

## Towards a Framework for Characterizing Communication-Oriented ELT Textbooks

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### Abstract

*Textbooks hold a fundamental position in English Language Teaching (ELT). Today, their main aim is to contribute to the development of the learner's communicative competence. This paper sets out to set the basis for constructing a framework for characterizing ELT textbooks, in terms of their opportunities to promote communicative competence. In order to provide a theoretical foundation for the framework, it first introduces the notions of input (Krashen, 1989) and output (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Then, it presents two influential models of communicative competence, i.e., those of Canale and Swain (1980), and the Common European Framework for Reference of Languages (Council of Europe, 2001, 2018). Following that, it presents two significantly quoted sets of principles for the study of learning materials in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), i.e., the principles of Richards and Rodgers (2014) and Nation (2007). Building on the models and principles, the paper suggests eleven criteria for characterizing communication-oriented ELT textbooks, covering input in the form of topics and texts, and output in the form of activities. A short discussion of the main affordances of the suggested framework is provided at the end of the article.*

*Keywords: communicative competence, ELT textbooks, textbook analysis, communicative language teaching (CLT).*

### Introduction

Most national curricula around the world put the development of the learner's communicative competence in the foreground (Harmer, 2015). However, the methods suggested for developing students' competence involve a seemingly indefinite number of approaches and types of materials (Brown, 1994; Celce-Murcia, 2007; Scrivener, 2011). In this way, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) comes across as a very complex affair (Savignon, 2018). Thus, there seems to be a need for clear criteria that can help identify methods and materials that are better suited than others in order to help develop the learner's communicative competence.

Based on a thematic literature review of communicative competence and CLT, this article sets out to set the basis for constructing a framework for characterizing ELT textbooks, in terms of their opportunities to promote communicative competence. The preliminary version of the framework consists of eleven criteria that can be used to analyze textbooks for the teaching of English as a foreign/second language. The focus on textbooks has been chosen because, despite the increasing availability of new resources (e.g., digital resources), they are still widely used (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994; Harmer, 2015; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018). I use the term "textbook" to refer only to books that have been specifically developed and published for classroom use, acknowledging that a large number of other texts exist that can also be used for educational purposes (see Johnsen, 1993;

Selander & Skjelbred, 2004; Skjelbred, 2019). Characterizing, selecting and using such materials requires a focused and theoretically grounded approach (Hurst & Russo, 2020). However, such a framework is still nonexistent in the research literature, as will be discussed in the following section.

### Previous research

In the last decades, efforts have been made in order to describe what good ELT textbooks should contain (cf. Harwood, 2014). Central scholars in the field of ELT have suggested criteria for deciding how to choose, use and examine textbooks (see, e.g. Allwright, 1981; Byrd & Schuemann, 2014; Clark, 1989; Cunningsworth, 1995; Ellis, 1997; Littlejohn, 1998; McGrath, 2002; Sheldon, 1988; Tucker, 1975; Williams, 1983). Those criteria vary in aim and scope. For instance, Littlejohn (2011) suggested one framework for textbook analysis which helps examine the textbook content from three levels. Level 1 describes the structure and general information of the textbook (e.g., information of author, publication, its division in units and lessons, etc.). As such, Level 1 can let the textbook speak for itself and, thus, can be considered objective. Level 2 requires a more subjective interpretation of the textbook's tasks with the intention of identifying what they expect from the learner. Finally, Level 3 builds on Levels 1 and 2, and allow the researcher to make assumptions of the principles that underpin the textbook and its goals.

With the same aim in mind, Cunningsworth (1995) proposed forty-five criteria divided into eight different categories: Study skills, topic, methodology, content, aims and approaches, teacher's book, practical considerations, and design/organization. Similarly, McDonough and Shaw (1993) proposed a total of twenty-two criteria which can be used to analyze the goals of the textbook and its content (i.e., units, topics, vocabulary, etc.). While guidelines such as these can be applied as tools to characterize and analyze different textbooks, they may have some shortcomings. Firstly, they open for subjective perspectives. Secondly, the fact that they comprise a very large number of items may be time-consuming and difficult to operationalize for their users.

Researchers have also developed checklists which try to inform the writing, use and analysis of textbooks from different perspectives and for specific contexts (see, e.g., Miekley, 2005; Montasser, 2013, Mukundan, 2010; Şahin, 2020). However, none of these descriptions have been dedicated to the development of the learner's communicative competence in particular. This paper sets out to address this gap in the research literature by suggesting a framework which builds on well-established models and principles within CLT. As such, it may avoid opening for subjective perspectives. Moreover, the framework is expected to contain a relatively small number of items, so that it can be manageable for its users.

A key question when examining textbooks in terms of their opportunities to help develop communicative competence is: What is considered appropriate content? As we will see throughout this article, two core characteristics of communicative materials in CLT are *meaningfulness* and *interaction* (cf. Richards & Rodgers, 2014). This paper limits itself to content in terms of textbook topics, texts and activities, as will be detailed later. Touching on *meaningfulness* applied to textbook topics and texts, several studies have tried to shed light on these aspects, addressing the relevance of textbook topics in relation to the learner's own context and situation (see, e.g., Siegel, 2014; Lund, 2016; Lund, 2010). A common assumption is that topics should provide the learner with something to relate to, while they should also open doors to the world. Here, the texts presented in textbooks play a key role, as they should prepare the learner with genres that they are likely to encounter in their real-life experiences and present natural language (see, e.g., Banegas, 2010; Brevik, 2016; Brevik & Rindal, 2020; Skulstad, 2019). Regarding *interaction*, scholars suggest that textbook activities should provide the learner with the opportunity to negotiate meaning, i.e., convey messages and voice their opinions, and this is best achieved when learners have the opportunity to cooperate with others (see, e.g., Johnson & Johnson, 1998; Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Skukstad, 2019). Following this line, in this article, *meaningfulness* is understood as the relevance of the textbook topics and texts (the potential orientation of the learner towards the textbook content), as well as the opportunities for the negotiation of meaning that such content may encourage.

Considering the above-mentioned discussions, this paper suggests a framework of eleven criteria for characterizing communication-oriented ELT textbooks. In order to provide a background for the framework, the following sections will briefly introduce the notions of input (Krashen, 1989) and output (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Then, they will define the term “communicative competence” and present two central sets of principles within CLT, namely Richards and Rodgers (2014) principles for materials in CLT and Nation's (2007) four strands for a well-balanced language course.

### **Understanding the term “Communicative competence”**

Several different models of communicative competence have been established, where the aim is to explain what it means to know a language for communicative purposes (Savignon, 2018). The most influential ones are those developed by Canale and Swain (1980), complemented by Canale (1983), as well as the Common European Framework for Reference of Languages (Council of Europe, 2001; 2018, 2020).

Building on Hymes' (1972) idea that language users need more than linguistic skills in order to effectively communicate in a language, Canale and Swain (1980) singled out three components of communicative competence: *grammatical competence*, *sociolinguistic competence* and *strategic competence*. Grammatical competence includes knowledge of lexical items and of rules relating to morphology, syntax, semantics and phonology. Sociolinguistic competence pertains to the knowledge of sociocultural norms of use and discourse rules (e.g., rules of politeness). Strategic competence includes verbal and nonverbal communicative strategies that speakers may use to avoid communication breakdowns by, for instance, rephrasing what they mean or changing the subject of conversation. A few years later, Canale (1983) added discourse competence to the model, which was defined as the ability to produce and interpret language beyond the sentence level.

Despite its influence, this model of communicative competence has gained criticism. Some have criticized it for its lack of complexity; especially for not being able to account for all the elements that affect communication, such as contextual factors (e.g., Harding, 2014; McNamara, 2003). In response to such criticism, in 2001, the Common European Framework for Reference of Languages (CEFR) was introduced. Overall, the CEFR makes a binary division between *communicative language competences* and *general competences* (Council of Europe, 2011). The former relates to the understanding of communicative competence, as described in the model presented above. This category is subdivided into linguistic competences, sociolinguistic competences and pragmatic competences. The plural form "linguistic competences" is used to indicate six different sub-competences: lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological, orthographic and orthoepic competence. Similarly, the plural form of "sociolinguistic competences" is used to include five different components: linguistic markers of social relations, politeness conventions, expressions of folk-wisdom, register differences and dialects and accents. Finally, the plural form of "pragmatic competences" is used to involve two sub-competences: discourse competence and functional competence. Compared to Canale's (1980) model, the CEFR model is much more complex. Although this might lead to a more accurate description of what CLT is, it can certainly also lead to more confusion regarding how to help learners develop their communicative competence and what methods and materials may be appropriate.

The category *general competences* includes knowledge of the world (sociocultural knowledge and intercultural awareness), know-how skills (practical skills and know-how, intercultural skills and know-how), existential competence (attitudes, motivations, values, cognitive styles, personality factors, etc.) and the ability to learn. In other words, the CEFR posits that communicative competence encompasses factors such as personality, learning styles and motivation, in addition to communicative

language competence. This suggests that the development of learners' communicative competence certainly is a complex one.

Certainly, the CEFR has played a pivotal role in the teaching and learning of foreign languages by promoting up-to-date methodological approaches to designing teaching programs, especially the development of CLT. Moreover, The CEFR descriptors have become influential in Europe and beyond, and their recommendations have been used as the basis for developing educational materials which promote reflection on learners' needs, establish objectives and identify ways to follow up and check their progress (Díez-Bedmar, 2018; Figueras, 2012). However, the CEFR has also gained criticism. While some argue that it lacks a theoretical basis (see, e.g., Fulcher, 2010), others have found it deliberately open-ended, meaning that it is intended to be used in a wide variety of different contexts (for different languages, for different age groups, for different types of learning goals, in different pedagogic traditions) (North, 2020). Furthermore, others have found it challenging to correlate the descriptors in the CEFR to teaching and learning situations and materials (Jones & Saville, 2009; Fişne, Müzeyyen, Guerra & Gonçalves, 2018).

### **The notions of *Input* and *Output***

Two central notions within communicative competence development are *Input* (Krashen, 1989) and *Output* (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). The former posits that foreign language students learn a language by receiving input, i.e., what the learner hears or reads. The latter highlights the importance of producing language output, through speaking and writing. These two notions are key when describing how learners learn to communicate and when examining textbooks, as they may be used to establish a binary division in order to shed light on how the textbook content can support the language work that the learner is expected – and encouraged – to do.

According to Krashen (1989), input must be comprehensible, meaning that it should be understandable to the learner, yet cognitively challenging enough to spur his/her learning ( $i+1$ ). Applying this notion to textbook content, the topics and texts (including images) should build on the learner's previous knowledge and present new knowledge that can spur their learning. This knowledge is, in turn, expected to help their learner identify gaps in their linguistic repertoire and move him/her to change his/her choices when producing language output (Swain & Lapkin, 1995).

### **Principles for learning materials in CLT**

This section presents two much quoted sets of principles of learning materials, linked to the development of communicative competence. These are namely Richards' and Rodgers' (2014) three

principles for assessing the appropriacy of materials in CLT, and Nation's (2007) four strands principle for a well-balanced language course. These principles draw on assumptions about the nature of language, second language learning and second language teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). As such, they may be said to constitute a learning theory within CLT.

I have chosen these scholars' principles for two reasons. Firstly, they are commonly quoted by scholars who discuss the relevance and appropriacy of learning materials (see, e.g., Simensen, 2007; Skulstad, 2019). Secondly, as will be shown later, the principles may bear potential for deciding whether materials can be considered communication-oriented. The combination of the models of communicative competence and the principles will provide a theoretical background that can point towards criteria to characterize communicative textbooks and provide a general discussion of how they may relate to CLT.

### **Richards' and Rodgers' three principles for learning materials in CLT**

Richards and Rodgers (2014) have identified three principles for learning materials in CLT. According to them, these principles can serve as guidelines in designing teaching materials that mirror CLT. The three principles are the following (p. 90):

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

The *communication principle* highlights the need for activities which encourage real communication. "Real communication" means providing the learner with the opportunity to negotiate meaning, which is at the heart of communicative competence (Savignon, 1997). The negotiation of meaning takes place through interaction. Thus, real communication is facilitated by working with another person or in groups (student-student, student-class, student-teacher, etc.). In interactive settings, learners are encouraged to learn in a collaborative way and benefit from the feedback they receive from their classmates and teacher (see Johnson & Johnson, 1998).

The *task principle* points to the need for tasks to be meaningful. Tasks are considered meaningful when the learner's attention is focused on meaning rather than form (Nunan, 1989). Moreover, tasks can be said to be meaningful when learners are given the possibility to use the

language as an instrument for solving a problem that resembles a real-life activity (Nunan, 1999). Such activities may encourage a holistic language use, meaning that they involve the simultaneous use of several language skills, instead of working individually with each skill (Johnson & Johnson, 1998).

The *meaningfulness principle* stresses the need for learners to engage in activities that promote authentic use of language, i.e., conveying meaning in the form of messages, rather than merely practicing language patterns mechanically (Ellis, 2009). Meaningful language use must be appropriate to the situation depending on the setting, the roles of the participants, and the purpose of the communication. Thus, learners should, for instance, learn how to use formal as well as informal styles of speaking (Johnson & Johnson, 1998). The meaningfulness principle also applies to the content presented in diverse learning materials. If the content is meaningful in the way that it relates to the learners' context and situation it will, hopefully, motivate them to work with the language (see Lund, 2010; Pinter, 2017).

### **Nation's four strands principle for a well-balanced language course**

The following principle was chosen as, it will be shown later, it follows Richards' and Rodgers' (2014) principles. However, Nation's applies them more directly to the organization of a teaching/learning sequence and to teaching/learning materials. Nation (1996, 2007) claims that a language course should provide a balance of language learning opportunities in order to promote communicative competence. He developed a model which is commonly known as the *four strands principle* (Nation, 2007). Each strand should cover one quarter of the total scope of a language course, and this applies to teaching sequences as well as teaching materials. The four strands are the following:

- a. Meaning-focused input.** In this strand, learning happens through listening and reading, and the learner's attention is on the ideas and messages conveyed by the language. Typical activities include extensive reading, listening to stories, watching TV or films, and being a listener in a conversation.
- b. Meaning-focused output.** Here, learning happens through speaking and writing, and the learners' attention is on conveying ideas and messages to another person. Typical exercises in this strand include conversing, giving a speech or lecture, writing a letter and telling a story.
- c. Language-focused learning.** In this strand, learning happens through deliberate attention to language items and language features such as speech sounds, spelling, vocabulary, grammar

and discourse features. Typical activities include pronunciation practice, vocabulary study, explicit grammar work, translation and memorizing dialogues.

- d. Fluency development.** Here, learners work to become fluent users of language that they already know. Typical activities in this strand include speed reading, repeated reading and repeated retelling.

The four strands principle links up with research which underlines the importance of input (Krashen, 1989), output (Swain & Lapkin, 1995), as well as an explicit focus on language forms (Ellis, 2016). Although Krashen's (1989) input hypothesis has been criticized (see, e.g., Gregg, 1984), scholars agree on the fact that language learners need to be exposed to ample amounts of comprehensible input. In order to develop their language skills, however, they also have to produce language themselves. Then they will be able to notice "gaps" in their own competence and, thus, be spurred to learn more (Swain, 2005).

Research has also shown that language learning becomes more efficient if the learner's attention is drawn to linguistic elements (Ellis, 2016). The third strand, language-focused learning, addresses this. Nation (1996) refers to the fact that activities such as pronunciation practice, structure drills and learning words out of context have become unfashionable. He asserts, however, that activities like these can make an important contribution to language learning if they aim at increased awareness of the language and to the development of the learner's linguistic competence. Nation (2007) also emphasizes the need for learners to develop fluency, that is the ability to use the language in a natural and coherent way. He claims that most language courses tend to neglect fluency development activities. Consequently, learners are deprived of opportunities to practice the language they have already learned.

### Methodological considerations

A thematic literature review was undertaken in order to construct the preliminary version of the framework. The review was thematic in that it was organized around the main topic addressed in the article's research question (cf. Mann, 2015; Sutton, 2016), i.e., what kind of criteria for characterizing communication-oriented ELT textbooks can be suggested on the basis of the theory examined. The following steps guided the construction of the framework: Firstly, I synthesized the two models of communicative competence presented earlier (Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Council of Europe, 2011, 2018). Here, it is important to clarify that the models feature a relatively large number of descriptors and I needed to identify the most relevant ones for my work<sup>1</sup>. Following that, I looked at the notions of *Input* (Krashen, 1989) and *Output* (Swain & Lapkin,

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 1 for a more list of the descriptors used.

1995), and the principles of Richards and Rodgers (2014) and Nation (2007). The following table presents an overview of the main theoretical texts examined:

Table 1: An overview of the theoretical texts examined

Author(s)	Title of the text	Synthesis of findings / contributions
Canale and Swain (1980)	<i>Approaches to communicative competence</i>	An overview of their model of communicative competence, along with a description of each sub-competence (i.e., linguistic competence, discourse competence)
Canale (1983)	<i>From communicative competence to communicative language pedagogy</i>	A general overview of the central models of communicative competence (i.e., strategic competence)
Council of Europe (2001, 2018)	<i>Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching and assessment. Companion volume with new descriptors</i>	A general overview of its model of communicative competence. A binary division between linguistic competence and general competences
Krashen (1989)	<i>The input hypothesis: Issues and implications</i>	A description of the <i>Input</i> hypothesis
Swain and Lapkin (1995)	<i>Problems in output and the cognitive processes they generate: A step towards second language learning</i>	A description of the <i>Output</i> hypothesis
Richards and Rodgers (2014)	<i>Approaches and methods in language teaching</i>	A presentation of three principles for materials in communicative approaches
Nation (2007)	<i>The four strands</i>	A presentation of four strands for a well-balanced language course

Then, the descriptors from the models of communicative competence and the principles for learning materials within CLT were associated with research that addresses the meaningfulness of ELT

textbooks, in terms of their topics, texts and activities. In order to find such research, I searched for relevant literature in major databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, Eric and Google Scholar. The terms “ELT textbook content”, “ELT textbook research”, “ELT textbook analysis”, “ELT textbook topics”, “ELT textbook texts” and “ELT textbook activities” guided my search.

Secondly, I organized the framework around the notions of *Input* (Krashen, 1989) and *Output* (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Input covers topics and texts, while output covers activities. This division was strongly motivated by the principles of Richards and Rodgers (2014) and Nation (2007). These scholars view communicative learning materials as those which provide meaningful input which can encourage the production of meaningful language output. Moreover, this division was tested out in my own analysis of a series of ELT textbooks used in Nicaraguan secondary schools (see Tórrez, 2021; Tórrez & Lund, 2021). In this work, Nation’s (2007) four strands were used as categories in the examination of the materials of the series (meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused work and fluency development). The point here was to see how well-balanced the textbooks could be said to be. Naturally, the category meaning-focused input was strongly related to *Input*. The categories meaning-focused output and fluency development were related to *Output*. Finally, the category language-focused work was treated separately, but it was seen as a support to output production. As argued for earlier, language practice (e.g., pronunciation practice, structure drills, etc.), can make an important contribution to language learning if they aim at increased awareness of the language and to the development of the learner’s linguistic competence (Nation, 1996). Subsequently, Richards’ and Rodgers’ (2014) three principles were used in order to discuss the usefulness of the materials, in terms of their opportunities to encourage the negotiation of meaning and interaction. On the basis of this work, I decided that this binary division works well.

However, dividing the textbook content into input and output was somewhat problematic. The main challenge was the presence of border-line activities, i.e., some activities could fall in more than one category (or strand). For instance, an activity can ask the learner to read a text, in order to answer some questions. In other words, it may involve both input and output together. To address this challenge, the primary purpose of the activity was identified (e.g., read a text in order to perform another activity). Thus, this type of activity was treated as an input activity.

The suggested framework consists of only eleven items which cover aspects of input and output. Aspects of textbooks such as design and opportunity for self-study should also be taken into consideration, but they are not the focus of the present work. Another limitation of the framework is that the fact that it is only supported by theoretical constructs. In order to turn it into a functional tool

for textbook analysis, a more rigorous approach is needed, where the theoretical constructs are tested out against empirical examples from textbooks from different learning contexts.

### **A preliminary version of the framework**

#### **Criteria relating to *input***

As mentioned earlier, the criteria relating to input is divided into the sub-sections “topics” and “texts”. I present each proposed criterion and then I discuss how each main point from the models and approaches can manifest themselves in the textbooks and what criteria can be formulated on the basis of this.

#### ***The topics***

Topics – i.e., the main theme or subject in which the language is introduced to learners (cf. Siegel, 2014) – are a fundamental component of textbooks. For them to contribute to communicative competence, they need to be meaningful and relevant for learners (cf. Nation, 2007; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Which criteria, then, should one go by in order to determine whether this is the case?

First, there are curricular requirements which textbooks need to adhere to and, clearly, curricula will vary as to what they regard as relevant knowledge for the learners (Richards, 2013; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018). The goals of a national curriculum may not necessarily be perceived as meaningful and relevant by the learners, but it is in fact the very first thing that must be considered. Second, the category *general competence* in the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) and the call for meaningfulness from Richards and Rodgers (2014), as well as Nation (2007) can help shed light on the types of topics and texts that the learners need to find in textbooks.

Meaningful topics should provide the learners with knowledge that they can use in real-life situations. Language learning is context dependent. Thus, what can be considered relevant in one context may not be so in another context (Banega, 2010). Thus, textbooks should include topics that can deal with relevant issues for their intended audience. Such topics may address the learner’s general education (e.g., environmental and gender issues) and everyday skills (e.g., first aid) (see Lund, 2010). The goal is to provide content that learners find useful and relevant (see also, Graves, 2019; Siegel, 2014).

Naturally, meaningful topics should also connect to the learner’s previous experience. This links up with CEFR’s point about knowledge of the world (Council of Europe, 2001). A large number of learners around the world are consistently exposed to English in their free-time activities, for instance through gaming, TV and social media (Brevik, 2016). Undoubtedly, globalization has influenced the access to diverse information in the world community (Gray, 2002). The idea is to

catch the learner's attention, appeal to their interests and stimulate to communicate in the target language.

Furthermore, meaningful topics should contribute to fostering the learner's intercultural competence. Intercultural competence is a key component in the CEFR, under *knowledge of the world* (Council of Europe, 2001). Such a competence can be defined as "the ability to interact effectively with people from cultures that we recognize as being different from our own" (Gilherme, 2000, p. 297). For learners to develop such a competence, they need to challenge their own views and frames of reference through a comparative perspective. The development of intercultural competence can be said to be a long-standing process and not a "finished product" (see Lund, 2008). Topics addressing 'daily life activities and routines', 'social conventions' and 'values, beliefs and attitudes' from different countries where English is spoken can help learner understand and appreciate other cultures and their own, which can be useful in developing intercultural competence (Hasselgreen, 2003).

### **The Texts**

The texts should also, ideally, be meaningful. For this to happen, they must convey meaning in the form of messages, and not only illustrate a linguistic phenomenon. Moreover, the language should be natural, and not contrived (Skulstad, 2019). In language education, it is acknowledged that natural texts may be engaging and motivating for the learner (Brevik & Rindal, 2020). Thus, they can be considered key in foreign language learning. If the learners are expected to use formal as well as casual styles of speaking (Johnson & Johnson, 1998), textbooks should provide them with such natural language.

Learners should also be presented with different – and relevant – text types. Here, context plays a key role. The learners encounter a large number of text types outside the classroom, for example in the form of stories and dialogues in films, and it would also be natural for textbooks to present such texts (Skulstad, 2019). Other texts that may come across as meaningful and relevant are so-called "authentic" texts, e.g., menus and brochures that are created for L1 (first language) speakers without a teaching intent in mind (Wallace, 1992). Relevant texts should provide insights into the learner's own culture, needs and experiences. However, texts may avoid issues that are inappropriate in some contexts. Here, the term PARSNIPs (an acronym referring, respectively, to politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, isms, and pork) (Gray, 2013), can be useful. This term assumes that many issues may be dealt with carefully because they may inappropriate or politically incorrect in many learning contexts.

Texts should also lead to enjoyment and pleasure (Nation, 2007). Here, multimodal texts – i.e., texts that create meaning through the combination of various semiotic resources, e.g., images, verbal text, color, typography (cf. Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006) – are equally central. Textbooks that feature a high degree of visually attractive content may be more appealing and encouraging than older textbooks with very few multimodal resources. Therefore, the degree of multimodality in textbook texts, and issues of people, places and things represented in textbooks, has a central place in communicative textbooks.

Moreover, the texts presented should be appropriate in relation to their audience, and they should provide the learners with opportunities for identification. For this to happen, they should directly relate to the learner's surroundings and familiar aspects of their context. Textbook images play a key role here, as they have the power to include or exclude certain groups from the textbook context (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Van Leeuwen, 2008). In such a case, unrepresented groups will come across as not “belonging” to the reader's world or context. For instance, images of large houses with well-equipped kitchens may not be relatable to resource-challenged students in some particular contexts (Author, 2021). Moreover, in many contexts, diversity in terms of LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) is a social issue that has gained considerable attention in learning materials (Gray, 2013). Therefore, textbook images should provide the learners with opportunities to familiarize with such issues.

However, images that do not relate to the learner's own context may still bear the potential to open doors to the world and to provide new insights. Since the point of foreign language learning is to be able to meet, to experience, to see and to learn new things (see Lund & Zoughby, 2007), it seems natural that textbook images should try to spur the learner's interest and curiosity by presenting the culture of people from other parts of the world. Such images may, in turn, help stimulate independent thinking and critical reflection (see Lund, 2016).

### **Criteria relating to *output***

Meaningful activities are those which are geared towards meaningful language use. Meaningful language use takes place when the learners have the opportunity to choose – and produce – language themselves (cf. Swain, 2005). Moreover, meaningful activities encourage interaction and the exchange of meaning in pairs, small groups or the whole class (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Positioning the learner as a social agent who co-constructs meaning in interaction is a prerequisite for communicative materials (Council of Europe, 2018; Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

Meaningful activities in textbooks should focus on relevant content. For this to happen, activities must build on the learner's own background/context. Turning back to the point that language learning is context dependent, the learner should be provided with opportunities to work with activities that relate to their own experiences. Learners can be, for instance, requested to voice their own opinions or to discuss controversial issues in their context. Such issues can range from gender issues to political debates (Tórrez & Lund, 2021).

Meaningful activities should encourage work that goes beyond the sentence level, i.e., work that aids the development of the learner's discourse competence (Canale, 1983; Council of Europe, 2001). Activities should draw on the student's language background to contract knowledge, allowing them to elaborate ideas based on a topic that is meaningful to them. Clearly, the complexity of discourse will depend on the level of proficiency acquired by the learners. They will start from simple words and expressions to more complex descriptions (i+1) (Krashen, 1989).

Meaningful activities should also encourage the learners to perform real-life tasks, for instance, activities that ask the learners to find a street destination. This links up with the task principle (Richards & Rodgers, 2014), which assumes that tasks should resemble the work that the learners are likely to do in their everyday activities. Finding a street destination, even in a controlled activity, requires the learners use a supporting material, for example a map, and ask for directions to another person. This also requires the learner to listen carefully and react appropriately to what the other person says. Gathering information about an issue and discussing is something that can serve learners both inside and outside the classroom (see Richards, 2006). Moreover, such an activity requires the exchange of information, in which the learners can confirm or self-correct understanding of specific words, phrases, or larger concepts in communication (Johnson & Johnson, 1998). From this, it follows that meaningful activities should promote interaction. This is a core requirement for communicative activities (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Learners need opportunities to engage themselves in collaborative work in which they can express their opinions, discuss different issues, voice concerns and, thus negotiate meaning (see also Sheedhouse, 1996).

Textbooks should also include meaningful language-focused work (cf. Nation, 2007), which can support the development of the learner's linguistic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). Meaningful language-focused activities should promote *thoughtful* (or reflected) work combined with tasks relating to grammar, vocabulary, sentence construction and pronunciation. Not only are the learners expected to work with language features, but they are also expected to reflect on their own choices (see Larsen-Freeman, 2015). For this to happen, language-focused activities can, for example, be attached with a short note explaining a grammar point in detail, or by asking the learner to reflect

on why they make a certain choice. When language work is thoughtful, or conscious, it can promote “language awareness” – i.e., “the development in learners of an enhanced consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language” (Carter, 2003, p. 64). Language awareness might, among many aspects, allow the learners to describe language and language skills using appropriate terminology, help them identify their own needs and select learning strategies which can make their own learning more effective (Van Lier, 1995).

Finally, meaningful activities should also encourage the development of the learner’s fluency development. This criterion relates to Nation’s call for fluency development activities (Nation, 2007), and the strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). Activities should provide the learners with the opportunity to deal with previously worked language, for instance in activities in which they are required to retell or act out stories, building on language that they have already worked with. This type of language work can enable the learners to figure out ways in which they may overcome communication breakdowns. Again, this activity is typically neglected in ELT textbooks (Nation, 2007), but they may be important in CLT.

The following is an overview of the set of criteria suggested for characterizing communication-oriented ELT textbooks<sup>2</sup>:

### **Criteria relating to *Input***

1. The topics should provide meaningful content including
  - a) Knowledge that is outlined in guidelines from the authorities, if applicable
  - b) Knowledge that is useful in real-life situations
  - c) Knowledge of the world
  - d) Knowledge that relates to the learner’s own experiences
  - e) Knowledge that promotes intercultural competence
2. The texts should convey meaning, in the form of messages, containing natural language
3. Different text types should be presented
4. The texts should be appropriate, contributing to learner identification

### **Criteria relating to *Output***

5. The activities should promote meaningful language use, i.e., they should provide opportunities to choose – and produce – language

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 1 for an overview of the criteria along with its theoretical basis.

6. The activities should focus on relevant content, i.e., content that relates to issues that encourage the learner to voice their opinions and concerns
7. The activities should encourage the development of discourse competence, i.e., work that goes beyond the sentence level
8. The activities should encourage work with real-life tasks
9. The activities should promote interaction (i.e., student-student, student-teacher and student- class interaction)
10. The activities relating to language-focused work should be dealt with in thoughtful ways
11. The activities should promote fluency development.

### **Concluding remarks**

This paper has set the basis for constructing a framework that can be used in order to characterize textbooks in terms of their opportunities to promote communicative competence development. The preliminary version of the framework comprises eleven criteria that cover input in the form of topics and texts and output in the form of activities. This paper has emphasized the fact that the development of communicative competence is a complex phenomenon. Therefore, there is a need for a manageable theory-based set of criteria to use when deciding whether ELT textbooks can be considered communicative-oriented or not. This, along with the review of recent principles of learning materials within CLT, applied to the examination of ELT textbooks, is the novel contribution of this paper.

Textbooks rarely fit teaching and learning situations completely. Therefore, teachers must adapt and supplement the textbook to their particular situation (Byrd & Schuemann, 2014). Hopefully, the principles presented in this article can serve as a guide in doing this. Moreover, the set of criteria suggested can be useful for those who are involved in textbook writing and/or analysis. Further research could revisit this preliminary version of the framework in order to turn it into a functional tool for textbook analysis. To this end, a more rigorous approach is needed: The principles suggested in the framework need to be tested out with empirical data. Here, textbooks from different learning contexts can provide further insights into the validity and relevance of the criteria provided in the framework. All in all, it is my hope that the principles presented in this article can be useful in characterizing, using and analyzing textbooks that contribute to the development of English learners' communicative competence.

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**Appendix 1: A preliminary version of the framework of eleven criteria for characterizing communication-oriented ELT textbooks**

#	Theoretical basis	Criteria relating to <i>input</i>
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) The national curriculum may indicate what textbook content should include (Tomlinson &amp; Masuhara, 2018)</li> <li>b) The development of <i>general competences</i> (Council of Europe, 2001)</li> <li>c) <i>Knowledge of the world</i> (Council of Europe, 2001)</li> <li>d) <i>Knowledge of the world</i> (Council of Europe, 2001); the meaningfulness principle (Richards &amp; Rodgers, 2014); the four strands principle / meaning-focused input (Nation, 2007)</li> <li>e) The development of <i>intercultural competence</i> (Council of Europe, 2001)</li> </ul>	<p>The topics should provide meaningful content including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Knowledge that is outlined in guidelines from the authorities, if applicable</li> <li>b) Knowledge that is useful in real-life situations</li> <li>c) Knowledge of the world</li> <li>d) Knowledge that relates to the learner's own experiences</li> <li>e) Knowledge that promotes intercultural competence</li> </ul>
2	The meaningfulness principle (Richards & Rodgers, 2014); the four strands principle / meaning-focused input (Nations, 2007)	The texts should convey meaning, in the form of messages, containing natural language
3		Different text types should be presented
4	The meaningfulness principle (Richards & Rodgers, 2014)	The texts should be appropriate, contributing to learner identification
#	Theoretical basis	Criteria relating to <i>output</i>
5	Sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 2005); the meaningfulness principle (Richards & Rodgers, 2014); the four strands principle / meaning-focused output (Nation, 2007)	The activities should promote meaningful language use, i.e., they should provide opportunities to choose – and produce – language
6		The activities should focus on relevant content, i.e., content that relate to issues that encourage the learner to voice their opinions and concerns
7		The activities should encourage the development of discourse competence, i.e., work that goes beyond the sentence level
8	The task principle (Richards & Rodgers, 2014); the four strands principle / meaning-focused output (Nation, 2007)	The activities should encourage work with real-life tasks
9	The meaningfulness principle (Richards & Rodgers, 2014)	The activities should promote interaction (i.e., student-student, student-teacher and student-class interaction)
10	Grammatical competence (Canale & Swain, 2005); the four strands principle / language-focused work (Nation, 2007)	The activities relating to language-focused work should be dealt with in <i>thoughtful</i> ways
11	The strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 2005); the four strands principle / fluency development (Nation, 2007)	The activities should promote fluency development