Article

Fostering Cultural Understanding Through Vocabulary: The Case of Graded Readers

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Abstract

In the present study, a selection of two adapted versions addressed to basic and intermediate levels (A1-B1) of the classic novel A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens will be compared in terms of their cultural vocabulary. Our analysis attempts to determine to what extent cultural words are part of the two adapted texts for basic and intermediate level EFL learners, and to establish how the frequency and complexity of cultural words is addressed in each book. To accomplish these goals, the books were processed with the vocabulary analyser software LancsBox and cultural loaded words were examined employing Cultural Linguistic framework of analysis. The main findings indicate that: (i) cultural vocabulary at basic and intermediate levels of proficiency does not increase in proportion, (ii) cultural word occurrences in graded readers are not enough to facilitate their acquisition whereas the most frequent cultural words tend to be oversimplified. However, cultural conceptualizations address different and more complex cultural concepts progressively what may contribute to the development of EFL learners' cultural understanding through their receptive vocabulary.

Keywords

Cultural understanding in EFL, graded readers, cultural vocabulary

1 Introduction

The need of training students on intercultural awareness becomes evident when it comes to reading comprehension skills (Porto & Byram, 2016). Indeed, learners rely on their cultural schemata to understand written texts in a foreign language. If the predominant culture in the text is unknown to the student, misunderstandings may affect performance (Gatbonton & Tucker, 1971; Porto & Byram, 2016). The lexicon used in these texts plays an important part in the assimilation of cultural cues (Porto & Byram, 2016). The perception of cultural differences in a text is usually triggered by the recognition of key words; vocabulary that has heavily cultural connotations and express different societies' beliefs and values (Alred & Byram, 2002). In the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), vocabulary provides texts with their cultural focus while fostering cultural awareness (Byram, 1997; Porto & Byram, 2016). In this vein, cognitive linguistic approaches to culture explore how speakers

interpret the world based on their own set of cultural conceptualizations (e.g., schemas and categories), suggesting that 'unfamiliarity with the systems of conceptualizations on which the international speakers of English are relying may lead to various forms and degrees of discomfort and even miscommunication' (Sharifian, 2009, p. 246). Vocabulary, then, encodes how speakers conceptualize language and condition their interpretation of new experiences (Sharifian, 2009). Therefore, EFL learners may benefit from the contact with cultural words and meanings inasmuch as they describe their own cultural conceptualizations or challenges them. Although research on cultural vocabulary content of EFL textbooks is scarce, some publications have emphasised the secondary role of vocabulary in the development of students' cultural awareness in EFL materials (Canga Alonso & Cifone Ponte, 2015; Cifone Ponte, 2019).

In the light of the above, graded readers may be a powerful tool to supplement the lack of inclusion of cultural vocabulary already observed in EFL coursebooks. These simplified texts have been adapted to facilitate understanding at different levels of proficiency in EFL and serve to develop learners' vocabulary and reading skills (Nation, 2001). Furthermore, these books have been proved to be a useful tool to develop learners' intercultural competence as they experience otherness through literature (Babayan, 2019). Nevertheless, little has been published in linguistic circles on how culture is ingrained in their vocabulary input. The present study aims to expand knowledge on how cultural awareness may be fostered through cultural conceptualizations hidden in words. To do so, the vocabulary input of two different level graded readers (A1 and B1) adapted from the same novel, *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, were examined from two different perspectives. The first analysis was intended to determine to what extent cultural vocabulary was present in both texts. A quantitative analysis of the texts was conducted to determine the total number of types and tokens. Secondly, cultural words contained in both texts were extracted and analysed considering their frequency and connotations employing Cultural Linguistics framework of analysis. We believe that the examination of cultural conceptualizations can serve as a rich insight into cultural loaded words since it allows the identification of cultural connotations and cultural complexity of the lexicon.

The present paper is divided into five sections, including this introduction. The second section is focused on the literature review where a brief overview on the evolution of cultural awareness in the EFL context along with the relation between culture, vocabulary and reading are provided. In the third section, we describe the sample and the methodology selected. The fourth section is centred on providing the results from the analysis of the cultural words and discussed them with the main literature. Finally, the conclusions are draw in the last section.

2 Literature Review

2.1. Cultural understanding and EFL

Culture influences and continuously reshapes language. As a result, language and culture are two inseparable concepts, they cannot exist independently without both losing significance (Brown, 1994; Wenying, 2000). Wenying (2000) exemplifies the bond between language and culture by employing the philosophical metaphor of language and culture making a living organism. In this sense, language is flesh, and culture is blood; without culture, language would be dead, and, without language, culture would have no shape. Despite its undeniable importance in the context of foreign language teaching (FLT), their connection has not always been prioritized. In the 70s, with the emergence of the term Communicative Competence, culture started to be considered part of language teaching (Lo Bianco et al. 1999). Nevertheless, it was seen as an independent entity in the foreign language syllabi and its instruction was limited to cultural facts about the target culture (e.g., geography, literature, among others) (Lo Bianco et al. 1999). As a consequence, not only did this approach separate language from culture

but it also favoured the creation of stereotypes. In the 80s, although the aim of culture and language studies shifted to a view endorsed in cultural practices, values, and beliefs, this new approach was also questioned since its focus was still on the target culture and its goal remained focused on the target-language society (Lange & Paige, 2003). Thus, learners were taught a culture under their own cultural lenses which had a direct impact on learners' attitudes towards the target language.

In the 90s, English as a lingua franca (ELF) and English as an international language (EIL) gained ground in a society where intercultural encounters proliferated due to globalization (Chang, 2014). The question of whether speakers would be successful during these encounters did not exclusively depend on their level of fluency and their linguistic knowledge but on their capacity to solve and dodge misunderstandings caused by linguistic conventions, interaction management, vocabulary, or politeness (Lustig & Koester, 2010). The notion of intercultural competence emerged to address these issues; students were no longer considered individual learners who looked for mastering their linguistic competences but were seen as active participants in control of linguistic resources and sociocultural knowledge in authentic exchanges (Council of Europe, 2001; 2018). In this respect, several models on the development of the intercultural competence and intercultural awareness have been put forward to help EFL instructors and researchers to address this competence in the classroom (e.g, Byram 1997; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005; Baker, 2011).

The intercultural approach was immediately put at the forefront in Europe with the publication of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (henceforth, CEFR) in 2001. With its launch, the Council of Europe attempted to unify FLT criteria and improve mobility and communication within European borders. In the broadest sense, its main goal was to allow Europeans to communicate effectively despite their mother tongue and cultural background. This fact has had major implications regarding language usage and education policies whose focus has switched now to promote intercultural dialogue across Europe (Hoskins & Sallah, 2011). Since the CEFR publication, EFL textbooks, European countries' curricula along with teacher education have suffered considerable modifications regarding their approach to culture (Council of Europe, 2003). This has continuously posed some challenges regarding how culture should be addressed in the curricula and language teaching materials. Despite its status within educational policies, the intercultural competence is still regarded as a complementary element in EFL classes. Because of time constraints and teachers' training, the EFL classroom is usually oriented to work on the four skills where intercultural encounters are extremely limited (Sercu et al. 2004). To address this issue, EFL materials should be oriented to make up for this absence. However, many scholars remark the difficulties inherent in teaching a foreign language under new cultural perspectives. Therefore, cultural content should be addressed with caution yet bearing in mind that there is no correct way of representing target, source, and international cultures (Ulrich, 2004). Moreover, the approach followed by FLT instructors and materials should be carefully controlled to avoid a potential source of conflict and misunderstandings (Kramsch, 1993). Although research has shown learners will benefit from the inclusion of their own culture (i.e., source culture) and others' (i.e., target and international cultures) (McKay, 2003; Nault, 2006), the predominance of the target culture and the loss of cultural cues due to the adaptation of original texts in EFL textbooks have been observed (Clavel-Arroitia & Fuster-Márquez, 2014). More specifically, this has been the case of EFL materials. According to Alptekin (1993), the predominance of the target culture in EFL coursebooks is due to three facts: (i) when it comes to international publishers, it is more economical to produce one edition of their textbook, (ii) textbooks authors are usually English native speakers who consciously and unconsciously express their own values and beliefs, and (iii) historically, the Anglo-Saxon culture has been prioritized over the rest of cultures. Despite this, research into textbooks used globally and within Europe has revealed that the target culture is included at superficial levels in most EFL contexts. Most times the representation of this culture is unrealistic and stereotyped not to mention how limited its inclusion is (Matsuda, 2002; Méndez García, 2005; Gómez Rodríguez, 2015; Cifone Ponte, 2019). Furthermore, when it comes to the representation

of the students' own culture (i.e., source culture) and international cultures, they are usually neglected (Cifone Ponte & Mora Guarín, 2021).

In light of this, teachers may need different resources to explore and develop their students' intercultural awareness. In this sense, complementary EFL materials may be a great source of cultural aspects in the classroom. It has been argued that employing literature in the classroom may facilitate access to cultural information and may allow students to be in contact with otherness and expand their cultural experiences (Fenner, 2001). In this regard, graded readers may be a good alternative not only to improve students' reading abilities and receptive vocabulary but also to develop learners' intercultural competence by exposing them to different cultural perspectives (Babayan, 2019).

2.2. Vocabulary and reading

Research exploring vocabulary learning has found that the input the learner receives and the number of word repetitions of this input are essential for vocabulary acquisition (Baddeley, 1990; Nation, 2001). In this regard, vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension skills are closely related; vocabulary knowledge can improve reading comprehension skills. In turn, reading can contribute to vocabulary growth (Nation, 2001, Waring & Takaki, 2003). In EFL contexts, reading skills can be targeted by working on intensive or extensive reading. The former will refer to short texts (no more than 300-500 words) that allow teachers to focus on vocabulary and grammar structures. Extensive reading requires longer texts which, depending on their characteristics, can be aimed at either vocabulary growth or fluency development (Nation, 2001). For the purpose of this study, we will focus on the features of a text for vocabulary growth. Nation (2001) remarks that extensive reading should contain no more than 5% of unknown tokens and no less than 1%-2% to make sure that there is vocabulary to learn. In other words, so that learning can take place, the text cannot be too difficult to impede guessing from context. Moreover, texts that facilitate repetition of unknown vocabulary would provide favourable conditions for vocabulary learning (Waring & Takaki, 2003). The importance of spaced repetition and its effects in long term memory have already been stressed (Nation, 2001). However, it is not an easy task to establish the exact number of repetitions that are needed for a word to be learnt and other factors are also involved in this process. In the broadest sense, the rate of occurrences seems not to be less than six encounters and up to sixteen (Schmitt, 2000; Webb, 2007; Pellicer-Sánchez & Schmitt, 2010; Nation, 2014). Recent studies have reported that learners need to encounter new words at least 10 times in richly informative contexts to acquire them (Teng, 2016).

Graded readers may serve the purpose of addressing both: fluency and vocabulary growth (Nation, 2001; McQuillan, 2016). In general, graded readers are adapted books for second language learners, characterized by their simple syntax and grammar, repetition of words and phrases, and use of vocabulary lists (Nation & Wang Ming-tzu, 1999). Reading graded readers may be aimed at gaining fluency in reading, establishing previously learned vocabulary, and learning new words or grammar structures (Nation & Wang Ming-tzu, 1999). However, the main purpose of these types of books is to make reading for foreign language learners comfortable (Nation & Wang Ming-tzu, 1999). For this reason, their vocabulary is simplified so learners can read through the text being able to deduce meaning from context (Claridge, 2005). Moreover, graded readers provide support to vocabulary guessing by means of images and rich contexts (Liu Na & Nation, 1985; Nation & Wang Ming-tzu, 1999). Nation (2001) warns that care should be taken when choosing the level of the texts, if graded readers were used to develop learners' vocabulary growth, students should be reading at the level just beyond their current vocabulary knowledge. On the other hand, if the desire outcome is to improve their reading fluency, learners should read texts within their own level that contain little or no unknown vocabulary.

Having described the role of reading in vocabulary acquisition, the next section will deal with the relation between vocabulary and culture and how attention should be paid to cultural words to improve learners' reading comprehension and cultural understanding.

2.2.1. Vocabulary and cultural understanding in EFL

The relation between vocabulary and culture has already been emphasized in literature (e.g., Williams, 1976; Wierzbicka, 1997; Liu & Zhong, 1999; Bennett et al. 2005; Sharifian, 2009, 2011; Porto & Byram, 2016). The perception of cultural differences in a text is usually triggered by the recognition of key words. Vocabulary that may have heavily cultural connotations and express different societies' beliefs and values (Wierzbicka, 1997; Porto & Byram, 2016). Regarding EFL materials, vocabulary may provide texts with their cultural focus while fostering cultural awareness (Byram, 1997; Porto & Byram, 2016). Thus, EFL learners who are exposed to a wide variety of cultural words may expand their cultural conceptualizations, which may have a huge impact on their comprehension and their ability to avoid misunderstandings in communication (Sharifian, 2009). In fact, cultural conceptualizations serve as a tool for constructing, interpreting, and negotiating intercultural meanings. They are originated in the speaker's mind in association with their L1 and can be negotiated by means of the speaker's experiences and interaction with other cultures (Sharifian, 2017). Some have argued that cultural conceptualizations are behind miscommunication in intercultural encounters as speakers draw on their own cultural schemas, categories, and metaphors. In this vein, Bush offers examples of how lexicon and cultural conceptualizations are inseparable:

> Consider a few other examples. A French yatisserie in no way resembles a typical American iced cake. Nor does a small hotel in Paris look like a Holiday Inn […] when encountering the word lycee, (students of French as a FL) might think of an American high school and guess that a lycee would resemble the mental image evoked by their personal experience (2007, p. 730).

These two concepts seem to be key in the context of EFL teaching since delving into cultural schemas and categories by means of vocabulary instruction may allow speakers to expand their L1 conceptualizations which, in turn, facilitates understanding in cross-cultural communication. On the one hand, cultural schemas refer to conceptual structures, belief systems, values, norms, and expectations of behaviours. In the case of the word *wedding*, cultural schemas will include procedures, sequence of events, roles played by participants and expectations associated with these roles (Sharifian, 2017). As for EFL, cultural concepts such as the one in the example (i.e., wedding) may trigger different mental images and associations regarding the learners' culture. A way of facilitating cultural understanding, students' cultural conceptualizations may be expanded by the inclusion of vocabulary related to a given schema. For instance, *wedding* as a cultural schema from the target culture in the EFL classroom may be developed through the inclusion of some key words such as *bridesmaid*, *engagement party*, or *vows* (Sharifian, 2017). Similarly, categorization of objects, events and experiences are usually culturally constructed (Sharifian, 2017). Many words would act as labels for categories and their instances. To continue with the previous example, take the category *wedding reception food and drinks*. Here, words such as *wedding cake* or *champagne* will be instances of that category (Sharifian, 2017). In this vein, cultural conceptualizations play an important role within the intercultural competence, more specifically, when addressing vocabulary. As cultural schemas and categories have a strong connection with lexicon, their inclusion in EFL instruction may facilitate the development of learners' vocabulary depth (Read, 1993; Nation & Beglar, 2007). Vocabulary depth is not only related to spelling, pronunciation, and collocations but also to cultural connotations and contexts. Indeed, according to Read (1993), more attention should be given to this part of vocabulary knowledge in vocabulary learning and assessment.

In their model of cultural understanding of texts, Porto and Byram (2016) focused on the importance of cultural schemata to understand texts in a foreign language. This model consists of six levels which describe the ways in which EFL learners may approach cultural issues when reading. Their approach considers the process of reading in a foreign language as a constant fluid process of familiarity and unfamiliarity with cultural content. Level one is strongly related to the identification of visible elements of cultures, and it is when the active process of perceiving cultural differences takes place. Here,

the reader may identify 'different, exciting, and attractive […] elements of a given culture' (Porto & Byram, 2016, p. 22). The identification of cultural differences occurs through comparison and contrast, and it is facilitated by the recognition of key vocabulary (words or phrases). The authors argue that the understanding of cultural subtleties and connotations through vocabulary is not always a simple cognitive process as learners must have previously developed a way of categorizing these key words. Moreover, in this process, unpredictability or unfamiliarity with the text may play a crucial part as 'when the reader finds something that s/he considers weird, provoking, troubling or unsettling' they would make the effort to understand (Porto & Byram, 2016). In other words, if it challenges our conceptualizations and our schematic expectations, it will make readers to delve into more profound ways of knowing and understanding (Wade et al. 1999; Porto & Byram, 2016).

Considering the above, cultural vocabulary must be fostered at two levels: (i) receptive and (ii) productive. Intercultural awareness does not only play an essential part in comprehension skills but also in communication. Therefore, by identifying cultural keywords, the students will be able to perceive cultural differences and similarities (Porto & Byram, 2016). Equal importance should be given to the development of learners' cultural productive vocabulary through word repetition in EFL materials. Productive vocabulary helps in productive skills of speaking and writing (Nation, 2006). Intercultural competent speakers should be capable of communicating their own and the target language society's cultural beliefs, values, and meanings (Byram, 1997). Thus, learners, whose productive cultural vocabulary is larger, will be more competent in cross-cultural encounters.

Research into the presence and role of cultural words in EFL materials is still sparse, but some studies that exist suggest that cultural vocabulary tends to be focused on the target culture (Canga Alonso & Cifone Ponte, 2015). However, the inclusion of cultural words, even from the target culture, is disperse and does not provide students with enough information of a given cultural conceptualizations so that they can develop cultural understanding. One question that remains to be explored is whether graded readers may be a useful tool in the EFL classroom at different levels to fill in the gaps left by EFL textbooks regarding cultural vocabulary. On these grounds, the research questions were formed are as follows:

1. To what extent are cultural words included in the two adapted versions of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* addressed to basic and intermediate level EFL learners respectively?

2. How do frequency and complexity of cultural vocabulary increase with the level of the graded readers?

3 Methodology

3.1 Sample

The sample is comprised by two adapted versions of the classic short novel *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens (Hill, 2002; West, 2016). Graded readers A1 is addressed to young learners at an elementary level of proficiency. The book is published by Penguin Readers within the series Penguin Young Readers (Hill, 2002). This series are claimed to be simplified texts that support children learning. The text selected covers level 4; at this level texts are simplified attending to a wordlist of the most frequent 1400 words. Graded readers B1 belongs to the Oxford Bookworms series (West, 2016). This series publishes adapted versions of classic novels for English learners and it has a total of 6 stages. The book analysed in this paper belongs to stage 3, at this stage the texts are designed to cover an intermediate level of language proficiency (B1). Regarding the vocabulary, it is claimed to contain 1000 headwords. The term *headwords* refers to lists of basic vocabulary used to guide the writing of simplified materials (Horst, 2005). The total number of words the student will be exposed to is not included in the description of any of the books. Henceforth and for the sake of clarity, the books will be referred as GR A1 and GR B1.

Although there are a high number of graded readers on the market, these two versions were selected for several reasons: (i) the novel selected has a clear-cut cultural focus and it may contain key words that activate cultural conceptualizations regarding Christmas; (ii) Penguin Readers and Oxford Bookworms are two of the most popular publishing houses worldwide when it comes to graded reader series and adapt their texts in compliance with the CEFR scale, and (iii) they cover two different levels of language proficiency: basic and intermediate so we expect to find differences in number of occurrences and in the complexity of cultural vocabulary across levels.

3.2 Procedures

For the analysis, the two adapted versions were scanned and encoded as separate computer readable files, one per book. Pages with information regarding the edition, indexes and reading comprehension activities were omitted. These documents were checked manually to correct any spelling mistake caused by the conversion of the files into .txt documents.

To explore the cultural vocabulary, a series of methodological decisions were taken. The unit of analysis were lexical units; we followed Schmitt's definitions of lexical units or multiword units understood as "an item that functions as a single meaning unit, regardless of the number of words it contains" (2000, p. 11). For this purpose, the .txt files were scrutinised to identify cultural terms and, in case of being formed by several words, they were joined together into one unit so when processed with the vocabulary analyser, they were counted as one (e.g., ChristmasEve).

Each file was analysed by means of the textual analysis software LancsBox (Brezina et al. 2020). The application of this program enabled us to examine the vocabulary content of both adapted versions quantitatively by obtaining the total number of types, tokens, and word occurrences. Once the two wordlists were obtained (one per book), they were scrutinized manually to obtain the total number of cultural word types and tokens. We were interested in obtaining the total word count of the texts (tokens) and the word types; this allowed us to establish the representation of cultural word types and tokens over the total of vocabulary content.

For the content analysis, Cultural Linguistics framework was employed to examine the complexity of cultural words in the texts. This framework was developed considering the concept of cultural cognition and offers a multidisciplinary understanding of cognition beyond the individual mind (Sharifian, 2017). Indeed, it allows the evaluation of the relationship between language and cultural conceptualizations. Notions such as cultural schema, cultural category and cultural metaphor are considered analytical tools within this framework (Sharifian, 2017). In this regard, they serve to explore various characteristics and levels of language from morpho-syntactic features to pragmatic and semantic meaning. According to Sharifian (2011), cultural conceptualizations are evident in discourse, rituals, narrative and paintings. In the case of EFL materials, Cultural Linguistics has been implemented before to analyse cultural conceptualizations in visuals (Ngoc Dinh, 2017; Rahimi & Sharifian, 2019).

For the purpose of this study, we analysed cultural conceptualizations embedded in the lexicon of graded readers through the presence of cultural schemas and categories (Sharifian, 2011, 2017). To classify the cultural words, we followed Sharifian's (2011, 2017) concepts of cultural schemas, sub-schemas, categories and instances. Cultural schemas and sub-schemas are 'culturally constructed sub-class of schema […], abstracted from the collective cognitions associated with a cultural group' (Sharifian, 2017, p. 40). For this author, cultural schemas encompass culturally constructed meaning for lexical items. In this sense, the cultural schema 'Christmas' will include aspects or events within the festivity such as procedures and roles. As for cultural categories and instances, Sharifian (2017) claims that lexical items usually act as labels for categories and their instances. He provides the example of 'food' that refers to a category and 'steak' which is an instance of that category (Sharifian, 2017). Unveiling how cultural

conceptualizations are fostered by vocabulary in graded readers allowed us to define whether these texts may be enriching students' cultural understanding.

3 Results and Discussion

The first research question aims to describe the quantity of cultural words contained in the two adapted versions of *A Christmas Carol*. Table 1 shows the total number of non-cultural word types and tokens and cultural word types and tokens in each book. Percentages of cultural word types and tokens were calculated over the total word count in each text. As expected, because of the difference in levels, the two books considerably differ in terms of types and tokens (see table 1).

Table 1

Cultural and Non-cultural Types and Tokens

Book	Total words		Cultural words		Percentage of cultural words	Percentage of cultural words
	Types	Tokens	Types	Tokens	Based on types	Based on tokens
GR A1	564	2567	21	46	3,7%	1,79%
GR B1	1382	10114	43	116	3,1%	1,14%

We noted a difference of 818 types and 7547 tokens in favour of GR B1. As for cultural words, a similar trend was found, a difference of 22 types and 70 tokens was also observed in favour of the book for intermediate readers. At first sight, the increase in the number of cultural word types and tokens might be interpreted as a tendency on the part of the graded reader publishers to increase the number of cultural words with the level. However, care should be taken with this interpretation as the percentages of total words based on the total number of types and tokens remain essentially the same in both books regardless of the level (see table 1 and figure 1). Indeed, in terms of percentage, our results indicate that the presence of cultural words is slightly higher in the book addressed for beginners.

Figure 1

Distribution of Non-cultural and Cultural Word Types and Tokens
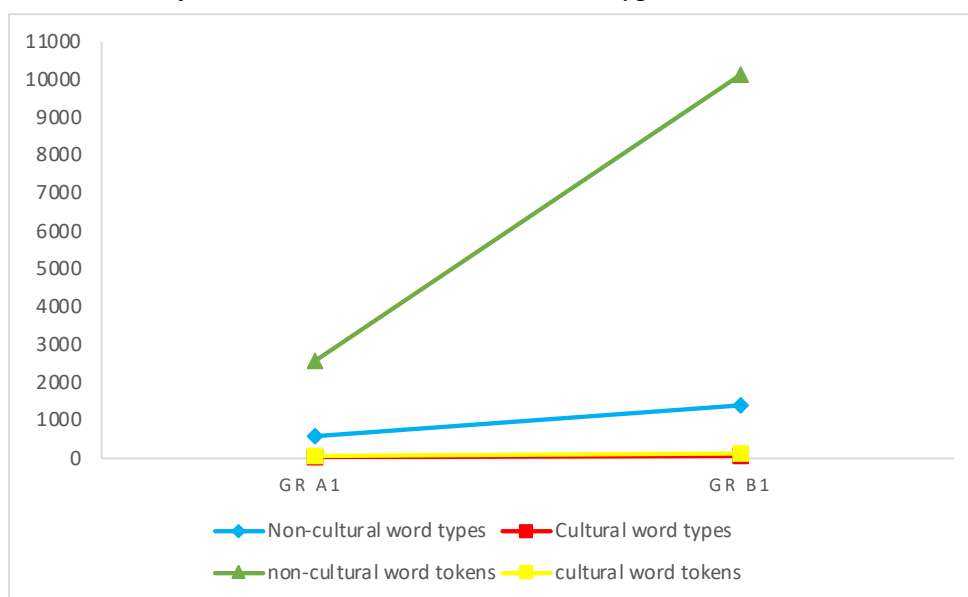
In proportion, the quantity of cultural words may not increase with the level of the book (figure 1). Therefore, our data may imply that from a quantitative approach, cultural vocabulary is similarly approached regardless of the level. This result is in line with Canga Alonso and Cifone Ponte's (2015) findings in their analysis of two EFL textbooks addressed to A2 and B2 learners respectively. This study reported that the difference in the quantity of vocabulary input in both materials was slight. In this regard, graded readers may follow the same approach of the one detected in EFL textbooks, where the inclusion of cultural words appears to be incidental and not a controlled strategy to gradually expose learner to more cultural elements and increase their cultural vocabulary (Canga Alonso & Cifone Ponte, 2015; Cifone Ponte, 2019). In terms of pedagogical perspectives, learners should be expected to improve their cultural awareness as they develop their linguistic skills in the foreign language. One should note that the graded readers in this study follow the CEFR standards, a document that fosters intercultural awareness and adapted this concept to be addressed at different levels of proficiency (Council of Europe, 2001, 2018). For this purpose, some descriptors are offered to describe how intercultural awareness should be tackled in the classroom. Initially, A1 learners are supposed to be aware of how to establish basic social contact whereas B1 learners should be able to identify most significant differences between customs, attitudes, values, and beliefs (Council of Europe, 2001). Similarly, several scholars have proposed models of intercultural awareness or maturity (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005; Baker, 2011). These models seek to draw a framework for the development of intercultural competence by levels regarding learners' skills and maturity. Both agree on the fact that intercultural competence should be addressed gradually, and learners should gain different cultural abilities and knowledge as their linguistic proficiency increases.

Drawing on word occurrences and the Cultural Linguistics framework of analysis, the second research question attempts to determine if the quantity and complexity of cultural words varies regarding the level covered by the books. As for the most frequent words, table 2 shows a list of those cultural words that occur more than once in both texts. As it can be observed, GR A1 reported a total of seven types while in GR B1 ten types were found. In the broadest sense, there is a coincidence in the inclusion of some words. On the one hand, the two most frequent words were *Christmas* and *Merry Christmas* in both texts. Other terms were also shared by the two adapted versions such as *merry*, *Christmas Eve* and *Christmas day.* In both cases, the most frequent words are related to general events (e.g., *Christmas day*, *party*) and prevalent expressions belonging to Christmas time (e.g., *merry Christmas*). Likewise, most words do not address a specific culture. Only one word in each book may be describing characteristics of some Christmas traditions in the target-language society among their most frequent words (e.g., *holly* in GR A1 and *pudding* in GR B1).

Table 2

Most Frequent Cultural Words

GR A1	GR B1
Christmas (10), Merry Christmas (9), Party (4), Christmas day (3), holly (2), Christmas Eve (2), merry (2)	Christmas (27), Merry Christmas (19), drink (8), merry (7), food (5), Christmas Eve (4), Christmas day (2), Happy New Year (2), fruit (2), pudding (2)

The low number of occurrences in the list of the most frequent words in both books (table 2) may have consequences for students and their vocabulary growth. In practice, this involves fewer opportunities for cultural vocabulary encounters. Several scholars claim that learners must encounter a specific word several times to learn it (Saragi et al. 1978; Webb, 2007; Nation, 2014; Teng, 2016). As stated in the literature review, an exact number of times is difficult to establish; nevertheless, studies on extensive reading suggest that the rate of occurrences seems to be around ten (Saragi et al. 1978; Teng, 2016).

However, Nation & Wang Ming-tzu (1999) argued that words that are found in previous levels of the graded reader scheme should be known to the learner. As far as our sample is concerned, this may have two implications. Firstly, A1 and B1 level learners may be learning the same word: *Christmas* while the other words may not appear frequently enough to be acquired. If, for the sake of argument, we assume Nation & Wang Ming-tzu's remarks, the only two words that meet the criteria for being acquired in GR B1 (i.e., Christmas and Merry Christmas) are likely to be already known by B1 learners. This theory may also explain why some words may increase in frequency in GR B1. Previous studies on the vocabulary input in graded readers suggest that learning vocabulary from graded readers may be a cumulative process (Nation & Wang Ming-tzu, 1999; McQuillan, 2016). Hence, the first time a word appears in graded readers, its frequency is not high enough to be learnt; however, in subsequent levels these words seem to occur more often (Nation & Wang Ming-tzu, 1999). This may be the case of some of most frequent words in our sample, which increase their occurrences in the intermediate level text (i.e., Christmas, merry Christmas, merry, Christmas Eve).

In light of these results, we may wonder whether students at intermediate levels may emerge with richer vocabularies concerning culture as the rest of the most frequent words either may be already known by the learners or are too general. In fact, it could be claimed that the most frequent cultural words are oversimplified. In other words, cultural terms in our data encompass general cultural concepts such as *Christmas*, *food*, *drink* which have a broad meaning and are shared by different communities. In the case of GR A1, this may be explained as an attempt of the publisher to provide the learners with vocabulary that may be more generic and can be used to describe the same traditions shared by different cultures. Moreover, basic level EFL students may be likely to establish negative associations about other cultures which are present as strikingly different to their own (Kramsch, 1993; Baker, 2011). For this reason, EFL materials addressed to this type of learner are cautious when it comes to their cultural content (Risager, 1991, Gómez Rodríguez, 2015). However, a quick look at the frequency list (table 2) enables us to say that both texts followed a similar trend: oversimplification of the most frequent cultural words. Our findings may concur with previous studies on cultural vocabulary input in EFL materials. Cifone Ponte (2019) in her PhD dissertation found that the most frequent cultural words in 2nd Baccalaureate EFL textbooks are too general to be attributed to a certain culture. On the other hand, Clavel-Arroitia and Fuster-Márquez (2014) observed that adapted texts in EFL textbooks usually lose their cultural focus as cultural words are usually replaced by a neutral word. For instance, they found a real text original written in English where some words in Spanish remained untranslated such as 'salsa'. However, in the process of adaptation, the word was substituted by 'ketchup'. This practice can also be attributed to graded readers which undergo to simplification of their language to be accessible to different level learners (Nation, 2001; Claridge, 2005). It seems reasonable to say that graded readers may be replacing cultural words with simplified terms or even avoiding their inclusion as frequent words to facilitate readers' fluency development (Nation, 2001). We believe that simplified content is necessary at basic levels. Yet, our sample reported great similarities in their most frequent cultural words which means that oversimplification of cultural content is occurring at intermediate levels too. Being able to communicate one's own values and belief is an essential part of intercultural competence (Byram, 1997; Baker, 2011). Hence, productive cultural vocabulary should be essential in EFL instruction in order to train intercultural competent speakers since specific cultural vocabulary will allow them to communicate their own and other cultures' values and beliefs.

On the other hand, to determine the complexity of the total number of cultural words regardless of their number of occurrences were examined. Table 3 contains all the cultural word types found in the two texts and it is organized by means of cultural schemas and categories. Our findings revealed that both books activate the same cultural schema (i.e., Christmas) and category (i.e., Christmas food). One explanation for this finding may be that both graded readers are adaptations of the same story; hence, it seems quite likely that cultural schemas and categories act as the unifying thread of these stories. However, this assertion should be taken with caution. Further research is called in the field of cultural

conceptualizations in different adaptations of the same novel to confirm whether cultural schemas and categories remain the same regardless of the level they are designed for.

Table 3

Vocabulary Developing Cultural Conceptualizations

Book	Graded readers A1	Graded readers B1
Schemas & sub-schemas	**Christmas**	**Christmas**
	Merry Christmas, party, Christmas day, holly, Christmas Eve, merry, green holly, evening parties, Christmas morning, sing Christmas songs, Christmas party, Christmas present, Christmas tree, snowy streets, **Christmas dinner**	Merry Christmas, merry, Christmas Eve, Christmas day, happy New Year, Christmas morning, holiday, Christmas present, snowy, frosty, dance, spend Christmas together, Christmas holiday, Christmas carols, presents, carols, Christmas carols at one's door, New Year, Christmastime, dinners, **Christmas dinner**
Categories & instances	**Christmas foods**	**Food**
	Christmas pudding, turkey, goose, potatoes	Sugared sweets, boxes of chocolate, hot meat, cold meat, cooked chicken, warm bread, potatoes, yellow butter, **drink**, Christmas drink, turkey, **fruit**, apples, oranges, bowl of fruit, sugar, **pudding**, Christmas pudding, **cake**, dark cakes.

Our data reported a larger number of sub-schemas and instances than schemas and categories. In this regard, differences between both texts in the quantity of sub-schemas and instances respectively were observed; being the intermediate level graded readers the one with more words boosting cultural meanings (see table 3). In our view, the fact that cultural conceptualizations are exceeded in number by their respective sub-schemas and instances will be of great benefit for EFL learners' cultural understanding. An overexposure to cultural conceptualization without delving into their meanings through the inclusion of sub-schemas and instances may cause an overgeneralization of cultural vocabulary as, superficially, cultural conceptualizations may be similar in primary meaning but have different connotations between L1 and L2 (Liu & Zhong, 1999; Sharifian 2009; Porto & Byram, 2016). Learners may operate on the assumption that cultural vocabulary they encounter is completely shared and may not question the existence of differences and similarities between their L1 cultural views and others. According to Porto and Byram's model of cultural understanding of texts (2016), this may cause learners to fail to perceive and omit cultural aspects, which may aggravate misunderstandings in cross-cultural encounters. Our findings show graded readers address cultural conceptualizations in a deeper way, which allows the students to come in contact with different cultural connotations and meanings.

A closer look at the sub-schemas and instances in table 3 show that they help enrich the Christmas schema and the Christmas food cultural category by adding deeper cultural meanings related to the target culture. The cultural conceptualizations found (i.e., Christmas and Christmas food) can be, in primary meaning, shared around Europe, America, and Latin America. In this sense, schemas or categories pointing specifically at the target culture were not observed in any of the texts. As stated before, this approach may have negative consequences in learners' perception of cultural realities. The sub-schemas and instances from our sample seem to play a relevant role in the inclusion of cultural connotations

which, according to Read (1993) increases learners' vocabulary depth. From these readings, learners can build a mind image of how Christmas time is celebrated in the target culture, to be more thorough, the British culture. Our finding corroborates the results obtained by Cifone Ponte and Mora Guarín (2021), who argued that textbooks for 6th of Primary Education EFL learners provide them with an extensive vocabulary to encode new conceptualizations as they tend to include more subordinate levels of categorisation than basic. Furthermore, our data show the number of sub-schemas and instances is higher as the level of the text increases. Indeed, cultural conceptualizations may carry deeper cultural meanings as the level of proficiency becomes more complex. Our sample include important events and foods at Christmastime such as *Christmas day, Christmas Eve* and *Christmas pudding* and they highlight some traditions such as giving presents, the use of holly, attending Christmas dinners and parties. However, in GR B1, we can observe the schema is expanded a little more by adding other cultural notions such as spending Christmas in family, singing carols at someone's door and other traditional food such as hot and cold meat or dark cakes. In this sense, this result may be in line with Liu & Zhong' findings (1999) as they pointed to a better performance of higher proficiency level students in a test designed to identify their ability to distinguish cultural subtleties in cultural loaded words. These scholars suggested that English proficiency has a moderate effect of EFL learners' understanding of cultural words. One may speculate that, even when cultural vocabulary is not prioritized in EFL instruction, gradually exposure to a more complex set of cultural norms, connotations, and meanings through vocabulary can positively affect their cultural understanding.

It can also be observed how the same sub-schema becomes more complex from the lexical point of view when the level of the text increases; in GR A1 learners are introduced to the target-language society's custom of singing Christmas songs. In contrast, in GR B1 learners are provided with more specific vocabulary in this respect: *Christmas carols, carols* and *Christmas carols at one's door.* This finding concurs with previous research in vocabulary simplification in graded readers. Claridge (2005) compared adapted versions with their originals to determine how vocabulary simplification is approached. The author found that paraphrasing to simplify vocabulary was observed in these adapted versions. She argued that simplification of words by means of rephrasing makes them lose their original meaning. However, in our view, in the case of cultural vocabulary, low proficiency level readers may not be providing learners with specific words (e.g., carols) but it still contributes to expand the Christmas schema with new ideas through already known or easier vocabulary. This result suggests that graded readers may scaffold certain cultural concepts by simplifying cultural loaded words at basic levels and introducing more complex vocabulary in this regard in their subsequent levels.

4 Conclusions

The present paper has examined the vocabulary content in two different level graded readers adapted from the same novel to determine how they encode cultural aspects through the analysis of word frequency and cultural conceptualizations. This study brings novel insights into how graded readers influence learners' receptive and productive cultural vocabulary.

The results revealed that the number of cultural words in both texts is low and in proportion, the quantity of cultural word types and tokens do not increase in conjunction with the proficiency level of the book as it happens with the rest of the vocabulary input. In this regard, our results may imply that graded readers' approach to cultural loaded words is similar as that one observed in EFL textbooks. In terms of frequency, our sample showed that EFL learners at different learning stages may be acquiring the same cultural words. Subsequently, students with a basic level of proficiency may expand their productive cultural vocabulary while learners from an intermediate level may not be benefiting from the most frequent words as they may already know them. Hence, we believe the use of graded readers at intermediate levels may not contribute to the development of learners' cultural productive vocabulary.

Nevertheless, the study on cultural conceptualizations showed that graded readers may contribute to increase learners' cultural understanding and may develop cultural meanings and, vocabulary depth. In this regard, these books may also expand cultural conceptualizations as the level of the text increases. The development of certain cultural concepts through the inclusion of sub-schemas and instances facilitates learners' cultural understanding and promote the perception of reality from different cultural perspectives. The inclusion of words describing cultural schemas and categories make it possible to delve into certain cultural aspects and facilitate understanding of otherness. Therefore, graded readers may be a suitable way of expanding cultural understanding through overlooked topics in EFL textbooks.

These outcomes should be taken with caution. Our sample was limited to two graded readers from two different levels. Research on a wider sample where other levels are considered, and different novels are compared is required to support these findings. The novel selected, on the other hand, was expected to have strong cultural cues as the storyline develops during Christmas time in the target language society.

As for pedagogical implications, graded readers may not be developed with the aim of fostering intercultural competence through their vocabulary input. In terms of quantity and frequency, they may not be designed to improve learners' productive cultural vocabulary. However, if chosen wisely, they could be a useful companion to work on students' intercultural understanding through the development of their cultural conceptualizations. Moreover, the simplification process they go through make them suitable to gradually expose learners to cultural concepts. Research on EFL textbooks has shown how the cultural component is overlooked through vocabulary. For this reason, other tools such as graded readers could be implemented to fill in this gap. Although these books cannot substitute instruction on cultural vocabulary as they may not contribute to its growth, they can be of great value to improve learners' cultural understanding. On the other hand, as stated in the literature review and found in our data, vocabulary growth in graded reader is a commutative process. If learners are encouraged to incorporate graded readers as part of their learning process, overtime, these books may foster cultural vocabulary acquisition. Educators need to bear in mind the need of developing both: cultural receptive and productive vocabulary as cross-cultural communicative situations will require students to draw on their receptive cultural vocabulary to understand cultural concepts. Yet, they will also need productive vocabulary to communicate their own cultural values and beliefs.

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