

**UNIVERSIDADE DE SÃO PAULO**  
**FACULDADE DE FILOSOFIA, LETRAS E CIÊNCIAS HUMANAS**  
**TÓPICOS DE LÍNGUA E CULTURA**  
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**Response Paper 1**

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**THE ISSUES ABOUT TEACHING CULTURE THROUGH IMAGES**

When reading our first reading of the course, right on the first page, I came across a quote that resonated with different experiences I had in the classroom as an English teacher. The quote by Ruth Spack (1997, in Caragarajah 2016) reads:

“Teachers should be careful not to create curricula on unexamined assumptions about what students will need to succeed. ... We cannot safely predict what texts and activities will be most beneficial for our students’ development”

This brought up some memories, particularly from when I was a teacher in a language school and needed to give students an exercise from the school book that was attached to an image that, in her turn, was attached to a situational context. This usually meant - and by “meant” I mean “explicitly put in the teacher notes” - that students needed to get context, the right context, from the picture in order to answer questions or to understand certain pieces of audio or text, and context meant cultural references. The image was not merely an excuse to illustrate the exercise but was also part of it. Having what I will call from now on a *situational image* was usually part of the exercise as a cultural input or cultural cue to answering correctly the set of questions that followed.

Seeing that quote and reflecting on these memories I got to the question that I want to start with: if school books or English textbooks can’t safely predict the right texts and activities that will be most beneficial for the students and if each classroom has its own profile, its own set of different identities, cultural backgrounds, and personal language narratives, how can culture be taught through images that are supposed to activate certain cultural references that, more often than not, students don’t have?

These pictures are used by the textbooks as a starting point to the interpretative path which students are expected to follow. They have, in the answer key, one clear answer only, usually heavy with cultural cues. Even though it has been nearly three years since I taught

English using a textbook, I remember a few *situational images* that used to give students a hard time and I will try to replicate some of them below along with their descriptions.<sup>1</sup>

### **“The Coffee Shop work or study meeting”**

This piece of *situational image* usually has people on a table with their white cups or mugs, a laptop and a smile. From this piece, students were usually required to get the *coffee shop culture*, a place usually used for working or studying outside of one’s home or office and a common place for professional meetings. Of course, in Brazil, or in São Paulo at least, I’ve seen more professional meetings happening at



bars than at coffee shops. And when students were asked, most of them couldn’t name a coffee shop that wasn’t Starbucks and they couldn’t see why Starbucks would be an ideal place for professional meetings - and that’s when they could relate Starbucks to coffee shops at all.

### **“The Train Station/Departure Board”**



This *situational image* usually has a board full of the times and locations of the trains, where they are going and where they are coming from, what time they leave and from what gate. A hall full of people and bags is also seen. This piece is usually

understood after a few instructions but students alone might have trouble reading the board of departures and especially understanding things like punctuality of trains and one-way or return tickets. In some cases, there is a ticket collector or inspector involved as well, as part of the

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<sup>1</sup> Due to this paper’s limits I will present general pictures that are often used in most textbooks but at least 5 more come to mind when speaking to other colleagues or reflecting on this myself. My favorite one was, by far, any picture with celebrities, sub celebrities and famous TV shows posters. Even I sometimes had a hard time figuring out who that fifty-something-white-dude in the picture was.

audio/text. In Brazil, trains don't work like that and even on bus stations where the situation might be a little more similar, we miss a lot of these pieces of information. The closest situation we have is on airports and not many of my students were privileged enough to have been in airports or flights.

### **“The Locker Conversation”**

My last example comes from a school context. This *situational image* usually involved students in a hallway in a school near their lockers, putting things inside or taking things out and having a conversation. This used to be one of the easiest ones for



students to recognize because of pop culture but I've had unprivileged students that couldn't figure out the context of *being in a school* because in Brazil it is really rare for schools to have lockers, especially public schools. This one is used a lot in every level of every language school, from expensive franchises to small local ones. I worked at a big franchise located in a peripheric neighborhood so most of our students were not used to pop culture enough to see these images clearly in their context.

To continue the discussion I would like to bring another quote from one this semester's readings from Ferraz & Kawachi: “as imagens são também vistas como representações da realidade (...), são minuciosamente controladas, selecionadas, organizadas e redistribuídas, gerando discursos de verdade, verdades imagéticas.” What caught my attention was this concept of images creating reality. And without a doubt, students create these concepts and ideas of how life outside Brazil is and most of the time there is no reflection on the creation and manipulation that sometimes go behind pictures like that. Do these pictures really represent American<sup>2</sup> life? What part of North American society is really portrayed in these pictures?

When we start reflecting on these questions there is always a matter of *culture* involved. The way I - white Brazilian woman who had early access to English education - see American culture is definitely different from the way a lot of my students and even co-workers see North American culture and a classroom reflection needs to express that. Ferraz & Kawachi bring up

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<sup>2</sup> The usage of United States of America as an example comes from the fact that I worked at a North American Culture language school.

again a discussion on this matter when stating “Isso significa que, do mesmo modo que acreditamos na transparência do signo linguístico e, com isso, vemos língua/linguagem como algo fixo e estável, também o fazemos com as imagens.” Therefore it is not a surprise to me when students come and ask if life in North America is really how the English school’s movies, videos and pictures portray it and if everybody really wear fancy brand named clothes and cool sneakers and eat out every weekend and so on and so forth.

If students are only required to pick up on cultural cues, to understand *situational images* and not reflect on the story behind those pictures and the reality of thousands of people that may or may not be represented in those pictures, how can subjectivity really be something that is being worked on in English schools? How can we make our students aware of their own cultural background when trying to explain and present someone else’s cultural background? Is there a space for negotiating different interpretations when it comes to culture and images inside a classroom?

After studying Culture through so many different views - in undergraduation, in English schools and on my own terms - I decided to try and create a space in the class where students can reflect on these different views of culture and decide for themselves what makes sense for them, while helping them achieve a reality of other cultures that is as close to real as it can be but is, at the same time, comprehensible enough to someone who has never encountered those situations before. If textbooks and English courses won’t change overnight, a teacher also won’t and I definitely have *not* been studying culture overnight.