



## Teaching English with National Geographic Materials through the Prism of Holistic Education

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### Abstract

*This article introduces a new series of educational materials, published by National Geographic Learning, a part of Cengage Learning, in 2014. Spanning beginner to advanced level, the LIFE books series is designed for EFL/ ESL students who aim at academic education. Using National Geographic materials, the book provides learners with real life lesson models encompassing global cultural awareness and issues. Thus, merging ecology, sociology, culturology, anthropology, technology, social studies, science and politics, it provides us, the English teachers, with a material that answers to the interdisciplinary, cross-curricular scheme of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that our National Curriculum reformations have been attempting, but without providing a model ground for such a change in educational concept. The paper analyses the changes this global concept brings and sheds light on the changing demands on both students and teachers, should such an approach be adopted. Last but not least, it attempts at a critical assessment of the concept the LIFE series proposes.*

### 1. Brief assessment of the current situation

English textbooks, despite their visually improved form and an effort to aid to interactive lessons, are still perceived as a cut-and-dry must by most students. The discrepancy between the recent social push to proficiency in English in many fields and walks of life, be it from technical to medical, artistic to scientific, is not echoed by the English textbooks we are literally swarmed with. Thus, we find ourselves supplying materials from BBC, NYT and other sources to engage students in topical issues and real English, since even CPE materials and books provide a simplified, distilled version of it. Our students try to mimic L2 ambiance by adopting as much input in L2 as available. In most cases though, particularly at lower and higher secondary school level, it is movies and PC games which provide most of the source for L2 acquisition. In either way, the increased input leads to increasing boredom with constructed texts and listening which feel artificial and too transparent in their one level task dimension.

With the supply of sources students have at hand, be it entertainment or educational matter, it is more than obvious that if we are to engage them actively, we need to go far beyond regular textbooks, gap filling exercises and artificial dialogues whose only purpose is to train an examination skill.

### 2. Introducing LIFE, an English textbook by National Geographic

Bringing the interdisciplinary into focus by law (In the Czech Republic, the so called SVP, or “School Educational Programme providing a national scheme for schools to profile their goals under unified frame for Educational Programme) has been accepted as merely a formal criterion, given that the concept stands on no solid ground and many schools have been trying to somehow accommodate their old traditional way to this framework. However justified the trend is, there has been a palpable lack of a concept that would provide a meaningful demonstration for such a change.

For those teachers who wish to teach “out of the box” it has been feasible to integrate videos, news, movie excerpts or even academic articles to more advanced levels, bringing topical news and discussing affairs in Libya, Syria, Ukraine, Bosnia ... wherever there was a conflict widely covered by media and therefore, with bountiful materials, to enhance the lessons both in linguistic and cognitive levels. The problem I encountered as more challenging was bringing this concept to young learners of A1, A2 levels, providing that they were too “old” for children songs and stories but curious and investigative enough to be challenged beyond the common prefabricated textbooks.

As if in an answer to a wish, the LIFE series, officially launched in 2014, came with a skilful merge of unique features tailored to fill the above mentioned gaps: It promises to bring life to classroom.

#### 2.1 The general concept of the LIFE series

The concept of LIFE series is to increase the awareness of real life situations around us, provoke curiosity about global issues and transform English classes into “multicultural education”. Using the rich repertoire of National Geographic materials, photos, videos, studies, articles and vastness of



issues covered, it unites expert pedagogical and linguistic approach to the content National Geographic stands for. There are several layers upon which lessons can be conducted. On the face of it, each unit is tightened by its topic, which is more like a leitmotif developed and expanded upon in all activities of a given unit. Starting with a fascinating photo (many of which can be identified as World Press Photos), it manages to personalize each experience, going from the basic, general, to a more subjective experience and from there, to a more generalizing grasp of the topic. It encourages to look beyond issues and topics raised in the units by listing projects, scientists and other aspects the students can easily Google and research further, having a real name and a real project at hand.

## 2.2 Organization of the book

Each unit is carefully divided into A—F subsections, structurally mirrored in the Workbook series. In itself, this doesn't come as a surprise. What does, though, is the novelty and the take of the articles, in both Students' book and Workbook. The interlinking of grammar, phrases and knowledge. Each unit opens up with a listening provoking debate and raising dissenting opinions with an enticing photo as an eye-catcher. The A subsection presents a grammar item, and a text with practical examples of its use. The B section focuses on listening and vocabulary work, differences between synonyms, phrasal verbs, or set phrases. The topic is further developed into writing and speaking, placing emphasis on the newly acquired grammar. The C section consists of a dense article, presenting a challenging viewpoint on the topic, based either on a recent discovery, or an issue we, as a human race, need to change. Apart from the reading comprehension tasks, the section on critical thinking brings the true edge to each topic. Teaching students to analyse, synthesize, draw conclusions, predict in the light of the information provided, think of possible consequences and solution, this is the truly engaging part. The D section focuses on a real life situation and provided phrases for daily interaction. The section E works on writing skills, providing a model example for each genre and again, real examples. The tasks are not taken away from reality and therefore not perceived as an exercise per se. E.g. when teaching to write a proposal, the task is based on a pre-activity of determining what part of our city would benefit from modernization. The students are directly linked to a palpable issue they can identify with. The F section is the most awaited by students, the video page. Carefully designed, with pre-watching, while-watching and post-watching parts, the videos take us into every corner of the world, presenting us with cultures unknown, with societies and their values we have not heard of. Apart from an engaging role, the videos are thought-provoking and argument-inspiring. They very often lead to a problem solution or compromise-seeking discussion. With the information and visual support provided in the video /which is part of every textbook/, the students are well equipped for a discussion which would otherwise seem unrealistic and far-flung. Each unit is ended by a review page.

### 2.2.1. Practical demonstration of a unit (taken from LIFE intermediate, Unit 1)

Starting with a photo of two girls in Brunei, wearing the most extraordinary colours, the listening brings us to think of the meaning of colours in our every day life. Of the difference in perception and in national customs and traditions. The photos shows colours that we, Europeans, would scarcely wear and thus it challenges us to think why we avoid bright colours and colour combinations in general.

The section A further expands on the topic, showing a different insight: colour is not a marginal issue in our life, it is omnipresent and our lives are tightly connected to it. Students are lead to think how we use colours as badges of identity, personal or national. How we send different messages through colours and how that differs in fashion-conscious Europe and let us say, Quechua tribe in Peru (photo). Grammar section presents the present simple and continuous, stative verbs and time expressions.

Section B starts with eliciting students reaction about their own personal association with certain colours. As a pre-listening, it focuses on choosing the correct word for each definition (e.g. joy/ mourning: the word "mourning" would be new to intermediate students). The core of the listening, underlain by a bright picture of Indian women at a wedding ceremony, is about different meaning and associations of colours in different cultures (e.g. yellow – wisdom in India, red – the colour of love and passion and aggression in the Western World while it is a wedding colour in India.). The Grammar extended practice is again motivated by colours and the theoretical part is further practised in activities combining the application of the rules (e.g. present simple used for routines) and interest-igniting articles: the Blue People and their lifestyle, the Californian Yellow Fruit Festival, etc.

The C section talks about the colour red as a colour of winners both in animal and human worlds. Besides drawing parallels to the perception of red as a dominant colour we have in common, it also suggests the sport team of similar ability is more likely to win if wearing the colour red. Therefore, the critical thinking tasks are to deduce the impact of the colour, synthesizing the animal and human



worlds, and transporting this conclusion into sport domain, discussing whether red should be banned from official competitions.

The D section starts with a catchy slogan: “You don’t get a second chance to make a good first impression”. Behind an easy task of learning how to introduce oneself, the students are also presented with business strategy to make a good impression, to be able to ask for a contact or offer a contact, to be aware of the dress code and hence, role of colour in social communication.

The section E explores designing a web site, talking about a website profile (an interior design company) and the impact companies desire to reach.

The F section: Video about Peruvian Weavers

Apart from visually attractive, colourful scenery of the Andes and Peruvian village, the video presents a controversial topic of keeping a tradition which might seem backward /in this case, weaving/ to safeguard local habits and cultures. In the post-watching task, students are asked to perform an interview with a Peruvian weaver asking about the importance of local traditions in contrast to promoting progress and modernity. The students may, in a way, realize how much we all sacrifice on the altar of globalization.

## 2.3 Extra features

### 2.3.1 Extensibility of topics

The listening about different associations with certain colours proved of high interest among students and provoked heated discussions about stereotypes and traditions. It proved to be an incentive for a much larger project, consisting of research into colour symbolism and cultural differences in colour perception, archetypes and understanding of life (concept of death, e.g.). Similarly, the article entitled “A better life?” about Chinese sweatshops and China as a factory floor of the world served as a platform for a project on modern slavery, looking into details on slave labour, world-wide slave labour profit, conditions and measures to prevent this from occurring. Coincidentally, there was a series of “Apple Exposed”, Slaves at Foxconn videos showing an up-to-date and daunting reality. By interconnecting the book and these, we are positive the students are equipped with knowledge they can use to make a change in this world, growing into confident speakers making well-informed choices.

### 2.3.2 Critical thinking extension into current issues

As already mentioned above, the materials can be used at multiple levels. Even if we follow the tasks without further alterations and extensions, students get sufficient mental challenge to keep them involved and active. More interestingly though, they can be prompted to look harder. To explore beyond the information served to them. Another layer, therefore, is taking the articles as a platform for further research and in-depth world awareness focus. For instance, the unit 3, Life intermediate, with the main topic of Water, shows an interesting video about water issues in India in the area of Rajasthan. It touches the polemics of dam construction in developing countries and its impact on the local inhabitants and the environment, which is further developed in the Life Upper Intermediate book under the topic of Sustainable Development. For the majority of students, any topic concerning India would be a new and unexplored ground. Their only knowledge may derive from the movie Slum dog Millionaire, at the best. Therefore, introducing the reality of slums first proved a true incentive for the topic. Furthermore, using the fact that many documentaries about India water problem have been released, mapping various traditional techniques to store water and attempts to clean heavily polluted rivers led to a more in-depth understanding. As a further extension, I linked to topic to Africa and similar issues, trying to bring awareness to the fact we were fortunately born in a country which does not suffer from drinking water shortage, but we are responsible for our actions nonetheless. The website [www.whypoverty.net](http://www.whypoverty.net) proved extremely helpful in practically any topic about human rights violations, poverty, or ecology. To be more specific, I used <http://www.whypoverty.net/video/god-is-rain/>.

### 2.3.3 Visuals to help synthesizing processes

To avoid the growing complexity of topics swarming the students and imposing motivating elements rather than letting them nourish their own internal motivation, a number of steps were taken to help organize and systematize all work.

#### 2.3.3.1 (E) - portfolios

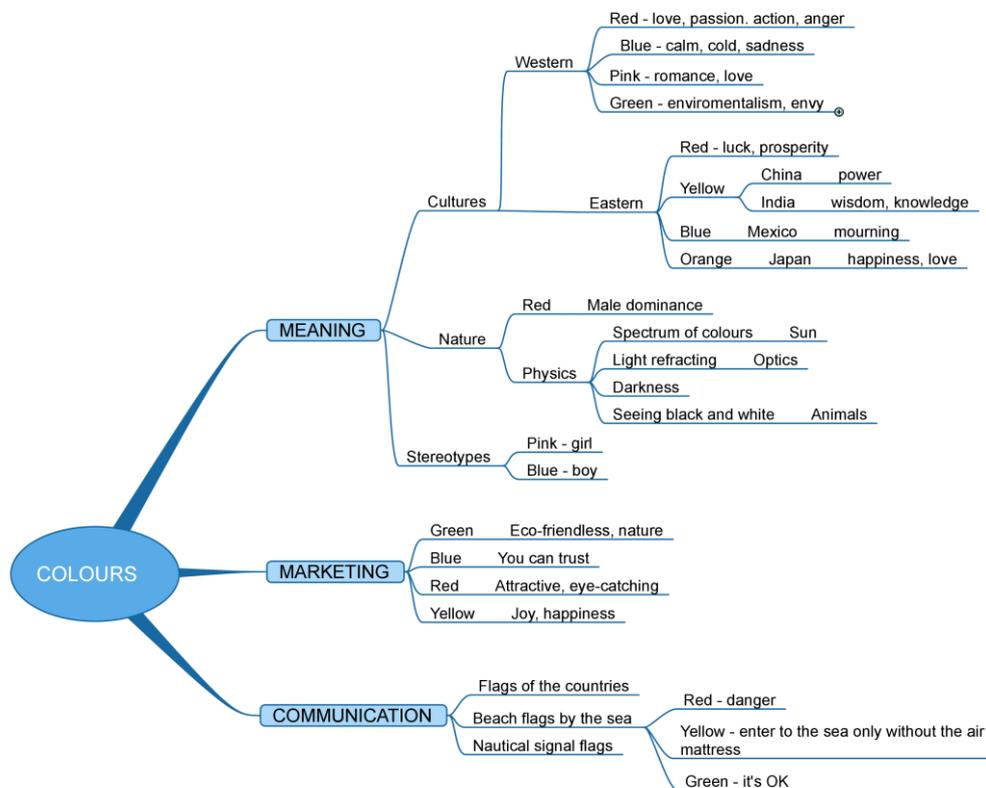
Students were asked to keep a portfolio (or an e-portfolio) to trace online sources we were adding to the course. Beside extensive vocabulary work, they were asked to write a summary of each topic,



including the extra sources discussed in classes plus their own reflection, mapping their personal development and degree of motivation.

### 2.3.3.2 Mind-maps

As a tool to help organize thoughts and hierarchy of topics and issues, mind mapping software was encouraged both as a visual support for reviewing lessons and a frame for students' mock-academic presentations. An example of a student work follows:



## 2.4 Critical points

Based on a thorough feedback from 7 pilot classes at Lauder School, Prague (1 Elementary group aged 11, 2 Pre-Intermediate classes aged 12 and 13, 3 Intermediate groups aged 14, 15 and 16, one Advanced group aged 17), four university groups (aged 21) and two private Advanced classes, let me attempt at a comprehensive assessment of the series seen through the prism of holistic education, methodology of L2 education and students' feedback.

### 2.4.1 Holistic approach

Engaging the logical and the creative, the intuitive and the systematic, the right and left-hemisphere oriented activities, the academic and the interactive. We might go on in listing the demands of modern education propelled by increasing demands on individuals. Seen through the prism of holistic philosophy, we can no longer make isolated mistakes, we need to learn to think long-term and not with a short-term self-centred focus on our minds [3]. However difficult this seems to be to integrate into academic preparation, it should be the goal of us, teachers, to develop and also help develop.

Given the difficulty in merging so many disciplines and pedagogically and methodically thought-through materials, interwoven topics that do not get repeated throughout the series, this clear, carefully revised form brings timeless concept of education. By being a synthesis of an L2 and world issues though, the work far surpasses grammar and vocabulary lessons. If the message is to be delivered effectively, students need to be given a help with understanding why they are learning about a tucked-away village in Peru and not their own day-to-day reality. They need to grasp the complexity of world-wide issues and at the same time, be led to apply the knowledge to their lives, a link which might not be evident and extrinsic to all at the first sight. We might, quite righteously, raise the question whether the topics should not be closer to the European reality. Whether learning about far-flung places and rare specimen should not be the icing on the cake rather than the meat and potatoes of the units. Let us have a closer look at the criteria for holistic education in an attempt to answer this question.



Holistic approach aims at:

1. wholeness
2. fostering a less materialistic and more spiritual world-view
3. cultivating different aspects of the individual, that is: aesthetic, intellectual, physical, spiritual, emotional, social
4. building relations between the individual and other people, the individual and natural environment, the inner-self and the external
5. being based on life experience, not narrowly defined basic skills
6. appreciation for the diversity of human experience
7. being open to change when social and cultural change is required
8. kindling a relationship between the human and the natural world that is nurturing, not exploitative [2]

By inference, taking into account a broader perspective than purely an English teaching methodology, we can agree that reading about dams in India, about little gadgets helping people in Africa to drinkable water, about people devoting their lives to make a change however little it might seem (like making a research about bees in Mexico), about fusion music concept, but also about augmented reality, about future urbanism (19.20.21 project), to name just a few, fulfils this mission simply because the matter is not purely about far-flung places, but its a fusion of current heroes, scientific projects and curiosities. What may seem far-fetched proved actually intriguing for the students, particularly at lower levels.

On the other hand, some articles would benefit from a more careful consideration (like "Mission" video in the unit 8 of Intermediate LIFE, which failed to make a point to both students and teachers). As both students' and teachers' feedback showed, a more interwoven European issues would contribute to the solidity of issues. As it is, it lies heavily on the teacher to provide these interlinks and fill in the gaps, should an in-depth understanding of the matter be reached. From the above mentioned pilot student groups, roughly a half has been taught through the prism of holistic education with a great emphasis on visualizing and structuring notes, on expanding the topics using additional sources and providing a solid knowledge corpus for them to grasp the wholeness of the topics. As it was clearly proven by the feedback research, there was a painful discrepancy between groups led with this on mind and groups which were taught in a far less demanding, more traditional way of just following the units as in a traditional textbook. Those students demonstrated an alarming level of confusion and failure to grasp complex issues. They only remembered the colourful photos and surprising videos but did not benefit much further.

Summarized, we need to conclude that working with LIFE series requires additional work. It demands the teacher adopt and integrate broader spectrum of knowledge, systems to analyse and synthesise, to visualize the content, and aid to systematic grammar and vocabulary acquisition. Another point to consider were the frequent answers that the most memorable parts of the lesson were actually the extra articles and videos, bringing a more intellectually demanding materials without alterations to make them neutral. Last but not least, a frequent complaint that the majority of topics are nature and ecology oriented and there is a lack of art and literature oriented units comes as perfectly justified. Perhaps these point could help bring the books to even a higher standard.

### **2.4.2 Changing roles**

Nonetheless, it is a material that requires thorough preparation and readiness to accept an alternative role of a teacher. Far from an English teacher only, s/he needs to be an open-minded person with broad spectrum of knowledge; otherwise there is a danger of getting tired with some units which are strictly mono-thematic in every step and exercise just because the subtlety of holistic concept is not grasped and understood. One of the greatest benefits I see is that the students are naturally led to accepting responsibility for their progress and they are not entirely dependent on extrinsic motivation only. By being challenged to perform a well-informed discussion or a presentation, they adopt a mock-academic post, proud to present arguments and facts they have carefully researched.

### **2.4.3 Level assessment**

Based on one year of teaching all levels and having a thorough feedback from students in lower secondary, higher secondary and tertiary education, we can conclude that LIFE presents an utterly spectacular concept, engaging and enriching in every aspect. Even the Elementary book manages to captivate and intrigue learners by simply inspiring to wanting to learn more and express themselves better. While the videos might seem too difficult particularly for A1-A2 levels, the visual stimuli and careful task management fully bridge this gap. Moreover, the mantra of students being presented with materials a level higher than their current practical level works in all aspects. They lose the fear of not



understanding, they train predicting and deducing from the context/ visuals automatically and naturally, and they acquire smooth phrases and collocations in a memorable and fully engaging way. Our only hesitation would go to the Advanced textbook, which does not seem to meet this mantra. To justify this claim, let me demonstrate on one selected example: the video about Sea Gypsies showed an entirely different reality from what the article in the textbook presented. Also, compared to the original article published by National Geographic, (<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2005/04/sea-gypsies/ivanoff-text>), the textbook version showed a slightly idealized version, refraining from the political and governmental issues, as well as several human rights violation policy, as shown in the short film at <http://www.whypoverty.net/video/sea-gypsies/>. Without going into details, I do feel that a level which is supposedly academic (or, preparing for an academic) should be much more challenging both linguistically and intellectually. Compared to the Upper Intermediate book, the Advanced series is a leisure walk after an uphill climb. If we take into consideration that this should be the pinnacle, the presentation of the polished language, a model for academic style and a starting point for an academic career, then we might expect unabridged articles, even politically motivated and controversial, heavily engaged issues that the adolescent learners would truly appreciate.

#### 2.4.4 Fear of complexity

A possible fear among teachers is that the materials are too complex and withdrawn from our day to day reality. The truth is that talking about a tucked away village in Peru won't help our students itself unless we manage to make them see why Peruvian tribe might interest them as a representative of a wider social issue. In some cases, undeniably, the justification is more difficult and would perhaps need a more careful revision. In others, the articles may benefit from a link to a current situation or more in-depth, denser information which would provide the missing justification of a case. As illustrated above, several videos, unabridged sources and links were added in classes to help students integrate the new piece of knowledge into their walking system and actually proved to be the most appreciated parts of the lessons.

### 3. Conclusion

As the 21<sup>st</sup> century mantra is change and changing approaches, education cannot remain indifferent. The complexity of this day and age may seem daunting to many and yet, we, teachers, are here to facilitate knowledge, to open new doors to our students. The frontal, authoritarian approach is long gone, a sepulchre of times when authority was automatic. Nowadays, it is not so. If we fail to convince our students, if we fail to live in these times and find a way to use complexity to your benefit, we will remain bystanders and copers, rather than shapers.

As the key question is "whom do we want to educate?" and the answer is: future politicians, businessmen, technicians, doctors,... but also people who are aware of their purpose of existence and their contribution, they will most positively need to be equipped with tools to understand their role in this global, complex world, calling for holistic, responsible approach. The team of National Geographic Learning certainly helped us in this path under the condition we are prepared to put extra work in helping students embrace the complexity.

#### 3.1 Feedback from students

*"I've learnt a lot about the inhabitants of Burma, Sahara, or urbanism. We discussed various intriguing topics like The Enigma of Beauty, our perception of it and yet I was actually learning English, naturally and effortlessly."*

*(Lenka Lovicarová, manager of People in Need organization, about LIFE Advanced)*

*"I love the surprises English lessons bring. It always challenges us, makes us think of unusual questions and topics while demanding precision and richness in language. It makes us learn about topics we would otherwise not have heard or thought, like "sustainability". Some of the article in LIFE Advanced are too easy though, we could do with far more challenging texts and vocabulary."*

*(Veronika Denkova, a student of Lauder School, Prague, about LIFE Advanced)*

*"I like the structure of the textbook and videos because it's special about this book. I miss some pieces of literature to read, though. In my opinion, there should be more topics about Europe because it hits us."* (Rut Schmidtova, a student of Lauder School, Prague, about LIFE Intermediate)

*"I found it confusing. I couldn't find a vocabulary list and the books were puzzling for me. I also didn't understand the people in the videos. I had to search for grammar elsewhere and I found it difficult to prepare at home."* (a student from Lauder School, about LIFE Pre-Intermediate)



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