The first article is ‘Banal Nationalism in ESL Textbooks’ by Trevor Gulliver from Canadian Journal of Education. The main idea of the article is that banal nationalism, ‘the ways in which the nation is remembered through little reminders that say little about the nation but affirm its existence’ (Gulliver, 2011: 121), is a common theme in ESL textbooks used in Canada, particularly in government-funded language programs.

The data for the study is the 12 most commonly used texts in the province of Ontario along with 12 others selected at random. The texts were analyzed for ‘markings of nation including flags, maps and the presentation of some symbols as Canadian symbols’ (Gulliver, 2011: 123).

The article positions itself as descriptive and does not makes any explicit claims as to what effects this form of nationalism has on students or the ways in which teachers approach the subject (if at all) and the author states this limitation early in the article. The author claims that ‘this article is not accusatory’ (Gulliver, 2011: 130), but the general tone of the piece and lexical choice suggest otherwise. Gulliver finds textbooks ‘saturated’ with nationalism, that the ‘ubiquitous’ flag hangs ‘limply’ or is ‘plastered on the walls of immigration offices’ and that images of Canadian geography ‘seep’ into texts which ‘inundate readers’ with signs of nationalism (Gulliver, 2011: 121, 125, 126, 130), all of which lead to the conclusion that the author in fact takes a dim view of the trends he finds.

Critique

In general, this is an informative and interesting article. Gulliver presents a clear framework of banal nationalism and makes a strong argument that it is a common theme in the texts he examines, but at its heart this is (perhaps by necessity) a subjective study that could have more relevance to students and teachers of social sciences or nationalism than to those of English.

The methodological approach of the study is somewhat vague. Gulliver reports that in choosing the texts to be analysed, he conducted a survey of teachers, but it is not clear how they were approached or how many responded. Further, as it is generally the case that decisions relating to core texts are taken not by individual teachers but by schools as a whole, the choice to contact teachers is one that may require greater explanation.

The means of analysis is also slightly problematic. Exactly what constitutes a representation of banal nationalism is not thoroughly described and there is no quantitative data provided. Though some symbols and items could clearly be identified as such (flags and national anthems, for instance), others are far more subjective. For instance, Gulliver counts
not only maps but also pictures of Canadian cities or landscapes as examples of banal nationalism. Most teachers or students would view an image of a Canadian city as just that and it is difficult to objectively attribute its inclusion to any form of subtle nationalism.

One criticism of the article in general would be that it is unclear whether Gulliver takes issue with banal nationalism in Canada in general or specifically as it manifests itself in Canadian textbooks. He clearly has a negative view of the phenomenon as he describes it, but the extent to which he feels textbooks perpetuate this is not as easily discerned. For example, the article notes the presence of flags in textbooks’ portrayals of schools, post offices and government offices. However, in actuality these are the places in which one would expect and indeed find flags, so it could easily be argued that the texts are simply portraying Canadian society as it is. There is an argument to be made as to whether the reproduction of a trend in a text legitimises or encourages it, but the corollary to that would be that ignoring a reality could be even more dangerous as it would essentially allow for editors or writers to ignore facts based on their personal opinions or biases.

Though the article does clearly relate to ESL, the analysis at times seems to overstretch logical bounds. The treatment of the Canadian national anthem is an example of this. Gulliver notes that while one text includes a question to be discussed by students concerning the issue of whether gendered phrases in the anthem should be changed, he goes on the state that it fails to address the larger question of ‘whether anthems should be sung’ (Gulliver, 2011: 129-130). This is an interesting matter but certainly not one which would be expected to be addressed in an ESL class or textbook and that critique leaves the impression that Gulliver’s expectations from the texts are perhaps unrealistic.

The main value of the article is the way in which it highlights the existence of the issue and though it is something that teachers should be aware of when using materials, the question of whether or not the second language classroom is an appropriate or logical forum for discussions of constructs of national identity remains an open one, and one not addressed by the author.