1 USING THE COURSE BOOK: A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

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1. INTRODUCTION

English language teaching (ELT) materials are most usually published in the form of print course books, often with supplementary audio and other digital resources and are designed to provide a comprehensive teaching programme for a course. Increasingly, digital course materials are also being used. The question about whether or not use of a course book, in principle (whether print or digital) is a good thing has been dealt with extensively in the literature; see, for example, Allwright (1981) and Meddings & Thornbury (2009) for the case against; O'Neill (1981) and Hutchinson & Torres (1994) for arguments in favour. This question is, however, largely academic; in fact, the vast majority of English teachers base their teaching on course books, and the publishing of such materials continues to thrive.

As an English teacher myself, I am firmly in favour of using a course book. I taught ELT in elementary and secondary school classes in state schools for 25 years; on average, I taught about 20 hours a week and based my teaching very substantially on textbooks approved by the local Ministry of Education. I could not have managed without them; I did not have the time to look for, let alone create, my own materials. I did, however, make occasional adaptations and additions (ones that did not demand too much extra preparation time).

The main part of this article deals with some issues of principle and practice in teachers' use of course books. Approaches suggested by writers on EFL professional research, some of them based on insights from research, will be discussed, and some conclusions drawn, coloured by my own teaching experience. I will then give some examples of some practical techniques of adaptation of grammar and vocabulary exercises that accord with these conclusions.

2. SOME ISSUES IN TEACHERS' USE OF COURSE BOOKS

2.1 DO TEACHERS FOLLOW THE COURSE BOOK SLAVISHLY?

It is commonly claimed that a danger of course book use is that it tempts teachers to follow the book uncritically, without thinking for themselves, using it as a "script" rather than as a tool or resource, that they may abdicate the right to teach as they think best, simply mediate the given texts and tasks as they stand, and are thus disempowered or de-skilled (Tomlinson, 2012).

> The danger with ready-made textbooks is that they seem to absolve teachers of responsibility. Instead of participating in the day-to-day decisions that have to be made about what to teach and how to teach it, it is easy to just sit back and operate the system, secure in the knowledge that the wise and virtuous people who produced the textbook knew what was good for us (Swan, 2012, p. 42).

See also Maley (2011), and arguments summarised in the introduction to McGrath (2012). It seems likely, however, that this claim is not, in the majority of cases, true (Richards & Mahoney, 1996). First, teachers do not spend all their lesson time just going through the book; there is evidence that many bring in material of their own, downloaded from the Internet, composed by themselves or brought by students (Lee & Bathmaker, 2007). Second, even while using the course book, the moment a teacher uses any specific text or task he or she inevitably has to choose between various possibilities as to *how* to teach it. For example, a text followed by comprehension questions and preceded by the instruction "Read and answer the questions" is apparently prescriptive, but in fact leaves open a number of decisions to be taken by the teacher. Will the students read silently or aloud? At home or in class? Will the teacher read aloud while students follow or not? Will the teacher set the whole text to be read all at once, or go through it bit by bit? How many times will it be read? Similarly, there are variations with regard to the questions: Will they be done in class through a conventional "ping-pong" interaction with the teacher? Will they be looked at before reading the text? Will they be done for homework? Will they be done individually in writing in class, in pairs or small groups? The answers will depend partly on the competence or preferences of the teacher, but predominantly on the local *culture of learning* (Cortazzi & Lixian, 1999). For example, in places where the culture of learning is based on the teacher as authority and the learners as disciples, tasks and texts are likely to be administered consistently in a teacher-led interaction structure; in those where learner independence is highly valued, there will be more student-initiated procedures.

The same is true of any other course book items. However predetermined and rigid the instructions seem, and however closely they are followed in class, there is inevitably room for differing interpretations by the teacher. Course book use entails course book adaptation. But there is, of course, a quantitative and qualitative difference between the limited kinds of procedural adaptations suggested above, and the more substantial teacher-initiated adaptations (changes, additions, deletions and re-ordering) which are discussed below.

2.2 IS SUBSTANTIAL ADAPTATION OF COURSE BOOKS DESIRABLE?

In most cases, some substantial adaptation of course books is, of course, inevitable and there have been many lists of reasons why this should be so. The course book may be an international one not suited to the local situation; there may be problems of cultural bias or references, inappropriate level or quantity of the material, and so on. There are, however, many situations where the course book is appropriate for the needs of its target teacher and student population, and in such cases it can, and indeed should, usually be used without very much adaptation beyond the basic ones referred to above. Such situations are more likely to exist where the course book has been designed specifically for the target population – as in countries where textbooks are locally written, or adapted, or were carefully

selected to match the needs of learners and teachers. In my own case, approved state school course books are locally published and written by authors with experience teaching within the system. I used these course books myself for all my (school-)teaching career and implemented most of the material in my classrooms more or less as given.

Reasons why many, or most, of the course book components may be used as they stand include the following:

- **They are often very good.**

   Michael Swan, in the passage quoted above, refers ironically to the "wise and virtuous" people who produce textbooks; but the underlying implication (that they are not) is not really fair. Course book writers may or may not be virtuous, but certainly many of them do possess the kind of professional wisdom born of teaching and writing experience that enables them to write good materials. Certainly, the reason I used most of the components in my course books was simply that I found them effective and did not feel I could improve on them.

- **They are convenient and time-saving.**

   This is a very real professional consideration, not to be sneered at. Most teachers have relatively little time to prepare lessons, and many other things to do that limit it further. These include not only personal factors like family and home commitments or travel to and from school, but also school-linked ones: administrative paperwork, checking homework, assessment and grading, staff meetings. Anything that can help teachers to use their time and energy more effectively is to be welcomed, and ready-made course materials fulfil this function well.

- **They promote professional learning.**

   The ideas suggested in the course books can contribute to a teacher's knowledge base. The teacher who uses them increases his or her awareness of the variety of types of text and task that can be used – information that teacher preparation courses do not regularly provide. In good course books, the explanations of language points can provide succinct and learner-friendly pedagogical rules (Swan, 2012). The teacher's guide (if used, see below) may add new ideas and insights which, if they are immediately applied in the use of the book in the classroom, are likely to be internalised better than those provided in teachers' handbooks or courses.

- **They are an agent of change.**

   This is the main point made in the much-quoted paper by Hutchinson and Torres (1994). The article produces convincing research evidence to support the claim that changes in methodology or content of an English teaching programme in a particular context (an institution, or chain of schools, or country) – are probably most effectively mediated by the textbooks. Few teachers read curricula or theoretical guidelines published by an authority; even fewer have the time or energy to work out how to implement these in their classrooms on their own. The changes will be implemented in classrooms simply because the teachers are using the course books which apply them, and for this reason only. I have seen this happen in my own

teaching context; a new curriculum recently introduced in Israel demands extensive teaching and reviewing of large amounts of vocabulary and provides a list of the most important "core" items which should be known at different levels. Much more vocabulary is now being learnt in Israeli classrooms, not because of the curriculum itself, but because teachers are using approved course books that are based on it. It has to be noted, however, that there is evidence that very drastic changes that are unacceptable to teachers will be rejected even if they are inserted in course books; teachers will simply refuse to implement them (Tomlinson, 2015, personal communication).

To conclude, in situations where course books have been well-designed or selected, most of their components are likely to be used by teachers more or less as they stand; and this needs no apology. This fact is, however, totally compatible with a recommendation to adapt (add to, omit or change) specific components where appropriate.

2.3 IS THE MAIN FUNCTION OF ADAPTATION TO COMPENSATE FOR INADEQUA-CY?

Many writers would answer *Yes* to this question (McDonough, Shaw, & Masuhara, 2013). Richards (2001, p. 4) makes the same point more positively: "Commercial textbooks can seldom be used without some form of adaptation to make them more suitable for the particular context in which they will be used". In other words, the purpose of adaptation is to counteract those aspects in which the materials are inappropriate or inadequate.

However, this assumption is questionable. In many cases, we adapt materials components that are fine in themselves and already appropriate for the needs of the students. For example, when we do something to an activity to add interest, this may not necessarily be because it was not interesting as it stood, but because we feel we can make it more so. We may want to adapt a quite adequate procedure for a variety of reasons: to make it more learning-rich or more available for different levels within the class, to fit our own teaching style or preferences, to make the course book more attractive to students, to make its use more enjoyable for both of us or simply for the sake of variety.

My point is that adaptation of a textbook does not (necessarily) imply criticism of its shortcomings, but rather aims at optimal utilisation of its resources.

2.4 SHOULD COURSE BOOK DESIGN EXPLICITLY ENCOURAGE TEACHER ADAPTATION?

Of course, any course book component can be changed by a teacher. The question here is whether the book explicitly conveys the message "It's up to you how you do this" or whether it rather dictates "You should do it like this".

In general, most writers on materials design are clearly in support of the first option (Tomlinson, Dat, Masuhara, Rubdy, 2001; Bell & Gower, 2011; Masuhara, 2011). In a similar vein, Cortazzi and Lixian (1999) recommend the use of open texts available for

multiple interpretation and discussion, rather than closed ones that present pre-set facts or assumptions with which it is assumed the learner will agree.

Flexibility of design can be provided in two ways: first, by simply not giving prescribed procedures at all, but providing a set of resources which the teacher can use as he or she thinks fit, as suggested by Maley (2011), or by providing a range of suggestions which the teacher can choose from as to how to use each activity or text, as suggested by Masuhara, Hann and Tomlinson:

> What teachers want are not prescriptions but engaging texts, activities, advice and suggestions so that they can personalize, localize and adapt the global coursebooks to suit their specific learners in their classrooms in diverse contexts (Masuhara, Hann, & Tomlinson, 2008, p. 311).

There are, however, problems with both solutions.

Simply providing resources without directions how to use them is likely in practice to result in teachers relying on conventional, tried-and-tested procedures rather than becoming more creative, as shown in Van den Akker's research (1988), referred to in Hutchinson and Torres (2001). It is interesting that in Van Den Akker's study teachers without structured guidance on how to use the materials also reported less satisfaction with them, as well as problems of classroom control. Even if the teacher is confident, experienced and creative enough to initiate his or her own procedures or supplementary materials in order to use the course book effectively, the time and work needed to think out and prepare them may well be prohibitive.

A range of suggestions in the teacher's guide as to how to deal with a specific text or activity may also not be very helpful; teachers simply do not have the time to read them all and choose between them. And it is an interesting question how much teachers use teacher's guides in general. I could find no solid research evidence on this, but I do not remember using teacher's guides very much in my own teaching. These memories were confirmed by an informal recent survey of my class of experienced teachers in a Master's programme, which revealed that only two out of fifteen even open the teacher's guides attached to their course books, except to check listening text transcripts; but they also said that they had used them more in their early years of teaching. It may well be that this represents a general trend.

Kurt Lewin famously pronounced "There is nothing so practical as a good theory". Swan (1985, p. 2) has used this as a basis for his assertion "There is nothing so creative as a good dogma". This claim is obviously hyperbolic, but there is an underlying truth in it. A structured, consistent and clearly enunciated dogma (principle, belief, model, theory, philosophy) is easier to argue with, reject or use as a basis for further development of thought than is a wide-ranging, flexible and fluid one that can be interpreted in different ways. Compare the basic claim of Popperian science that a hypothesis that is expressed explicitly and categorically and can be tested is much more productive for the development of scientific theory than is a vague generalisation (Popper, 1963, 2014).

In the present context, my argument is that components in a course book where the text and recommended procedures are clearly prescribed are, perhaps paradoxically, much more conducive to the creation of extensions and variations than are components where

there is no such prescription. There is also the point that a course book with no specific directives forces teachers to work out themselves how to use the components (often with the result that we fall back on very conventional procedures); a course book with prescriptions allows the teacher the choice as to whether to use them or not.

2.5 HOW CAN TEACHERS BE HELPED TO ADAPT COURSE BOOKS EFFECTIVELY?

Many writers have made the point that teacher training programmes should include components on materials design, evaluation and use (e.g. Masuhara, 2011; McGrath, 2013). The guidance available to teachers in the literature that would serve as a basis for such courses is, however, rather theoretical, and not of immediate practical use. The number and variety of checklists available for course book evaluation, for example, is daunting (see the account in McGrath, 2013, p. 55), and many use criteria that presuppose a particular model or approach (for example, "Does the book use authentic language?") that may not fit a particular teacher or teaching context. The accounts of applied linguistics research and theory that are relevant to materials development, such as those covered in Tomlinson (2013), are similarly wide-ranging and for the most part not obviously applicable to practice.

Practical recommendations as to how teachers may adapt materials typically list the procedures under three main headings: omission, addition and change. Omission would include the elimination of entire components or only deletion of particular items. Addition includes the use of entirely new texts or tasks or just the addition of extra items within the given component. Change includes change of order, change of instructions or change of the actual text (McGrath, 2013). In some cases, writers provide illustrative examples of these, but the examples in themselves do not provide the kind of practical guidance teachers require, because they are unlikely to need exactly the adaptation shown (e.g. those shown in McGrath, 2013, pp. 144–145). To me, as a teacher, it is fairly obvious that I can add, omit or change. I do not need an authority to tell me so. Examples of what other teachers have done are also not very helpful.

What I need is a set of "generic" techniques, practical but generalisable, that I can easily apply to my own course books texts or tasks. An example of what I mean is provided by Maley (1994, 2011), relating to the use of reading passages. He provides headings such as *expansion, reduction* and *media-transfer* together with brief explanation of what each heading means, in practical terms, and some ways in which it can be expressed in adaptation of texts. For example, *expansion* is explained simply as "the text must be lengthened in some way", and examples include "add one or more sentences/paragraphs to the beginning or end of the text", "Add specified items within the text (e.g. adjectives)" (Maley, 2011, p. 395).

3. CLASSROOM TECHNIQUES FOR ADAPTATION OF LANGUAGE EXERCISES

This section proposes a set of generic techniques that can be applied to a range of conventional grammar and vocabulary-focused practice exercises such as: gapfills, sentence-completion, matching, multiple-choice, etc. Such exercises are very common in the course

books and seen as helpful by many students and teachers (including myself). The proposals for change, therefore, do not imply negative criticism of the exercises to which they are applied; rather, as discussed in Section 2.3 above, they provide variations in the use of exercises that are arguably valid and appropriate in themselves, in order to better exploit their potential for enhanced learning and interest.

The main purposes of the adaptations are:

- to increase the learning value by adding (extra) meanings, or by recycling or extending the items;
- to increase learner interest by making the items more meaningful, personalised, challenging or fun;
- to make the exercise accessible and useful to students at different levels in a heterogeneous class.

In many cases, the implementation of these goals involves changes that are based on creative interpretation and provision for personal student response, as described by Tomlinson (2015, forthcoming).

Note that I do not include here aims like "to make more authentic" or "to make more communicative". I am not convinced, and have seen no evidence, that using authentic language promotes language learning more than work on contrived but meaningful items (Cook, 2001). Similarly, real communication, in the sense of conveying messages to bridge an information gap, is probably no more conducive to learning than playful use of language, in the sense of engaging in "fun" exchanges of ideas or words (Bell, 2012).

The main design criteria are:

- The use of ready-made exercises as shown in the materials as a basis;
- Minimal requirements in terms of preparation (adaptations should not depend on, for example, extensive photocopying, teacher composition of new texts or surfing the Internet to find appropriate material);
- Simplicity of both preparation and administration.

The suggestions are divided into two main sections. The first relates to techniques that do not involve actually changing the wording of the exercise items themselves; the second to ones that do involve some alterations (addition, deletion, change).

3.1 ADAPTING WITHOUT CHANGING THE WORDING OF THE EXERCISE ITEMS

3.1.1 REPEAT

Often repetition of the same text or task can result in enhanced learning (Gorsuch & Taguchi, 2010; Lynch & Maclean, 2000). But it is a bit boring, and does not lead to optimal learning, to do the same thing over again, the same way. Repetitions, however, can be varied in place, mode or interaction pattern. For example:

- Do the exercise orally, students then do it again in writing in class; can they get it all right?
- Do the exercise orally, students then do it again for homework.

- Students do the exercise individually or in pairs in writing; you then go through it orally in full-class interaction.
- Do the exercise in class; the next day go through it quickly again, challenging them to get it all right.
- Do the exercise in class, then tell students to close their books or turn off their laptops or tablets. How many of the items can they remember and write down, individually or in pairs?

3.1.2 VARYING CHECKING PROCEDURES

Many teachers ask students to do a course book exercise for homework and check by going round the class in a "ping-pong" interaction, eliciting answers from individual students and providing feedback each time. This is rather boring and not a good use of lesson time for learning. Some useful alternatives are:

- provide the right answers, written up on the board or dictated, for students to self-check;
- ask students to work in pairs and check each other, calling on you only if they cannot agree on the right answer;
- take in the homework, and check it at home; or, in a large class, take in only some of the assignments, selected randomly, each time.

3.1.3 VARYING INSTRUCTIONS

Different instructions will obviously determine whether the exercise will be done in reading or in writing, through teacher-led, group or individual process. The authors of the course book may or may not suggest how the exercise is to be done, but in any case their recommendation is not binding. An exercise to be done one way can often easily be converted to another, if the teacher so decides.

Less commonly used, however, are the variations in instructions whose aim is to individualise. To transform an exercise that is "homogeneous" – suitable only for students in the class who are at a specific level – into one that is "heterogeneous" – can be done at different levels, higher or lower. For example:

- Do at least five (or whatever number is likely to be do-able by most of the class) items;
- Do the items in any order you like; start with the ones that you feel you are sure you know the answers to and tackle the others later if you have time;
- Do as much of the exercise as you can in five minutes (or whatever length of time you wish to allow);
- Do as much as you can on your own; ask a neighbour for help with the ones you cannot answer alone;
- If you finish the exercise early, either go on to the next one or help anyone near you who has not finished and needs help.

3.2 ADAPTING BY CHANGING THE WORDING OF THE EXERCISE ITEMS

Inviting students to change, delete or add to the wording of the items very often results in exercises that are open-ended. Each item has multiple acceptable answers instead of one right one.

3.2.1 DELETING

- **Delete the "bank"**

Here is a vocabulary exercise based on a "bank" of items which students are asked to insert in sentences:

healthy	scary	educate

1. You should eat _____ food.
2. That horror movie was very _____ .
3. Parents should _____ their children.

If the "bank" is deleted, then the students may insert whatever words they like in the gap. The target items will probably come up, but so will others (e.g. "You should eat *less* food", "You should eat *cooked* food") and the exercise is more interesting to do.

- **Delete the options in parenthesis or multiple-choice options**

Similar deletions can be implemented in gapfill exercises with the target item in brackets. For example:

1. Yesterday I _____ a cake. (make)
2. Last week she _____ early. (leave)

These obviously require the fill-in items *made* and *left*. However, if we delete the verb in brackets, then answers may use the past tense of any suitable verb: *ate, burnt, found, bought, came, got up, finished, began…* Alternatively, we might retain the verb in brackets, but delete everything after the gap. Answers might then end with the words: *made a cake, made a mistake, made lunch, made a new friend; left home, left the lesson, left her husband, left in tears.*

- **Delete one column of a "matching" exercise**

Sometimes students are asked to match items in Column A with items in Column B, as in the example below:

A	B
miserable	pleased, feeling good
tense	very unhappy or sorry
happy	lacking interest or energy
apathetic	nervous, anxious, unable to relax

If one of the columns is deleted (either A or B), students can suggest their own "matches". In all cases, the result is to make the items "open-ended", with various positive results:

- The answers cannot be provided mechanically or by random guessing; they have to be meaningful.
- There are therefore altogether more possible responses to each cue and therefore likely to be more learning.
- Students use more, or less, advanced vocabulary, according to their individual level; the exercise is therefore more individualized.
- The responses are unpredictable, more interesting – and often humorous.

3.2.2 ADDING AND CHANGING

Students can be invited to add or change individual words within sentence-items. For example, given the items from the exercise above:

1. You should eat healthy food.
2. That horror movie was very scary.
3. Parents should educate their children.

They might be asked to insert one word or a whole phrase in each sentence, or substitute a different word for one already there. For example, in the insertion task, they might add "always" after "you" in the first sentence or "last night" after "movie" in the second. In the "change" task, they could substitute "fruit and vegetables" for "food" in the first or "action" instead of "horror" in the second.

A variation on this is to ask students to change in order to personalise. They make any necessary changes, deletions or additions to any of the items to make them true for them themselves or for a person or situation they are familiar with. So, a change to the first item might be "I know you should eat healthy food, but I love hamburgers!" and so on.

These changes are one way of getting students to recycle the basic exercise (as suggested above in 3.1.1) and get more learning value out of it, without having to repeat exactly the same items. They also add interest.

4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The position presented here may be summarised as follows:

- Course books are in most teaching situations a necessary basis for classroom teaching and make a positive contribution to teaching. They do not, as often claimed, disempower teachers, but provide an important basis for effective and creative teaching.
- Course books cannot be used "slavishly" without some measure of interpretation and adaptation by teachers; the question is whether such adaptation involves minimal organisational or procedural aspects, or more substantial changes to content or form.

- Not all course books need to be extensively adapted; a course book that is tailored to the needs of a particular population will be used largely more or less as it stands, with only occasional deletions, additions or changes.
- Where changes are made, these are not necessarily in response to a perceived deficiency; they may be – and often are – simply a way of optimising the learning or interest value of an already valid procedure, or in order to provide variation.
- There is no need to design course books to be flexibly used. In many ways, carefully structured and detailed course book components are more easily adapted than are components with vague or multiple suggestions as to how to use them.
- The most helpful guidelines for teachers in adapting materials are those that provide practical and simple adaptation techniques that can be easily applied to a specified range of components.

The relationship between teachers and course books is essentially a symbiotic one – each needs the other for optimal functioning. The vast majority of practitioners (including myself) work best if they can base their teaching on the structure, syllabus and battery of texts and tasks provided by good course materials, which they may use as they stand or adapt. The course books cannot teach by themselves; they are necessarily mediated and interpreted by the teacher.

Inevitably, there are situations where this does not work so well. There are some poorly designed, boring or inappropriate materials out there, so difficult to use effectively that the teacher is driven either to rewrite extensively (who has time for this?) or to compromise, using procedures or texts he or she is not comfortable with and does not feel provide for good learning. There are less competent teachers with only a very limited repertoire of conventional classroom procedures which they use repeatedly, regardless of the potential variation in interpretation and use of the texts and ideas provided.

But my main point is that in principle most published course materials, particularly if they are designed or selected to suit the target student population, do not reduce opportunities for the teacher to teach creatively, interestingly and effectively. On the contrary, they provide such opportunities. It is up to the individual teacher how these are exploited.

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