

In defence of the coursebook

Alastair Lane describes why he remains a keen supporter of coursebooks.

'C'lose your books.' It's one of the most popular sentences in the classroom. We all love to shut the coursebook from time to time and do something different, something more communicative, something new. We want to escape from the well-paved path of book-based exercises and wander for a while in the green forests by the side of the road. Leaving the book for a lesson or a day is a relief, a pleasant change, but should we close it forever? Is it time to consign the coursebook to that great recycling bin in the sky? Some people think so. The debate rumbles on in the blogosphere, as teachers, trainers and materials developers cross swords over whether the coursebook has had its day.

Trawling the Internet

Scott Thornbury argued in a telling comment on The Steve Brown Blog¹ that 'If it's texts that teachers want, they need only do what coursebooks writers do anyway: trawl the internet.' The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines trawl as 'search thoroughly' and I think that's a fair description of the research that coursebook writers do. They seek texts that are relevant to a large number of students from many different backgrounds. It is no easy task. It is surprising how often an apparently innocent text in one culture is offensive and even shocking in another.

And indeed, teachers do search for their own texts to supplement a coursebook unit with a text that is more relevant to their students' needs. However, this is not a task



that can be blithely dismissed as something teachers 'only' have to do. Many teachers simply don't have time to spend their evenings and weekends researching a text for each individual class. They may already spend a large part of their working day outside their main workplace moving from classroom to classroom (as many in-company Business English trainers do). They may have other commitments which occupy their time after they come home from an intense day of teaching.

The great forgotten area of EFL

Using texts sourced from the Internet might sound like a basic element of language teaching, but it ignores the great forgotten area of EFL. What about primary? Primary teachers cannot give their class of six-year-olds an article from the BBC to analyse and discuss.

Primary is a specialised field and one in which a great deal of innovation has been taking place in the field of English language teaching. The coursebook supplements that are available to primary teachers on a course, such as Pearson's *My Little Island*, include songs, big books for classroom use, flashcards and soft toy puppets (in this case *Sammy the Squirrel*). All of these relate directly to the course that the children are doing. Because most of the debate online focuses on courses for older students, this vast assembly of materials is often passed over. The fact remains that coursebooks at primary level are an essential tool for teachers, especially for those who may be struggling to control very large classes.

Teachers are busy people whose jobs are physically, mentally and often emotionally demanding. The coursebook's role is to make the teacher's life easier by providing a ready-made set of sound materials that can be supplemented as

and when necessary. As long as teachers are teaching 25 hours or more a week, the coursebook will continue to be a vital support for their work.

A ready-made syllabus

That support is not just in the classroom. Teachers working in a state school system are required to follow a syllabus. Knowing that their coursebook has ministry approval takes a huge weight off their shoulders. The fact that the coursebook developers have covered the official requirements and they can prove that they have done so, removes a whole layer of professional pressure from the classroom teacher as well as the relevant Head of English. This is especially important for less-experienced teachers who may already be feeling overwhelmed by the amount of work that being a full-time teacher involves.

Facilitating learner autonomy

As for students, the use of a coursebook can give them some control over their learning. They have easy access to the language that they are expected to acquire at their level and they can organise their work so that it fits their needs. Without a coursebook, only the teacher decides what, when and how to deliver materials. As a consequence, the students are much more dependent on the teacher's decisions and sometimes so flooded with photocopies and online materials that they are unable to make any sense of the overall direction of their course.

One size fits all?

In seeking to follow official guidelines, many courses are accused of creating a 'one size fits all approach', whereby everyone is expected to follow the same system no matter where they are studying. A deeper understanding of how EFL publishing works will show that this is not the case. Many of the most popular coursebooks already have different versions especially created for different school systems. This may be at a global level, for example the British and American editions of *Headway*. It may also be at a national level, with books being specially adapted to fit the needs of a local school system, be it Poland, Brazil or Saudi Arabia.

In the field of ESP (English for Specific Purposes), this specialisation is even more pronounced. There are coursebooks for specific industries such as Macmillan's *Aviation English* or *English for Law Enforcement*.

There is even *English for Football* by Alan Redmond and Sean Warren, which I used myself to teach a one-to-one class with a radio journalist. I cannot imagine how I would have prepared that course for a student at elementary level without that book and CD.

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Underpinned by rigorous research

Modern coursebooks are developed using recent research into the English language and how it is used. One such tool is a corpus, a collection of texts or sources which can be used to examine both how language is used, and how it is changing. Drawing on corpus research, Oxford University Press have created the Oxford 3000, 'the words which should receive priority in vocabulary study because of their importance and

usefulness'². These words are then used to ensure their series', such as *Navigate*, reflect common usage.

Language is not just made up of individual lexical items, and here other resources are essential in course development. The Cambridge English Corpus (CEC) is a multi-billion word corpus of current spoken and written English, while the Cambridge Learner Corpus (CLC) is made up of thousands of exam scripts by learners at all levels from all over the world. It is therefore able to confirm what learners typically can and cannot do at each level. In turn, *English Profile* is informed by both of these corpora (<http://www.englishprofile.org/>). Coursebooks which use these resources – for example CUP's *Empower* – are therefore able to present students with the most useful and relevant language for them, and at the right point in their learning journey, meaning students will gain maximum benefit from the time they invest.

The Cambridge Grammar of English by Ronald Carter and Michael McCarthy is another key example. This draws on the CANCODE corpus of spoken English (Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English). Spoken English is an area of the language which is nebulous and difficult to capture in a way that can be analysed by computational methods. The developers of the CANCODE corpus 'have not simply amassed examples of people speaking; they have tried to obtain examples from a range of sociolinguistic contexts and genres of talk. There is considerable advantage in being able to demonstrate statistical evidence over many millions of words and broad general contexts.'³

The results of this research as gleaned through the prism of Carter and McCarthy are revealing, trustworthy and often surprising. They are also a key starting point for many people like me who are involved in materials development.

Whose language is the model?

If classes do not use a coursebook, the danger is that students are only exposed to their teacher's idiolect, that particular teacher's individual use of the language.

A book ensures that models come from a range of sources, and that recordings reflect English speakers from many different environments.

It is true that published materials are not always as open-minded as they could be in the models that they provide for students. Even for someone whose accent approaches received pronunciation such as myself, there will be moments when a coursebook throws up a piece of phonemic script that in no way resembles their own accent. I can still remember one book stating that 'one' rhymes with 'bun', rather than 'con', which is how I would say it. This kind of prescriptive (and, I would argue, low frequency) phonetic model is given as the first choice in many learners' dictionaries.

Nevertheless, sounds, phonemes and words do not exist in isolation. To know how words sound in relation to one another, students need to hear the words in context. Take linking sounds, such as the /w/ which appears between words when we say 'He's too old.' That sound can be easily modelled by a teacher working alone. The teacher could just say the words and repeat them with the language point drawn on the board, but ideally students want to hear this feature of connected speech in the midst of a dialogue or conversation.

How can a teacher do that without a coursebook? Should the teacher record their own conversations with a friend, to make their own audio models? The time needed would be astronomical. Should the teacher alternatively seek out pronunciation models from movies or videos online? It can take a huge amount of time to find the particular pronunciation feature and even when it does appear, it may be in a context that is too risqué or too confusing to be used in the classroom. Furthermore, many online videos are unsuitable because they are just too fast and too idiomatic to be understood by a lower level group of learners.

Thus, the set of audio models provided by a coursebook is a boon. It solves this problem instantly, with an easy to use context in which to demonstrate the particular pronunciation point.

The teacher's preparation time is almost nil and he or she also has the assurance that the rest of the language will also be graded.

One teacher, one class?

One other issue that rarely gets discussed in this debate is what to do when the main classroom teacher is away. People get ill; they go on compassionate leave, and sometimes these things happen without any warning. When a substitute teacher has to step in at the last minute, possibly with no prior opportunity of speaking to the main classroom teacher, the coursebook is essential. The thread of the lessons can be quickly picked up, and the new teacher has the security of knowing that key elements of the syllabus will not be passed over on his or her watch. A substitution at times can take place over a whole academic year, with a long succession of teachers coming and going through the classroom door. In a time of upheaval, the book may be the sole source of consistency from lesson to lesson, from week to week.

Not perfect by any means

This is not to say we are living in a 'Golden Age' of coursebook design. Much work still needs to be done to bridge the gap between these books and the real world. Thankfully, we have now moved beyond the 'village green' style of EFL where everyone lived in a thatched cottage and did their shopping at the greengrocers.

Three major trends that are starting to emerge are:

- The introduction of a broader range of relationship types and domestic situations. Not everyone lives in the idealised unit of husband, wife and 2.4 children.
- There is a greater emphasis on English as a world language, moving on from the rather simplistic division of the language into 'British English' and 'American English'.
- Books are using more natural and up-to-date dialogues. Characters in recordings have to stop speaking a false sort of EFL-ese. As Michael Swan and others have noted, one simple change that we will see in the near

future is greater emphasis on structures such as 'He was like ...' to introduce reported speech, as in 'He was like I'm in a hurry and I was like I am too.'

Coursebooks exist because they answer a need. They make the teacher's life easier. They also remain the key way of bringing new teaching ideas and approaches into the classroom, with a much greater reach even than CELTA courses and the like. Whereas much of the debate in the blogosphere has been focused on the books as conservative or even retrogressive teaching tools, in actual fact, EFL remains a leader in bringing new communicative techniques of language learning into the classroom. Many school systems around the world and many teachers of other languages have nothing like the resources available to them that an EFL teacher has with a student's book, workbook, teacher's book and CD-ROM or other online teaching tool. Bearing in mind that a great deal of room remains for improvement, we should celebrate the resources that are available to teachers, not condemn them out of hand.

References

- 1 <https://canlloparot.wordpress.com/2015/08/16/scott-thornburys-definitive-200-word-dismissal-of-coursebooks/> which quotes The Steve Brown Blog, where Scott Thornbury's original quote appeared: <https://stevebrown70.wordpress.com/2015/07/23/concerning-coursebooks/>
- 2 *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 7th edition, OUP (2005: R99).
- 3 *The Cambridge Grammar of English*, Carter R & McCarthy M, CUP (2006: 11).



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