

PROBLEMS WITH COURSEBOOKS IN EFL CLASSROOMS: PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS' OPINIONS

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Abstract

In today's classrooms, coursebooks remain as the major instructional instrument and resource and effectiveness and quality of coursebooks must be studied in their actual classroom use. In this study, opinions of future teachers of English are collected and analyzed to shed light on what happens in Turkish EFL classrooms in regards to the use of English language coursebooks. This study is a descriptive study using qualitative research design, analyzing reports made by 12 volunteering practicum students. As the findings suggest, participants generally find the quality of coursebooks acceptable although problems with coursebooks are often associated with the teachers who make use them.

Keywords: coursebook, English, foreign language, quality

İngilizce sınıflarında ders kitaplarıyla ilgili yaşanan sorunlar: Öğretmen adaylarının görüşleri

Özet

Günümüzde ders kitaplarının en önemli öğretim aracı olduğu görülmektedir ancak ders kitaplarının niteliği ve etkisi sınıf içi kullanımı ekseninde değerlendirilmelidir. Bu çalışmada, İngilizce ders kitaplarının nitelikleri Türkiye'de yabancı dil olarak İngilizce derslerinde bu kitapların nasıl kullanıldığı sorusu ile ilintili olarak incelenmiştir. Çalışma betimleme amaçlı bir nitelik çalışmasıdır ve 12 gönüllü öğretmen adayının yazdıkları raporların incelenmesini içermektedir. Sonuçlara göre öğretmen adayları ders kitaplarının niteliğini genelde olumlu bulmakta ve ders kitaplarıyla ilgili sorunların öğretmenlerin işleyişlerinden kaynaklandığına inandıklarını göstermektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: ders kitabı, İngilizce, yabancı dil, nitelik

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Introduction

Turkey started applying constructivist approach selectively in primary schools in 2005 and in high schools in 2006-2007 (Çimer and Timuçin, 2008). In the case of Turkey, as İnal (2006) articulates, problems in teaching a foreign language are linked to the coursebook selection process since once a coursebook is chosen few efforts are made to evaluate its effectiveness. Amidst these changes, selecting a suitable coursebook has become a rather difficult task. Coursebook selection is not a simple task since many parties are involved in the process (Chambers, 1997). These agents are students, parents, teachers, coursebook writers, administrators, curriculum planners, and academics.

As stated by Yildirim (2006) coursebooks accumulate the content to teachers and students toward reaching the educational objectives. A large part of such knowledge to which students are exposed comes from the coursebook itself. In fact, as Kaplan and Knutson (1993) suggested, many foreign language learning classrooms remain book-oriented rather than listening materials-oriented (tapes, CDs, audio files). Similarly, as Savignon (1997, 131) rightly puts, coursebooks are “written for general audiences and thus cannot, in themselves, meet the needs of a particular second language class.” Despite this heavy dependence on coursebooks, there is general and widespread dissatisfaction with them. Hence, the need to cater to international markets has given rise to the publication of ‘global coursebooks’ which can be used by students anywhere in the world, regardless of culture (Ranalli, 2003). In contrast to their widespread popularity, assessment of coursebooks as classroom materials remains under-researched (Sheldon, 1988).

Knowing that the “ultimate evaluation of a text comes with actual classroom use” (Daoud and Celce-Murcia, 1989, 306), any coursebook study should entail a process of evaluating the coursebook in action (instruction). In this study, opinions of future teachers of English are collected and analyzed to shed light on what happens in Turkish EFL classrooms in regards to the use of English language coursebooks. The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. What is the pedagogical quality of the coursebooks used in secondary school EFL classrooms?
2. What areas do practicum students see problematic in terms of how the coursebooks are used in secondary school EFL classrooms?

Methods

This study is a descriptive study which aims to delve into the state of the use of EFL coursebooks in secondary school English language classrooms in Turkey. The data processed in this study were collected towards the completion of document analysis which is a data gathering and analysis technique used in qualitative research methodology (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998).

Participants and Instrument

12 prospective teachers of English who were taking the School Experience II course participated in this study. They volunteered to take part in the research process. Prospective teachers' reports on the related task, which was the use of coursebooks in the classroom, were used the main data source. The participants were not given any specific or detailed instruction prior to or during the assignment in order not to affect the originality and authenticity of the opinions given. The length of the essays was kept to 1000-1500 words, but the

prospective teachers were asked to present well-thought pieces of information describing how coursebooks were used in the classes they were to observe. The participants are given pseudonyms to keep their anonymity.

Findings and Discussion

The findings given in this study are composed as answers to the two research questions mentioned above. The results are presented as interpreted from the close study of the data which resulted in the emergence of common themes. As the reports revealed, there were two coursebooks used in the classrooms, namely, *Password*, and *Breeze*. In the following paragraphs, the names of the coursebooks will not be mentioned in order not to create bias against any of the coursebooks mentioned above.

What is the pedagogical quality of the coursebooks used in secondary school EFL classrooms?

Prospective teachers agree that coursebooks are the most important instructional material used in the classrooms they observed. Canan writes “as it is known, teaching a foreign language does not necessarily mean teaching from a coursebook. However, using a coursebook is probably the most common way of teaching English today.” This common theme matches with the idea which can be found in the related research stated above.

Prospective teachers’s reports showed that the coursebooks were found to be of high quality with minor pitfalls. All prospective teachers accepted that the coursebooks were well-designed and organized, leading the students from easier to more difficult structures or lexical items. Similarly, prospective teachers claimed that the visual materials given in the coursebooks were sufficient in number and they were of acceptable quality. Although not in majority, four participants

criticized the coursebook used in the classroom for containing many misspelled words such as “imanigation” for “imagination.” It is one of the main rules of materials production that information published in coursebooks must be error-free. Three prospective teachers also criticized the quality of visual materials by claiming that some of them were given for “decoration” rather than having a real “function.” This contrasts with the fact that the world has become more and more visually oriented (Giorgis, 1999).

All prospective teachers agreed that these coursebooks fostered individualized activities rather than pair and group work activities. As Nilgün stated, all of the activities given in the coursebook were to be “completed individually rather than in groups except for the speaking activities which, by nature, requires another person’s involvement.” As for these participants, some reading activities could be completed in pairs as accepted in the contemporary methodology of teaching.

Prospective teachers found that the coursebooks followed syllabus types that were integrating all of the four skills although the listening skill was the least emphasized one. As for the participants, listening activities given in the coursebooks were less in number and lacked variety in comparison to the place of the other skills. However, the coursebooks used in these foreign language learning classrooms come with CDs including a variety of listening materials all of which are found to be of high quality by the participants. In short, although coursebooks could include a greater number of listening activities, the listening parts are of acceptable quality as perceived by these prospective teachers.

Another relatively negative point about the coursebooks was that they did not emphasize the teaching of target culture. Leyla related this negativity with the nationality of authors who were “not native

speakers of English.” Hence, for her, the coursebook “does not reflect the target culture. Even the pictures and photographs used in the coursebook don’t include scenes about the target culture and its speakers.”

The nature of coursebooks in terms of being deductive or inductive in their governing teaching method is a matter of great concern for these prospective teachers. As Şule reported, the coursebook used in the classroom has “serious drawbacks and weaknesses” in their teaching methodology. For instance, as she continues, the coursebook “presents the topics deductively instead of giving students a chance of discovering the rules implicitly, which sometimes causes the students to get bored easily and lose their interest in the lesson.” Hence, additional materials are needed as these participants suggest.

What areas do practicum students see problematic in terms of how the coursebooks are used in secondary school EFL classrooms?

Prospective teachers’ reports clearly exemplify their awareness in the way the teacher uses the coursebook. As Sumru articulated, teacher’s way of using the coursebook “may result in passive learning rather than presenting students with a variety of activating tasks.” This kind of structure is called “now do this, and then do that structure of the coursebook” by Ali and such view results in creating boredom and fostering “memorization of the content” rather than “bringing true learning opportunities.”

The most serious problem affecting the use of coursebooks is the way the teacher uses it. For majority of the participants, the teachers use the coursebook in a “dry” manner, so as called by Hasan. The most widely used negative adjectives describing the teachers’ ways of using

the coursebook are that teachers “skip or omit the parts as they wish”, “carry out the activities in a boring way”, and “do not make use of sufficient number of support materials.” Among these three major issues, omitting the coursebook parts is of utmost importance. Similarly, as Cihan explains, the teacher

mostly pays attention to comprehension and vocabulary parts, but writing sections are omitted generally. Writing activities are given as homework in an ignoring way. The sound quality of audio CDs provided with the coursebook is pretty high. The spoken English is clear and easy to understand, but they are rarely used.”

Another major problem with how coursebooks are used is that they are often put aside to supply students with materials preparing them to the “upcoming university entrance exams.” Nur narrates how she came to know about this activity in an ironic way:

When the lesson started, I expected that we could continue studying from where we had left in the previous lesson. The teacher, however, asked students to do the multiple choice questions given in a different commercial book I had never seen before. The students showed great enthusiasm with this news. All of a sudden, the students started focusing on the multiple choice questions for two consecutive hours all the while the teacher was gazing outside the window without doing anything. No other instruction for two hours and everyone was happy.

In order to minimize the negative effect of the teacher on the way the coursebook is used, participants demand the use of additional or supplementary materials. Similarly, Mine claims that the teacher “hardly ever used any worksheets in the classroom, and the ones she brought in were outdated and boring.

As Simla narrates:

As I observed how the coursebook was used in the classroom, I noticed that the most visible deficiency was the coursebook's being the only resource used in the classroom. That is to say, supplementary materials have never been used during my presence. As a result of this, variety in activities and materials has not been realized. More importantly, the points students need improvement remain unfulfilled. Thus, I can easily say that this coursebook is not perfect and needs to be supported by external supplementary materials.

The need for supplementary materials is most visible when the physical qualities of the school environment are considered. Prospective teachers criticize that the school itself is the reason why many class hours are spent as such. As Neval's view crosscuts many others', the school:

has a computer lab, but it is not used. Consequently, the students are not able to use the Internet at school. The class does not have an OHP, a projector, a DVD player or a VCD player. The school does not have adequate technological equipments. There are not any visual materials on the walls related to English.

The data also revealed the existence of non-traditional teacher behavior related with coursebook use. As Banu clarified, one teacher;

It is surprising for me that the students do not have a specific coursebook to use in the class. [The teacher] makes use of some supplementary materials such as ELS worksheets, the coursebook itself, and numerous handouts in which there are lots of exercises and reading passages suitable for the students' levels. These materials are used as the coursebook.

This teacher's (non) use of the coursebook resembles what Savignon (1997, p. 133) calls "no textbook approach" in which the teacher draws on students "knowledge of the second language, as well as of learner interests, to provide a corpus of language activities that is unique to a particular context." As Banu further states, although there are some drawbacks in this way of instruction such as "not having a coherent system of what is to be taught," the students seem to be "learning in a positive classroom atmosphere with a teacher who makes use of materials that were used before and tested for their accuracy."

Conclusion

This study aimed to find out how coursebooks were currently used in English language courses at Turkish secondary schools as perceived by the fourth grade prospective teachers of English who were taking School Experience II course. The data obtained from the participants suggests that the quality of coursebooks used at secondary school classrooms was generally considered to be of high quality with minimal problems. Among the problematic parts, the fact that these coursebooks were structured with a focus on learning individually rather than in interaction. In essence, this distinction is worth noting since prospective teachers repeatedly articulated that the coursebooks were composed of "parts" that become "activities" in the classroom. This point also signals the shift towards communicative language teaching which "distinguishes" itself from "its predecessors" with its "adoption of the concept of activities" (Howatt and Widdowson, 2004, 258).

Coursebooks should continuously be revised and updated so that students are supplied with newer information and updated methodology. Hence, making these necessary revisions require careful planning and vigorous study. New studies should be carried out to

increase the quality of coursebooks used and to point at the problematic practices that hinder the effectiveness of coursebooks.

The results also indicate that coursebooks used in secondary school English language classrooms are seen as the single most important resource in the language classroom. Hence, the teacher either uses it extensively, sometimes by omitting the parts he or she wish, or puts aside altogether to prepare their students for the university entrance exams. This problem should be dealt with as soon as possible so as to foster learning for the sake of learning the language in a natural way rather than getting prepared for an exam which disregards fundamentally important language skills such as listening, speaking, and writing. In such a process, as the data reveals, the coursebook can only be understood in interaction and action.

As the findings suggest, the problems portrayed by these practicum teachers are often associated with the teachers who make use them. Hence, it can be inferred that teachers could limit the use of these coursebooks in the teaching process by replacing parts of them with other, most preferably, authentic materials which could serve toward meeting the predefined pedagogical objectives. In future studies, teachers' strategies in making up for the limitations of their coursebooks should be studied further while continuing to interrogate how they use their coursebooks.

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