

The Role and Use of Course Books in EFL

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ABSTRACT

Course books continue to play a significant role in EFL teaching and learning by providing useful ready-made material to both teachers and students. However, inappropriate use of course books may de-skill teachers and tire students. This paper explores the role of course books in EFL teaching and examines how teachers can make effective use of the material. It mainly applies to novice teachers and those working in centralised systems, where decisions are made by ministries and committees. The first part of the paper refers to the role of course books, their impact on teaching and learning processes, and explains why teaching should be course book-based rather than course book-led. The second part of the article is an attempt to demonstrate how course books can be appropriately exploited by using the important processes of evaluation, selection, adaptation and supplementation. It also refers EFL teachers to sources of guidance and practical advice.

Introduction

This paper explores the role of course books in EFL teaching and examines how teachers can make effective use of the material. It mainly applies to novice teachers and those working in centralised systems, where decisions are made by ministries and committees. The first part of the paper refers to the role of course books, their impact on teaching and learning processes, and explains why teaching should be course book-based rather than course book-led. The second part of the article is an attempt to demonstrate how course books can be exploited by using the important processes of selection, adaptation and supplementation. It also refers teachers to sources of guidance and practical advice.

The Role of Course books

The literature around the evaluation and use of course books and commercial material is extensive. There has been a considerable debate on the role of course books by a number of educators and experts.

Positive effects

A large number of experts and educators claim that there are obvious advantages of using a course book. Hutchinson and Torres (1994) argue that during periods of change, a course book can serve as a tool for supporting teachers and as an instrument of modifications and alterations. Most teachers consider course books to be valuable aids that offer useful material and support. Also learners need course books to guide them towards the hard process of learning. A course book reinforces the teacher's work and offers material for further learning and revision. In brief, a course book provides teachers and learners with a structure of teaching and learning, methodological support and opportunities for revision and preparation

(McGrath 2002). Moreover, it gives teachers a relief as it reduces the heavy load of preparation, saves time and makes teaching and learning easier.

Negative effects

At the same time, experts warn that slavish use of coursebooks may have destructive effects on teaching and learning processes:

a) Course books de-skill teachers.

Using course books tightly, turns teaching into a very controlled process that de-skills teacher (Richards 1993). If teachers use course books largely, as the only source of material, if they follow pages and activities strictly in order, they turn themselves into a 'technician', whose only responsibility is to teach materials prepared by others (Richards 1998:126). They gradually lose the ability to plan and they end up 'teaching' the course book, not their students. Brumfit (1979:30, cited in McGrath 2002:10) claims that although course books can assist teachers in their teaching processes many of them don't. Even the best course books take creativity and inspiration away from teachers by indicating that "there is somewhere an expert who can solve problems". Similarly, Swan (1992:33, cited in Richards 1998:130), points out that course books often take important decisions off the hands of teachers who, "having been absolved of responsibilities, sit back and merely operate the system". Allwright (1981:8) argues against their use, as they do not encourage teachers to provide "enough roughly-tuned input" and output practice. He emphasizes that course books hold a limited and prescribed role, confining students to "captive learners", with no initiative and involvement in the process. Students should be trained to actively participate in the management of their own learning (1981:8). Following this approach, tight use of course books, will not be possible. Cunningsworth (1995:10), likewise, emphasises that, "heavy dependence on course

books is far from ideal” because this approach finally decreases the “importance of the contributions that good teachers make at all levels in the learning process”. Moreover, flexibility and spontaneity are reduced and teachers often lack techniques and creativity.

b) Course books cause boredom.

Commercial materials usually follow the same format from one unit to the next. For these reason teachers, regularly, find themselves teaching the same types of activities and tasks following the same order, repeating themselves. Inevitably, this course book-centred teaching, rapidly leads to dull and repetitious classes and turns students into pathetic or unwilling to learn individuals. The element of unpredictability, that generates interest in the EFL classroom, fades away (McGrath 2002). Similarly, the joy of learning, which should prevail in the classroom atmosphere, is turned into boring endless hours of school life. This situation, regularly results in the creation of more discipline problems, as the students become naughty and difficult to control.

c) No textbook is perfect.

It is widely accepted that no textbook or set of materials is perfect (McDonough and Shaw, 1993:65; McGrath 2002). Course books are planned to be applicable to many students, teachers and contexts. Obviously this means that no book is perfect for a particular class or an individual student. Language teaching and learning are complicated processes; they cannot be satisfied with a ‘prepackaged’ set of decisions that can be found in ready-made teaching materials (Allwright, 1981:10). There’s a consensus among experienced educators, writers, and experts that the perfect course book does not exist (O’Neil, 1982; Grant, 1987; Sheldon, 1987;

Skierso, 1991; Acklam, 1994). All books have certain limitations and deficiencies and they all require evaluation, selection, adaptation and supplementation. There is no course book that can work in all situations or can be applied to all teachers and students.

d) Every class is unique

It is well recorded in education that every class is unique and needs to be treated differently since it is constituted from a number of individuals with different abilities and skills. As Prodromou (1990:28) points out, every class is mixed-ability. Only the teacher knows exactly the needs, competence, potential, and learning styles of their students. Therefore, only the teachers themselves should be responsible for material exploitation in their classrooms (Acklam, 1994). The same lesson almost always has to be taught differently to different classes (Grant, 1987).

e) Every student should be treated individually.

Every student is different in terms of attention, interest, motivation, pace, and physiological and psychological needs. They need to be treated individually to satisfy their needs. Their differences should always be considered by teachers while planning their lessons. A certain activity or material that is particularly appropriate for one student may not be suitable for another.

Using course books effectively

A considerable number of experts and educators (O'Neal, 1982; Grant, 1987; Harmer, 1991; Tice, 1991; Richards, 1993; Nunan, 1998; Hedge, 2000; Graves, 2000; McGrath, 2002) have commented on the need of supplementing the course books with material suitable to satisfy the needs of the particular learners. Course

books provide useful materials to teachers and learners but they should not be their 'master' (Cunningsworth, 1995:7). They are best seen as one of many sources in achieving the objectives and targets that have been set in terms of the particular learners. McDonough and Shaw (1993) point out that the ability to evaluate and supplement teaching materials effectively is a very important professional activity for EFL teachers and needs to be under continuous development.

How can teachers use course books effectively? How can they be sure that they are helping their students? Where can they find criteria for selecting and designing the appropriate material? How can they find the time to make materials? All these are questions that trouble teachers. This part of the paper attempts to address these issues by giving some general guidelines.

Selection

Having in mind the aims of the course, teachers should first critically examine the course book. As Graves (2000:176) advises they need to "get inside the course book", study the table of contents, speculate the topics and structures in order to understand how these are constructed and why. Following this process they will be able to distinguish between those units that seem relevant and interesting to their students and can be used unchanged or adapted. Also this process will allow them to find materials that should be rejected, because they are considered boring, irrelevant or do not suit the age or cultural background of their students. A very useful and practical checklist that can be used for this process is offered by Acklam (1994:13) and recommended by McGrath (2002:81).

Adaptation

Once teachers are familiar with the overall organization and content of their course book and they have decided which units to reject and which to adapt, they can familiarize themselves with each unit separately. They can design a diagram, a table, a mind map or a list where they can write their course objectives, contents of unit, rationale and the activities they have selected. The next step is to consider how they can adapt each activity to maximize their appropriacy. Having in mind clear objectives for each lesson they can continue with the changes they consider necessary. The following principles of adaptation provided by McGrath (2002:74) are useful to be kept in mind throughout the process:

- a) Localisation: adapting the material to confine within our country.
- b) Personalisation: changing the material to satisfy our students' needs and interests.
- c) Individualisation: adapting the material in a way to address our students' learning styles.
- d) Modernisation: bringing the material up to date.
- e) Simplification: making the texts or the tasks easier to do or understand.

Supplementation

All units that do not satisfy the students' needs can be modified or replaced by other ready-made, devised or authentic material. Using materials from another course book is the easiest way but one should always consider copyright legislation. Writing materials for students is certainly more demanding but undoubtedly this could satisfy the students' needs more appropriately. It is undoubted that teachers have a real awareness of their students' needs. However, designing appropriate material

requires a number of abilities and skills that teachers need certain training to acquire (Allwright, 1981; O'Neal, 1982). Continuous training, collaboration and sharing of materials among teachers could give a solution to the problem. The formation of a bank of material, supplied by not only teachers but students as well, is another idea that could lighten the heavy burden of preparation. Besides, it is very challenging for students, especially teenagers, to have the opportunity to get involved in the teaching process by bringing in class materials they have selected themselves.

Evaluation

At the end of every lesson the process of reflection and evaluation is mandatory. It is very useful if teachers keep a record about the process of selection, adaptation, supplementation and their rationale. They can also make brief notes about what has worked well, what didn't work well and why and how they think the same lesson should be redesigned for the next class. Their experiences with the course book and supplementary materials could be discussed in weekly meetings with colleagues. They may also have classroom visits to see the way their colleagues use the course book and how the same materials influence teaching and interaction in their classrooms. But first of all teachers should always consider their students' reactions and comments on the experience with the course book and supplementary materials (Breen and Candlin 1987). With their students' assistance they can form the criteria for selection, adaptation and design of the material. This can easily be done if they provide their students with a questionnaire where they can freely express their opinions and comments (see McGrath 2002:184).

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, course books play a significant role in EFL teaching and learning by providing useful material to both teachers and students. However, heavy dependence on course books de-skills teachers and tires students. To avoid this careful selection of course book and appropriate and flexible use are important. Also course books should never be regarded as the only source where teachers can draw material from. Teaching and learning processes should include a variety of materials, online sources and approaches. For this reason training the teachers on evaluating, selecting, adapting and supplementing the course book, by designing their own materials, are significant and should be an ongoing process. Also teachers' collaboration and sharing of materials are essential. Moreover, students' contribution to the process of evaluating and design of material is also another factor that should also be considered for effective learning.

Sources of guidance and practical advice

The list of sources and guidebooks on adaptation and supplementation is quite long. Very helpful guidance and support on evaluation, selection and adaptation can be found in: Cunningsworth (1984), Grant (1987), Skierso (1991), Tice (1991), McDonough and Shaw (1993), Acklam (1994), Byrd (1995), Graves (2000), McGrath (2002).

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