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Teacher, what page today? A look at materials development

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Learning materials are core components of our practices. Sometimes they become useful tools and some other times they dictate the courses we teach. In this talk I will explore learning materials in different formats and modes but I will particularly focus on coursebooks at primary and secondary school levels. Some of the questions I will raise are: What do coursebooks usually feature? Have they evolved? Are materials challenging enough? Do they offer cognitive-rich opportunities? Are they culturally-responsive? Are there any people against marketed materials? What do more recent materials offer? What's the role of materials today? And more importantly, what's our role in this hard-to-resist marketed world?

Introduction

In this contribution I have adopted a less formal register and a more conversational tone. My reason (or excuse) behind this decision is that this paper is based on my plenary and at the time of writing these words I feel like I am addressing you in a synchronous matrix of communication and experience.

Let me start my approximation to materials development in English Language Teaching (ELT) by enumerating those materials which I experienced as a learner: a coursebook (student's book and workbook), cassettes owned by my teacher and played when all the planets were aligned, photocopies, readers, videos, songs, newspapers, magazines, pictures, and a game or two.

However, the world is changed and our practices and learning opportunities, whether these are embedded in formal settings or informal environments, are inhabited by an "upgraded" army of materials such as digital applications, YouTube videos, online/offline activities and games, interactive reading devices, blogs, social networks, and resources such as interactive whiteboards (IWB) and netbooks through which autonomy is hoped to be encouraged.

In this contribution I will first conceptualise materials development, and from that point of dynamic departure and I will focus on coursebooks, still unchallenged masters in the realm of marketed materials, and their roles as tools and teachers. From the printed page I will offer a bird's view of digital materials before examining mainstream materials through the lens of cognitive development and culture.

Materials development

Brian Tomlinson (for example see 2008, 2011, 2012, 2013) is an authoritative source in the field of materials development together with authors such as Harwood (2010), McDonough, Shaw and Masuhara (2013) and McGrath (2002), to name a few. In a state-of-the-art article Tomlinson (2012, p. 144) asserts that

Materials development refers to all the processes made use of by practitioners who produce and/or use materials for language learning, including materials evaluation, their adaptation, design, production, exploitation and research. Ideally, all of these processes should be given consideration and should interact in the making of language-learning materials.

Tomlinson seems to place the emphasis on practitioners with the aim of conceptualising this field as bottom-up in his quest for bridging the gap between theory and practice. In this regard, Tomlinson (2013) advances that some possible reasons for the gap between applied linguistics theory and materials development practice and implementation may be due to the fact that applied linguistics theories:

- are often written about in language which is not easily accessible to practitioners;
- sometimes seem difficult to apply to materials development;
- do not seem to take into account such realities of classroom practice as large classes, unmotivated learners, lack of adequate time, lack of resources and the need for examination preparation;
- are unappealing to materials developers as their application would require innovations which might prove unacceptable to the users of their materials.

Within the systemic relationships in materials development, materials can be classified in crude terms according to their sources and functions as follows (Figure 1):

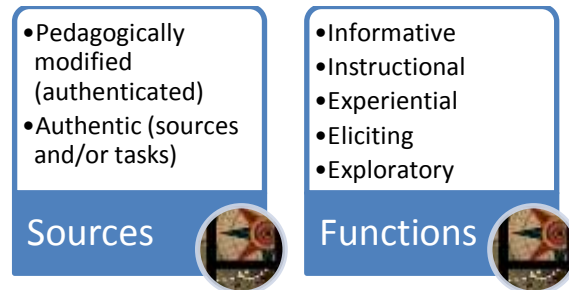


Figure 1. Classification of materials

Readers will notice that in the sources section I have only offered two broad distinctions which may be unclear or easily contested. While functions may coexist depending on our aims as materials users, the issue of authenticity and pedagogical modification are more problematic. When we think of authenticity we tend to associate it with materials which have not been produced for an ELT world or formal education at large. However, we sometimes see textbooks, for example, aimed at teenage L1 English-speakers as authentic. Because of the aims and target groups, both language and content have been modified to scaffold learning. But do these modifications make the language become artificial and contrived? Certainly not.

Having offered this far from accurate classification, let me now focus on coursebooks and their impact on our teaching and learning practices.

Coursebooks

According to Gray (2010, p. 19), “teachers are primary consumers of coursebooks and retain considerable power in determining the uses to which they are put in the classroom.” This critical position in relation to the examination of coursebooks as market goods and capitalist objects may be the base to look at coursebooks uses and stances as placed along a continuum (Figure 2):

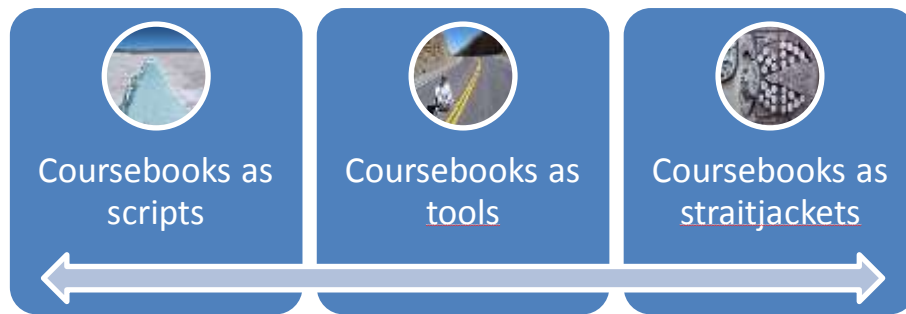


Figure 2. Coursebook use continuum

Under “coursebooks as scripts” I place those practices through which the coursebook and all the materials which come with one become the authority inside the classroom dictating and determining the course syllabus, progress and sequence. Nonetheless, “coursebooks as scripts” should not be seen through negative lens only. More often than not, unqualified teachers’ or novice teachers’ practices (Grossman & Thompson, 2008) are improved by adhering closely to one coursebook as opposed to disjointed and unsequenced photocopies. In fact, in this continuum I evaluate this practice as positive as it helps with teachers’ problems with work overload particularly in our educational system and our “profesores taxis.”

The following vignette (Banegas, 2013a) may illustrate this practice of allowing a coursebook to exercise a leading role:

Anahí started both lessons with a routine: checking that each student had done their homework and they had their coursebooks. However, something happened in her first lesson that I did not notice in the other lessons observed at this stage:

1 Anahí: Today we’re going to work with festivals.

2 Student: Page?

3 Anahí: Yes? We’re not going to work with the book now. Ok, so tell, me, what festivals are popular in your country, here?

(Excerpt 5.19, Lesson 1, 19/04/11)

When the student asked that question (line 2), she made eye contact with me sitting at the back. She later explained that the situation made her realise that the students usually expected her to start her lesson by going immediately to the coursebook. She added that she would usually start her lessons with the coursebook and then she would use other resources and plan activities such as games.

Secondly, “coursebook as tools” is, at this stage, self-explanatory. This is a mid-position which encompasses most teachers and practices since we usually adopt a

coursebook as a skeleton or guide around which we engage in context-responsive original and adapted pedagogies and didactic transpositions.

The other end of the continuum, “coursebooks as straightjackets” is a complex territory as the adoption and delivery of a given coursebook may be imposed on teachers and therefore they may feel that such a tool becomes a barrier, a limitation to their creativity, reflection-on-action, and development as autonomous professionals (Akbari, 2008; Duy-Thien, 2008). Tomlinson (2012, p. 158) adds that “opponents of coursebooks argue that they can disempower both teacher and learners, cannot cater for the needs and wants of their actual users, are used mainly to impose control and order.”

As a reaction to coursebook-constrained pedagogies, Dogme ELT appeared in the scene underpinned by three principles: (1) materials-light, (2) conversation-driven, and (3) emergent language (for a discussion see [Banegas, 2012](#)). Although the fathers of this movement are particularly against coursebooks, they are part of the publishing industry. Furthermore, followers and champions have mutated and become more flexible with their principles and have now embraced new technologies thus updating their stance as Dogme 2.0.

While these views develop and produce new insights, the publishing industry continues to release new coursebooks. Thus, to the question “What do new coursebooks offer?” Tomlinson and Masuhara (2013) found improvements in the areas of personalisation, discovery, communicative effect, and the use of illustration. Yet,

too much attention given to explicit knowledge of grammar at the expense of affective and cognitive engagement, not enough activities for the experientially and kinaesthetically inclined, not enough use of narrative, not enough extensive reading and listening, not enough challenging content or tasks, and hardly any real tasks that have an intended outcome other than the practice of language. Also, there is very little use made of humour, there is even less use made of literature, and there seems to be an assumption that all the learners are aspirational, urban, middle-class, well-educated, westernized computer users. (pp. 247 – 248)

As regards current coursebooks and cognitive development, I have reported elsewhere ([Banegas, 2013b](#)) that recent textbooks advertised as CLIL-focused offer practice mostly for lower-thinking skills such as remembering and understanding. Sad as it may seem, higher-order thinking skills are not encouraged. This landscape may make us assess the extent to which the market is promoting challenging materials for teenage learners. In a similar vein but looking at the global coursebook, Freeman (2013) found that each new edition of *Headway Intermediate* is dominated by a growing proportion of lower-order comprehension questions.

While the authors above indicate that cognitive development needs urgent attention, other areas such as culture and intercultural competence are also under scrutiny. For example, Byram and Masuhara (2013) conclude that cultures different from those of the learner are simplified, homogenised, and presented as a single unit of values, beliefs and behaviours interpreted from a western perspective. I shall add that if this is the case across mainstream coursebooks, issues of representation, overgeneralisations, and stereotypes will continue to be featured in the global coursebook.

Within an Argentinian context, intercultural awareness through textbooks has been reported by authors such as López-Barrios (2012) and Moirano (2012). While the former reports that learners play different roles (e.g. informants, consumers, ethnographers) in bringing global and local topics together, the latter highlights that textbook have been sanitised, that is, there is nothing controversial or critical about their cultural dimension.

However, my own examination of other titles in the market projects signs of hope. For example, series such as *English Unlimited* and *Global* include different varieties of English without overt implications as regards power and control, and cultures of self and others appear as decentralised and empathetic.

All in all, coursebooks have undergone several transformations as they reflect different needs and market options. It is also important to highlight that coursebook production includes a piloting phase and therefore changes and careful business cases are built and exercised before their release in the market. It is also important to underline that coursebooks respond to a given methodology and users need to be aware of such a methodology to maximise the use of the coursebook.

New roles and opportunities

New (and not so new) trends indicate that coursebooks are now packs which include CD Roms and companion websites. These two elements together with online activities realised and channelled through varied formats highlight that multimodality is now an essential component together with opportunities for learner autonomy. Activities now include hints, tips, and answers and therefore learners can manage their own pace and explore different strategies. Teachers, in this scenario, become organisers, leaders, supporters, and clarifiers of whatever learning may take place inside and outside the classroom. That said, ubiquitous learning, with varying degrees of constraints (e.g. access to internet) is a new dimension promoted by and through materials as, for example, learners no longer their teacher to listen to the audio CD o engage in controlled practice.

Because learning happens everywhere and because new tools allow us to become content creators, both learners and teachers are called to become agents of change by developing their own materials. Learners do not need to be passive recipients of information. The setting up a blog, or a Facebook group will allow learners to engage in knowledge creation, communicate in the target language, and share whatever they find online or produce aided with different software and devices such as mobiles phones.

According to Stanley (2013, p.3),

The proliferation of hand-held devices, such as mobile phones, digital cameras, tables, mp3 players and voice recorders, has led to what, for some teachers, is a sometimes bewildering choice of potential activities and resources.

The use of mobile devices is expected to lead to language learning becoming more informal and personal (...). This revolution in mobile learning is happening both inside and outside the classroom.

Teachers, in turn, can also participate in this “authoring revolution” through materials adaptation and development from scratch. The literature now offers practical and critical advice on how to incorporate ICT in our classrooms (see Dudeney, Hockly, & Pegrum, 2013; Stanley, 2013; Walker & White, 2013) and how education is shaped and shaped by

language online (Barton & Lee, 2013) and Web 2.0 tools (Starkey, 2011). Above all, we should remember that ICT per se will not save us. We need to develop a principled-approach to digital language learning.

A final word

In this changing world, materials will continue to be aids, scaffolds for learning, but the development of them may become horizontal in the sense that both producers and users (teachers and students) will create and recreate them. In this way, ownership, autonomy, and contextualisation will be core features of materials and material-rich pedagogies.

In this hard-to-resist marketed world, we need to become critical customers, and co-developers of our own tools. Despite being time consuming, materials development will help us continue with our professional growth as we will discover new roads for exploration and inquiry.

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