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A Coursebook in a Trilingual Classroom: to Use or not to Use

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Abstract

Coursebook use has proved to be a controversial issue in methodology. In this paper we refer to different writing on this subject, and take the argument a step further. As the way out, we look at an aspect of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) that sooner or later every teacher comes up against – a need to write his/her materials. As our research has shown, this becomes of major importance in a trilingual classroom. Here, we also refer to some of the theoretical positions underlying third language acquisition (TLA).

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Keywords: Coursebook use; a coursebook-driven syllabus; the ‘do-it-yourself’ approach; language experience; third language acquisition; materials writing.

1. Introduction

‘Do you use a coursebook with your students? If so, is it out of choice or because you are obliged to? Do you and your students like the coursebook ... or just about tolerate it ... or hate it? Or is the old maxim true, which says that 30% of teachers will be brilliant whatever tools they have or don’t have, 60% will benefit from the help of a good book, while the remaining 10% will be poor teachers whatever materials they have?’ With these words Therese Tobin, the editor of *Modern English Teacher* (MET), addresses its readers and offers two papers presenting opposing points of view on coursebook use so that they may join in the debate. In the first article, Jeremy Harmer reassures us all that there’s always been a need for coursebooks, whatever technology has to offer (Harmer, 2001). In reply to this article Scott Thornbury and Luke Meddings explain why they fail to find any use for coursebooks at all (Thornbury & Meddings, 2001a). Yet, behind the convincing explanations of both sides, it seems to us, are opinions of those who these coursebooks are written for – the teacher and the learner, non-native speakers – the subject of much of our paper.

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2. Methodology

While for English-speaking teachers it is still a largely unresolved issue whether or not to use the coursebook in EFL, for any Russian-speaking teacher of English, whatever group stated above s/he belongs to, ‘the coursebook is a naturally occurring item of classroom furniture – as natural as, say, as the blackboard or the cassette recorder. Love them or hate them, coursebooks are a fact of (classroom) life’ (Thornbury & Meddings, 2001b, p. 36). And that’s the issue, really. It’s not so much whether coursebooks are ‘a good thing’ or ‘a bad thing’. It is clear that they are both. Indeed, the ‘ideal’ coursebook which suits every teaching situation and every learner is a long way to come, and there is still, as all coursebook writers and publishers admit, much scope for innovation and development. What is important for us, mass-market coursebook users, is to know *how* this ‘cultural artefact’ should be used in the teaching process so that its advantages outweigh its disadvantages.

Fortunately, the idea of one-size-fits-all coursebook has had its day in Russia. With the emergence of English as a *lingua franca* the market for EFL coursebooks for adult learners (especially of intermediate level) has expanded beyond any expectation and is now virtually boundless. There is no denying that UK and US publishers have been quick to tap this highly lucrative market as we are now spoiled for choice when it comes to choosing a coursebook for our students. However, Russian teachers, perhaps unsurprisingly, tend to be the more skeptical audience in choosing an ‘ideal’ coursebook. Everyone feels sure that it is up to him/her to decide what is suitable for certain students at a certain time. His/her creativity in the coursebook use, however, results in picking out, as s/he thinks, ‘the best’ from various recourses. For every lesson the teacher makes decisions about whether or not to use certain bits of any book s/he has or will come across.

Thus, the most popular ‘path’ with Russian teachers (see Fig. 1) is to add or reduce the extract they want to use. Few (young teachers mainly) find it difficult to break away from coursebook content and procedures and, therefore, make no changes at all.

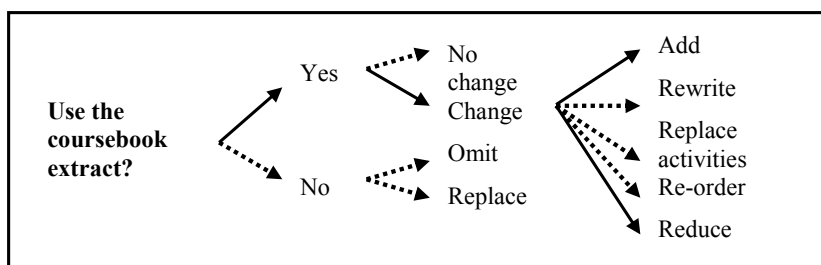


Fig. 1. Options for coursebook use.

Such an alternative to coursebook use is known as the DIY (‘do-it-yourself’) approach when teachers bring materials and activities which they have chosen for their students in their situation. And now DIY teaching and learning is becoming extraordinarily attractive in Russia.

I need hardly say that photocopiers are surely a blessing for us: they have added significantly to a coursebook-driven syllabus. Indeed, we can easily copy newspaper articles, grammar exercises from supplementary books, and engaging activities from numerous resource books. A fair number of teachers (not only young ones) use the almost limitless resources of the Internet where certain websites, say, www.onestopenglish.com, even provide them with instantly prepared lessons. However, there are a lot of ‘however’s’ including mention of the quality of the materials copied and what students feel about receiving mere ‘papers’ and spending a lot of money on them, but that is another issue.

Coursebooks or not, it is quite clear that the workings of the creative teacher (as everyone thinks s/he is) should be not a random collection of bits and pieces but a coherent syllabus with a set of adapted materials which is supposed to become an important part of his/her activity repertoire.

3. Research

Our scientific findings are targeted at trilingual students studying English as a second foreign language (after German). As regards coursebooks used for third language acquisition (TLA) the situation is, I believe, not very dissimilar to second language acquisition (SLA). One of the many interesting things we have found from our own research is that learners as well as teachers are not satisfied with the choice of coursebooks available in a trilingual classroom. There are several reasons for such complains.

What does an intermediate-level (and even a high-intermediate-level) adult learner look for in a coursebook? We strongly believe, what adult learners want is, in the first place, a genuinely *adult* coursebook. Indeed, our adult learners have often expressed their dissatisfaction with published materials that they felt were a bit ‘childish’ and did not respect them as adult learners. Needless to say, it is not only the choice of topics or situations that make a coursebook more or less attuned to an adult learner’s wants but also the design, the graphics – in a word the whole ‘package’. This mainly refers to, so to say, ‘home-produced’ coursebooks. The few that are to be found in our libraries and bookshops inevitably face tough competition on today’s market for EFL coursebooks.

Second, learners of English who also know another foreign language have rich language experience that should be taken into account anyway. Yet English coursebooks with no regard to the language difficulties brought to the learning process from the structures of the learner’s previous languages become one-size-fits-all again making the publishers’ idea a kind of double-edged sword: helpful in achieving native-speaking competence but, at the same time, their content can be sometimes misleading. The latter is caused by a naturally-occurring cross-linguistic interference that is especially strongly felt with closely related languages – English and German is a case in point. As teachers, we know all too well how difficult it is to get our students to pronounce correctly, as Englishmen do, words that are so similar to German words. On the other hand, the same classroom settings in SLA and TLA and the close family relationship between the languages make it possible to reduce the teaching material and the length of learning process. This can help students escape the feeling of *déjà vu* when there is very little new material to learn and gain the sense of progress which stems from being taught totally new language structures.

The final message which comes across from a special review of coursebooks available in a trilingual classroom (Yastrebova, 2010, 2011) is that it is necessary to strike a balance between the use of EFL coursebooks and that of ‘home-produced’ ones. It is the learners’ language experience that really counts: the better the learners’ knowledge of English is, the less references to the previous language experience a coursebook is to have. In other words, the higher the stage of TLA is, the more freedom in coursebooks choice the teacher has. The latter especially refers to EFL coursebooks.

4. Results and discussion

So we can say that the ‘ideal’ coursebook that is targeted at trilingual learners and fares with respect to ‘adulthood’ and ‘the *déjà vu* issue’ is a long way to come. However, waiting for a better proposition from coursebook writers and publishers just isn’t a good idea. Nor can the DIY alternative to course content take the development a step further as even having much to offer it often ends in all ‘innovation’ turning into a collection of scruffy photocopies.

Here is a compromise. The idea is to design your own materials what seems to us more attractive and rewarding. For all its ‘howevers’, it reduces the teacher’s dependency on publisher materials and is invaluable as a means of professional development.

Meanwhile, in the light of all the critical noise which surrounds coursebook use, it may appear surprising that they or their extracts are so widely used in Russia. Is it that EFL teachers are now too overworked, underpaid and tired to be expected to make their own materials? Or is it that they lack the intelligence to become proper DIY practitioners, or are just lazy? It is true that Russian teachers have heavy workloads and, apart from anything else, even in the hands of engaged teachers not every coursebook is a spur to creativity. Another reason is that a well-produced coursebook offers teachers (and learners as well) a coherent syllabus thus providing feelings of both progress and security. Then there could be some psychological explanation for this. Russian teachers of English often feel it is simply not worth and maybe not right spending time producing something an English-speaking author does best and is paid to do anyway.

So, the good materials-creating teacher, with time on his or her hands, with an unlimited amount of resources, and the confidence to marshal those resources into a clear and coherent language program, seems to be the pattern of language teaching in the future. But this future is not so far as it may appear.

There's been a lot of research into materials writing process lately. Its results are a number of published books and guides. As tools they are unmatched for both classroom teachers and the applied writer. What should we say, then, to teachers who are enthusiastic enough to become proper writers?

The obvious starting point for any EFL teacher who is enthusiastic enough to become a proper writer is to decide on a set of key principles underlying the theoretical framework. For TLA these are: 1) From text to language; 2) Use of previous language experience; 3) Engaging content; 4) Personalized practice; 5) Integrated skills; 6) Balance of approaches; 7) Learner development.

We have named seven (you might need more) key principles you should bear in mind before creating your own materials intended for trilingual learners. Almost all of them are the findings from our previous research outlined in another paper (Yastrebova, 2011).

As regards the next stage, the writing process itself, we have already mentioned that there is good literature, the result of many years of experience, much research and discussion with EFL teachers, consultants and publishers, that provides a detailed treatment of *why*, *what* and *how* you should do to put your ideas into practice.

It needs to be noted that in this paper we have tried to give answers to possible *why*-questions, with 'Why do you use a coursebook?' and 'Why don't you try writing yourself?' being major ones. No one is suggesting that all teachers actually have to write such material, of course. However, providing a comprehensive theoretical and then (in the next paper) practical framework to the issues touched upon above is sure to encourage you to do so anyway or at least provoke further thinking rather than discuss an all-or-nothing question.

To close, here are our reasons. First and foremost, the lack of proper coursebooks makes you a constant DIY practitioner as no one wants to come into class and let things develop (to try a 'jungle path' lesson). Or you have to use any coursebooks available at the moment which are often not intended for trilingual learners. The most visible result in both cases is the boredom that is engaged in learners with rich language experience.

Apart from anything else, materials writing may be very productive for our training and continuing professional development. Searching for answers to numerous *what*- and *how*-questions makes us treat methodological resources not like instructions for use but *proposals* for action.

5. Conclusion

To sum it up, the creativity of the teacher is to choose his/her own path in coursebook use: from blind acceptance of other materials, through adaptation and supplementation, to the production of 'purpose-built' materials. We strongly believe that if the learners are engaged in a range of life-like *tasks* about a range of real-life *topics* and using a range of real-life *text* types, they will be 'covering' all the structures, vocabulary items and sounds they need. Our job is to 'uncover' this natural syllabus in the interests of automaticity and fluency. The materials-creating teacher probably would do this better.

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