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Teaching/learning materials

Overview

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15.1 The coursebook: approach, components, presentation

The most common type of teaching/learning materials used in English teaching worldwide is the *coursebook* or *textbook*. Here, I'll make a distinction between these two terms. *Coursebook* will be used to designate the book that covers all the texts, tasks and language points that will be taught in a course. *Textbook*, in contrast, is a more general term: it could refer to a coursebook, but could also be a book of grammar exercises, or of reading texts with comprehension questions.

Both are most frequently used in the form of conventional paper books. Online or digital course materials are on the increase, but the evidence is that a substantial majority of students prefer paper textbooks, at least at university level (Baron et al., 2017), and this may well be true of younger students as well.

Approach

A coursebook follows – or sometimes only claims to follow – a certain approach to language teaching and learning, leading to a preferred methodology, which is often explained in the introduction or the blurb on the back cover. This approach may or may not be implemented in the content of the book. For example, many modern coursebooks claim to follow the communicative approach, but in fact much, if not most, of their space is taken up with activities whose main aim is getting the language right – vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation – rather than engaging learners in communicative tasks.

Components

The main components in any coursebook are:

- the syllabus, usually laid out as a table of contents at the beginning;

- reading and listening texts with following comprehension work;
- writing and speaking tasks;
- explanations of language points (usually grammar);
- grammar and vocabulary exercises;
- lists of new vocabulary.

It may also provide:

- transcripts of listening comprehension texts;
- a glossary of vocabulary items at the end of the book;
- tests;
- extra practice exercises on grammar and vocabulary, (sometimes in a separate workbook);
- a teacher's book, or teacher's guide, in a separate book;
- a website, with further guidance or materials.

Presentation

An important aspect of the coursebook is how it is presented: what the page looks like, how easy it is to identify headings and navigate to different pages and texts. Most coursebooks these days are full colour, with plenty of pictures. Pages are often divided into two columns in order to get as much material as possible on each page.

Pause for thought

Have a look at a coursebook you know. Check out its approach, components and presentation. Did you find any components not listed here? Was anything missing? Do you have any particular comments?

Comment

I looked at a locally published textbook for use in schools (A2–B1-level teenagers)³. Its syllabus is laid out using 'can-dos' modelled on the CEFR (see **14 The syllabus**), under the headings of reading, listening, speaking, writing, collaborative task, vocabulary and grammar. Its blurb on the back cover shows how it is coordinated with the national curriculum, which is CEFR-based, but there is no indication of an explicit approach to language teaching: perhaps this is taken for granted in the local context. All the components mentioned above are there: vocabulary is particularly prominent, with lists of words and many vocabulary exercises. The page layout is spaced and easy to navigate, with a lot of pictures and coloured headings.

³Moshe, S. (2021). *Teamwork*. Eric Cohen Books.

15.2 How necessary is a coursebook?

Pause for thought

In the context of a teaching situation you are familiar with, whether as teacher or learner, what would your own answer be to the question in the heading of this section?

Comment

In my own teaching situation (public schools within a state education system), I could not have managed without the coursebook: I simply did not have the time to search for appropriate texts and tasks to give my students. Even today, with the enormous quantity and variety of resources quickly and easily available online, it would take too long to search, copy and adapt. So my answer is: it was absolutely necessary, for me. But this does not mean that I taught only and fully what was in the book; and I allowed myself considerable liberties with how, and how much, I used it. So I could do my own thing occasionally, knowing that I had a structured programme to return to. It is my experience that the students also prefer to have a coursebook. The classes which I have tried to teach using a selection of materials from different sources have complained of a sense of lack of purpose. Interestingly, they also said that they felt that their studies – and, by implication, they themselves – were not taken seriously. It seems that having a coursebook may carry a certain prestige.

Advantages and disadvantages

In some places, it is taken for granted that coursebooks are used as the basis for courses. In others, they may not be used at all, and the teacher bases their teaching on a syllabus, or their own programme based on an evaluation of the learners' needs, using personally selected teaching materials. A third situation is a compromise, where a coursebook is used selectively, not necessarily in sequence, and is extensively supplemented by other materials.

Below is a list of advantages and disadvantages of using a coursebook, whether print or digital.

Advantages

- **Framework.** A coursebook provides a clear framework. Teachers and students know where they are going and what is coming next, so there is a sense of structure and progress.
- **Syllabus.** In many places, the coursebook is used as a syllabus. If it is followed systematically, an appropriate and graded selection of content (language items or other aspects such as topics or tasks) will be covered (see **14 The syllabus**).
- **Ready-made texts and tasks.** The coursebook provides texts and learning tasks which are likely to be of an appropriate level for most of the class. This saves time for the teacher, who would otherwise have to prepare their own.

- **Guidance.** For inexperienced teachers, the coursebook can give useful guidance and support; it can even fulfil a teacher training/development function in that it provides ideas on how to plan and teach lessons, as well as explanations of language points and suggestions for how to activate students.
- **Learner autonomy.** The student can use the coursebook to learn new material, and review and monitor their own progress autonomously. A student without a coursebook is likely to be much more teacher-dependent.

Disadvantages of a coursebook

- **Inadequacy.** Every individual class has their own learning needs. No single coursebook can possibly meet all of these satisfactorily.
- **Irrelevance, lack of interest.** The topics in the coursebook may not be relevant or interesting for your class. And they may date rapidly, whereas materials you choose yourself can be more up to date.
- **Cultural inappropriateness.** The content of a coursebook may be culturally inappropriate, which not only may make it irrelevant or uninteresting, but can also cause discomfort or even offence.
- **Limited range of level.** Coursebooks target a particular level and rarely cater for the wide range of levels of ability or proficiency that exist in most classes.
- **Possible negative effect on teaching.** Teachers may follow the coursebook uncritically and be discouraged from using their own initiative: they may find themselves functioning merely as mediators of its content instead of as teachers in their own right.

Further comments and conclusion

Through my own teaching, I have come to appreciate the advantages of using a coursebook as described in my comment on the **Pause for thought** on the previous page. But the experience of other teachers is different. Meddings and Thornbury (2009), for example, relate the story of a teacher who found himself bereft of all textbooks (and with no online resources available), teaching a programme based only on the needs of his students, and his attempts to address those needs – with excellent results. The Dogme approach, described in the same book, supports a materials-light approach: using materials as an auxiliary resource, certainly, but not allowing them to dominate or dictate the process of classroom teaching, which is essentially based on a dialogue between teacher and learner(s).

Coursebooks are certainly widely used – but this may not mean that they are necessary. On the positive side, their widespread use may be taken as evidence that coursebooks are useful or even important for effective teaching. More negative reasons could be that teachers are too lazy or unprofessional to make their own materials, or that the publishers are very good at marketing, or even that the authority that approves their purchase and use sees them as a means of controlling how learners are taught.

In any case, coursebooks are not about to disappear any time soon, and for many, the question in the heading of this section is purely academic. If your course is built on a coursebook, for whatever reason, the most important issue that you are likely to be interested in is not whether or not to use it, but how (see **Section 4**).

15.3 Evaluating the coursebook

If you are to use a coursebook, whether as the basis of your course or as an occasional resource, it is worth thinking about how you recognize a good one, and why you might reject or substantially adapt it. In other words, what are your main criteria for evaluation? These criteria may be general (suitable for any language-teaching materials) or specific (looking at the appropriateness of a set of materials for a certain course or group of learners). An example of a general criterion might be: 'clear layout and font', or 'provides regular review or test sections'. A specific criterion for a class of younger learners might be: 'attractive and colourful illustrations', or for a class of medical students: 'vocabulary and texts relevant to medicine'. The criteria suggested below are my own, but they rely on ideas suggested in a number of books and articles on the subject (see some useful sources in **Further reading** on page 219). They apply both to print and digital materials.

Read the list of criteria for evaluating language-learning coursebooks below. If you do not want to do the task in **Pause for thought**, then skip to the following **Comment**.

Pause for thought

Have a look at the list of criteria below. How important do you feel each criterion is for selecting a coursebook? Under 'Importance' use the following symbols to note your opinion: ✓✓ for 'essential' (without this I wouldn't use the coursebook); ✓ for 'quite important'; ? for 'not sure'; ✗ for 'not important'; ✗✗ for 'totally unimportant' (it wouldn't make any difference to me if it was there or not). Then, optionally, add further criteria you feel are significant, and note their importance.

Criterion	Importance
1 The methodological approach and objectives are clearly explained in the introduction, and implemented in the material.	
2 The approach is culturally acceptable to the target students.	
3 There is an explicit syllabus, which is covered systematically.	
4 The layout is clear and attractive, and the print is easy to read. If digital, then it is easy to navigate from page to page.	
5 The texts and tasks are interesting.	
6 The texts and tasks are varied in level and style, afford learning opportunities for different learner levels, learning styles, interests, etc.	
7 Instructions are clear.	
8 There are review and test sections.	
9 There are pronunciation and spelling explanations and practice.	
10 There are vocabulary explanations and practice.	

11	There are grammar explanations and practice.	
12	There are tasks that activate the students in listening, speaking, reading and writing.	
13	The material encourages learners to develop their own learning strategies and to become independent in their learning.	
14	There is adequate guidance for the teacher (teacher's guide, or teacher's notes).	
15	There are audio recordings available.	
16	There are visual materials available: posters, video, flashcards, etc.	
17	There is a coursebook website, with guidance and supplementary materials available.	
18	The material is easily available and not too expensive.	

Comment

- 1 **Approach and objectives.** This is important, but check that the objectives expressed in the introduction to the coursebook are in fact implemented. Sometimes they are not!
- 2 **Cultural aspects.** How important this is depends on your teaching context. Some communities are more sensitive than others.
- 3 **Syllabus.** Essential. Check what kind of a syllabus the coursebook has. This should be clear from the table of contents at the beginning (see **14 The syllabus**). Does it provide coverage of all the items you think are essential? And are these items in fact covered in the material itself? You may need to make sure that the coursebook follows syllabuses which are relevant to your teaching situation: a national syllabus, for example, or one relevant to an international exam like IELTS.
- 4 **Layout.** This is vitally important. The material has to be not only pleasing to the eye, but also clear and navigable: both you and your students need to be able to find your way around it quickly and smoothly. The texts should be very clear and readable (so it is not a good idea to have overly decorative fonts, or pictures behind text, which make reading difficult, particularly for anyone suffering from dyslexia). The same applies to digital material: you also need to be able to move around it easily, and any hyperlinks need to work readily.

- 5 **Interest.** I would rank this as quite important. On the one hand, skilful and imaginative teaching can make even the most boring texts and tasks interesting (and conversely bad teaching can kill the most interesting ones!). On the other hand, it helps a lot if the book provides interesting material that you will enjoy using, adapting as necessary for your classes.
- 6 **Varied learning opportunities.** Quite important. This quality is one that is often missing in coursebooks. There should be some texts which are easier or more difficult. Tasks should be designed to allow for performance at different levels. Texts and tasks should vary also in the topic, the language style, the type of participation or learning strategies they require, etc. The lack of such variation is not a reason to reject the book, but if it exists, it is a positive feature.
- 7 **Clear instructions.** Essential. For a monolingual class of beginners, this may mean providing instructions and explanations in the L1.
- 8 **Reviews and tests.** The inclusion of these features may or may not be important to you. Review exercises and tests are sometimes provided on the course website rather than in the main materials themselves. Often, however, you will prefer to create your own. What you actually teach is never exactly what the coursebook provides: you may skip some bits and add others, in which case the coursebook reviews and tests might not be suitable. So this component is probably less essential than some of the others.
- 9 **Pronunciation and spelling.** How much emphasis is put on these depends on the approach in your teaching situation, so the evaluation here will also vary. Pronunciation problems can often be dealt with as they come up, so you do not necessarily need a systematic programme in the coursebook. Spelling is surprisingly rarely taught or practised in many coursebooks, so you may need to initiate work on it yourself.
- 10 **Vocabulary.** This is an essential component. The materials should provide plenty of vocabulary expansion and review activities.
- 11 **Grammar.** In many contexts, substantial grammar coverage is required, but in others it is not. So the evaluation is likely to range from 'essential' to 'not sure'.
- 12 **Listening, speaking, reading and writing.** Essential. Tasks activating the four skills are the main basis for communicative practice. The coursebook should provide texts and tasks that promote fluency and accuracy in the four skills in communicative situations, as well as opportunities for students to do mixed-skills activities.
- 13 **Learner independence.** Whether the materials encourage learner independence and autonomy is quite important, but it is a very difficult aspect to evaluate. Some things to look for are computer-based tasks which enable self-checking, and tasks that require initiative on the part of the students.

- 14 **Teacher's guides.** Teacher's guides are quite important, particularly – but not only – for novice teachers. The teacher's materials provide not only keys to exercises and audioscripts, but also useful tips on ways of dealing with texts and tasks.
- 15 **Audio and video recordings.** This is an essential component for oral input and listening comprehension. It's quite important that at least some of these recordings should be video.
- 16 **Visual materials.** Visual materials such as posters and flashcards, whether on paper or displayed digitally, are essential for classes of younger learners. They provide an enjoyable break from the printed pages of coursebooks, focus attention and are likely to improve learning. For older or more advanced classes, they may be useful but less essential.
- 17 **Website.** The course website is a fairly standard component, even if the main book is paper. Often the audio/video recordings and teacher's guide can be found there, as well as supplementary exercises, tests and texts, and links to other useful websites. It is not absolutely necessary, but it may be quite an important added resource.
- 18 **Availability.** This is perhaps obvious, but essential. The most desirable coursebook in the world cannot be used if it is too expensive for your institution or students to afford, or if it is not easily available in your country.

Pause for thought

Have a look at a textbook you have used yourself, either as a teacher or as a learner. How would you evaluate it, using the above criteria?

Comment

Very often, even if your evaluation of many of the points above is fairly negative, you may have no choice, as a teacher, as to whether to use the book or not: the institution or some other authority may have chosen it for you. The evaluation, however, can give you a solid basis for deciding which aspects of it to supplement or adapt. Some ideas on adaptation are shown in the next section.

15.4 Using course materials

This section applies both to standard coursebooks, as discussed above, and to other kinds of materials, such as grammar or reading comprehension supplementary textbooks, worksheets, websites providing any of these, audio and video recordings, and more.

When looking through materials we are going to use in class, we need to be aware of what they do well and what is missing or could be improved. For example, if the coursebook does not provide enough reading texts or grammar practice, we might want to supplement it by using free-access material available online. But problems with specific components that you want to use within teaching units can only be solved by you yourself in the classroom. You may find it necessary to make substantial changes, deletions and additions. Here is a sample of problems that teachers in particular situations might encounter with coursebook texts or tasks. Note that no criticism is intended of the extracts in themselves; it's just that they may not, for various reasons, address the needs of a particular group of students.

Using the materials: some issues

Paolo (teaching in a primary school in Italy)

I have this grammar exercise in my book.

- 1 Venice is (beautiful) than London.
- 2 This school is (big) than that one.
- 3 This was (bad) day of my life!
- 4 Which is (heavy): a pound or a kilo?
- 5 Which supermarket has the (cheap) vegetables?
- 6 She was (popular) singer in the festival.
- 7 For me, mathematics is (difficult) than English

I feel it's important to do lots of grammar practice with my students, but exercises like this one are rather boring; the students get fed up doing them, and they're pretty meaningless – my students could get them all right without understanding most of the sentences. Finally, they're too short: they don't give enough opportunities for (meaningful) practice.

Emilia (teaching in a private language school in Brazil).

I used this as a reading comprehension text.

Who was Robin Hood? Nobody knows. In the film, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, Robin was rich, but this probably wasn't true. We know that he was a popular hero in the 13th century. It's possible the real man was born before then. Who were the Merry Men? Little John and Will Scarlet were famous Merry Men. Robin Hood was the leader of this group of men (and women). Why were Robin Hood and his Merry Men famous? They were famous for robbing rich people. But Robin Hood and his Merry Men weren't robbers – the money was for poor people.

(adapted from *Active Grammar 1*, Davis, F. and Rimmer, W. 2011)

It's interesting, and my students relate well to the topic, but it's a bit too short and easy for my class of 12-year-old students. They need more challenge.

Hugo (teaching in a university in France).

I wanted to get my adult students (about B2 level) to talk, and my coursebook suggested this activity:

a  Read the following situations. What would you have done?

- 'I saw my best friend stealing something in the supermarket. Of course I didn't tell anyone – she's my friend.'
- 'A colleague in my office lied about the company accounts. I was the only one who knew he was lying. I sent my manager an anonymous note.'
- 'In our final exam at university, I saw a student in our year look at answers on a small piece of paper. I didn't say anything. It wasn't anything to do with me.'

(from *Empower Upper-intermediate/B2 Student's Book* 2nd Edition, by Doff, A. et al. 2022)

But after they'd done the task (each said what they would have done), they stopped talking. How can I get them to talk more?

Takumi (teaching in a boys' school in Japan)

I have this text in my book:

Tackling obesity

- A** Obesity is becoming a major problem in many parts of the world. In Britain alone, there was a 30% increase in the number of people being admitted to hospital with problems related to obesity last year. An estimated 60% of British adults are overweight.
- B** One way of tackling obesity is to eat less but to eat more healthily. An average man needs around 2,500 calories per day, while an average woman requires around 2,000 per day. We should eat a balanced diet which consists of a variety of foods in order to maintain a healthy weight. A healthy diet should include approximately 35% fruit and vegetables; 35% carbohydrates, such as bread, rice, potatoes and pasta (or other starchy food); around 15% dairy products like milk and cheese; 10% proteins, for example meat, fish, eggs and beans; and only around 5% should be sweet foods – namely cakes or biscuits – especially those that are high in fat and sugar.
- C** In many countries, nutritional values are shown on food packaging. In Britain, there is a traffic light system to show more clearly how good or bad a particular food product is. Red next to 'sugar', for example, means that the product is high in that particular item; yellow means the product is neither high nor low in sugar; and green means the product only has a small amount of sugar in it. The traffic light system helps people to know immediately whether the food product is good for them.
- D** Some people argue that foods that are high in fat, such as pizza and potato chips, and those high in refined sugar, like chocolate and sweets, should be taxed. This would make junk food too expensive for people to buy in large quantities. In Denmark, there is now a tax on products that contain more than 2.3% of saturated fat. However, taxing fast food is difficult because fast food companies are rich and powerful.
- E** The role of advertising should not be forgotten. Advertising junk food at times when children are watching TV was banned in Malaysia in 2007. This was designed to better protect them from the influence of advertising while they learn how to choose between treats and foods that are good for them. On the other hand, there have also been TV education campaigns to encourage people to eat five portions of fruit and vegetables per day. It has been estimated that if people ate enough fruit and vegetables, up to 2.7 million lives per year could be saved.
- F** Governments need to promote healthy eating and the importance of five portions of fruit and vegetables per day. Similarly, they need to fight obesity by discouraging people from eating fats and sugars. They must also encourage people to be more active by providing opportunities for everyone to get fit, no matter how rich or poor they may be. If governments can change people's habits, the world will be a healthier place in the future.

(from *Unlock 3 Student's Book* 2nd Edition by Westbrook, C., Baker, L. and Sowton, C. 2021)

The topic is quite interesting, but it's too difficult: some of the vocabulary is really advanced (*obesity*, for example), and the text is far too long.

Pause for thought

Before reading on ... What would you suggest to these teachers? What could they do with the tasks or texts in order to address the issues they bring up?

Comment

Adapting material from a coursebook means freeing ourselves from the assumption that materials should be used in the way the author seems to have intended, and allowing ourselves to change the instructions, or even the actual text, so that they are accessible to, and provide for more learning by, our students. Your ideas are probably based on such strategies, as are my suggestions below.

Paolo: boring, meaningless and too-short grammar exercises.

Here are some ideas for Paolo which will help add interest and length. Probably it's a good idea to do the exercise once very quickly as is, and then do one or more of the following:

- Tell students to close their books and try to recall all seven of the completed sentences. They can work in pairs. Then, in full class, check answers. So that gives you more practice – and it's actually meaningful, too, because as a rule we don't remember things that are meaningless. If they remember them, they probably understand them, too.
- For any sentence(s) students choose: tell them to ignore the adjective in brackets, and suggest any other comparative or superlative adjectives that make sense with the rest of the sentence. For example, the first sentence could be 'Venice is warmer than London' or 'Venice is smaller than London'. This obviously has to be meaningful, and provides extra, more interesting, practice.
- Again, for any sentence(s) students choose: tell them to ignore the sentence endings, and invent their own, using comparatives or superlatives: so sentence 5 might be 'Which supermarket has the freshest fruit?' This adds meaning, more practice and is more interesting.
- Ask students to change selected statements (it doesn't work for questions) in whatever way they like in order to make them true for them. So for sentence 7, for example, they might say 'For me, mathematics is more difficult than Italian.' This is still practising comparative and superlative of adjectives, but adding more practice and a personal aspect.
- Tell students to ignore all the sentences, except for the adjective in brackets, and invent sentences using that adjective in the comparative or superlative to make true sentences. (Or, for fun, false sentences!) Again, you get more, and more meaningful and interesting, practice.

Emilia: short, easy reading passage

This is indeed quite an easy text, though you might need to teach your students words like *leader*, *merry* (note that *merry* is a relatively rare word, a bit archaic, but *leader* more useful). Some things you might do to make it more challenging are:

- Give students five minutes to work on their own, inserting as many adjectives and adverbs as they can in the passage. Then share the results. This immediately makes the passage longer and more advanced.
- Tell students to take pairs of simple sentences from the text, and combine them into one sentence; or a pair of parallel clauses, and combine them into one. They can change the wording as necessary. For example, 'In the film *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, Robin was rich, but this probably wasn't true,' might be changed to 'Although in the film *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, Robin was rich, this probably wasn't true.' This adds more advanced grammar.
- Send students to the internet to find out as much as they can about Robin Hood, write notes, and share the information they have found in the following lesson, either orally or in writing.
- Display the text on the board and invite students to insert whole phrases or sentences of at least three words, wherever they like, provided they make sense. This can easily be done if you have digital text – and is feasible even using handwriting on a whiteboard. If students have done the internet research, as suggested above, then the insertions could relate to what they have found out.
- Select specific words from the text (for example, *hero*, *real*, *rich*, *popular*, etc.), and tell students for homework to find out from dictionaries, thesauri or by searching online as many other words of similar meaning as they can for each.

Hugo: they stop talking.

The basic issue that students are asked to talk about is an interesting one, but the task invites only one response from each participant, which may or may not develop into a general discussion – in Hugo's class, it obviously didn't.

Here are two adaptations that could help, both of which require consensus and are therefore more likely to get the student to continue the discussion beyond initial responses.

- Delete the last sentence (or two sentences in the third bullet point), leaving only the description of the dishonest behaviour. Then tell students they need to agree on a new final sentence – what 'I' did in response – which should express their own agreed ideas on an appropriate response by the writer.
- Leave the passages as they are, but change the task. The group of students are the editorial team of a website which provides advice to people who write in with their problems. The writer in each case has written to say they aren't sure they responded rightly, and to ask the team for their response and advice. The team has to agree on the wording of a short letter in response.

Takumi: long, difficult passage

Takumi mentions two problems here: vocabulary and length.

Vocabulary

- Don't try to preteach all previously unknown vocabulary before reading – that would just overwhelm and discourage the students. They need to discover the rest of the new items gradually, preferably in context. But it's useful to pre-teach the main key words (such as, in this case, *obesity*, *tackle*, *carbohydrates*).
- Use the title of the article to initiate a discussion of the topic. Such a discussion may well throw up more useful vocabulary, and awareness of the issues to be discussed will make understanding the main text easier when they come to it.
- If you have a digital version of the text, then before presenting the passage, delete the difficult bits wherever you can without altering the basic message, and present the text the first time without them. Present the full text later.

Length

- Read the text bit by bit, so that the students are not faced with the entire text at one session. In the first lesson, work only on the first few sentences, perhaps simplified as suggested above, teaching new vocabulary as necessary. Challenge students to predict what more information will be provided later in this report; then continue reading, working on each paragraph on its own before progressing to the next.
- When you have finished working through the entire passage, read it aloud to the students again, to familiarize further.
- Only after the students know the basic content and sequence of argument of the simplified passage, let them read the original with the deleted items reinstated, and work on these as necessary.

Bottom line

The coursebook provides you with useful texts and tasks which you can use as the basis for your teaching programme. But that is essentially what it is: a good basis. The coursebook authors do not know your class: you do. You are the best person to decide how much of the material to use, and how. Be selective and critical, using your own professional judgement to decide where it needs to be changed and where it does not. As the examples above show, coursebook materials can be adapted (sometimes quite drastically) in order to create appropriate, learning-rich and interesting activities for your class.

15.5 Other materials and resources

Whether or not you are using a coursebook, you will sooner or later want to resort to other types of material to enrich your teaching.

Reference books

In spite of the fact that online dictionaries, thesauri and grammars are used a lot, I find that I often also look up language items in my print editions, particularly the thesaurus. You probably need both.

The main type of reference book is, of course, the dictionary. A monolingual English dictionary such as the *Cambridge Learner's Dictionary*, for example, or *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, is traditionally seen as preferable to bilingual. Personally, I prefer to send students to look up words in bilingual ones: it's quicker and in many ways more reliable. Where the monolingual dictionary comes in useful is in vocabulary-expansion activities: sending students to look up words they know, for example, in order to learn more about them. Other useful reference books are the thesaurus (e.g., *Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*) and a good teacher's grammar (I usually use Michael Swan's *Practical English Usage*).

Textbooks

You will find it useful to have a variety of English-teaching textbooks on your shelves, or stored digitally. These could include coursebooks designed for other courses, but also books focusing on particular aspects of language such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, style and so on. If you are designing your own materials for a course, these will be invaluable as resources to dip into; or they can be used to supplement a coursebook where you feel something is missing or inadequately covered.

Teacher handbooks

Teacher handbooks are collections of practical suggestions for classroom activities to promote language learning. There are an enormous number of them available, as well as websites that provide ideas for lessons or individual activities. They are, however of very variable quality, and probably most of them not appropriate for your needs: they may focus on a specific student population which may not have much in common with yours, or suggest ideas that are not practicable in your classes. Searching for useful material can take a lot of time. Look for books or online resources coming from reputable publishers (the *Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers*, for example) or well-known organizations such as *TESOL*. Take every opportunity to browse through the teacher handbooks at teachers' conferences or in bookshops, and ask experienced colleagues which handbooks they have found useful.

Books and simplified readers for extensive reading

The importance of extensive reading has already been discussed in **10 Teaching reading**. A library of suitable books is therefore essential for any institution where English is taught. It's not advisable to base this on online material, since even today it appears that most people prefer to use conventional books for reading for pleasure. There should be plenty of simplified readers, fiction and non-fiction, at different levels as well as unsimplified books for more advanced learners. Getting a group of students to read such books regularly is easier said than done, as many experienced teachers will testify. It requires ongoing monitoring of book borrowing and returning, and constant investment

in new books. However, it is certainly worthwhile: the expense is relatively small, and the benefits for language learning are substantial.

Worksheets and test papers

Teachers very often prepare worksheets for their students with extra reading or language practice, as well as class tests. It's true that there is an enormous number of worksheets and tests available on the internet: the problem is that, as with suggestions for classroom activities discussed above, it takes a lot of searching to find what you want, and the material you eventually find may need further adaptation before you can use it.

Worksheets and tests prepared by teachers for classes within the institution, on the other hand, are likely to be useful also to other teachers in the same institution later. So it is worth storing both digital and paper forms of such materials for future use by others.

Pictures and other graphic material

Pictures are invaluable, particularly (though not only) for younger learners. The time is gone when teachers used to spend hours leafing through glossy magazines and colour supplements of newspapers to find suitable pictures: today, we can find and download all the pictures we need at the click of a mouse. These can then be glued onto card, or even laminated if they are to be used repeatedly, and filed. It is, of course, possible to display digital pictures with a projector or interactive whiteboard, or send them to students' own digital devices: but paper materials have the advantage that they can be easily handled, moved and exchanged rather than stuck to a computer screen. Bottom line: there is a place for both.

Corpora and corpus-based resources

It is very useful to have some of the major corpora readily available on the institution's computer system: to check out the frequency of a particular word, or how a vocabulary item collocates with other words, or in which varieties of English a particular word is more, or less, common. One useful source is *English Corpora* (www.english-corpora.org), which provides COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English), BNC (the British National Corpus), GloWbe (the Global Web-based English), and others. Some useful online corpus-based resources are:

- Sketch Engine (sketchengine.eu), a very reader-friendly, quick way of finding out the frequency of a given word, its contexts of use and most common collocations;
- Vocabulary Profilers, which can identify the frequency of words in any given text (see **5 Texts, Section 4** for more details);
- Google Ngram Viewer (<https://books.google.com/ngrams>), which shows you whether a word, or phrase, is becoming more, or less, widely used over time.

Some writers on ELT have suggested that students be invited to check out such issues themselves by having direct recourse to a corpus, in what is called DDL (data-driven learning). There have been some good results in terms of learning outcomes (e.g., Lee et al., 2019). On

the other hand, the time taken to access information by studying a corpus is much longer than the time it would take for the learners to get the same information directly from a teacher or by looking it up online. It is doubtful whether the added learning value is worth the investment in time and effort.

Other digital resources available online

For a detailed discussion of these, see **18 Digital technology and online teaching**.

Review: Check yourself

- 1 What are some components that are very likely to be found in all coursebooks?
- 2 Can you think of at least three arguments in favour of using a coursebook, and three against?
- 3 What are some key criteria to use if you need to select a new coursebook?
- 4 What sorts of things can be done to improve a textbook grammar exercise that is boring and does not provide enough practice?
- 5 What might be done to make a difficult text easier for the class to cope with?
- 6 What are some important teaching materials and resources other than the coursebook?

Further reading

McGrath, I. (2013). *Teaching Materials and the Roles of EFL/ESL teachers: Practice and Theory*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

(Various aspects of the design and use of materials, from the teacher's perspective)

Mishan, F. and Timmis, I. (2015). *Materials Development for TESOL*. Edinburgh University Press.

(Mainly targeting the materials designer; aspects of design and processes of production and evaluation)

Tomlinson, B. (Ed.) (2011). *Materials Development for Language Teaching (2nd Edition)*. Cambridge University Press.

(A collection of articles about different aspects of materials development and use)

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Davis, F. and Rimmer, W. (2011). *Active Grammar 1*. Cambridge University Press.

Doff, A., Thaine, C., Puchta, H., Stranks, J. and Lewis-Jones, P. (2022). *Empower Upper-intermediate/B2 Student's Book 2nd Edition*. Cambridge University Press.

Lee, H., Warschauer, M. and Lee, J. H. (2019). The effects of corpus use on second language vocabulary learning: A multilevel meta-analysis. *Applied Linguistics*, 40(5), 721–753.

Meddings, L. and Thornbury, S. (2009). *Teaching Unplugged: Dogme in English Language Teaching*. Delta Publishing.

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