

The coursebook challenge

Darren Elliott asks some questions and offers some answers about textbooks.

This article starts from the premise that there is no such thing as a bad textbook. Most of the time the books we use are well-designed and written in careful consideration of sound pedagogical research. However, the difficulties arise when we try to use textbooks exactly as they are, without thinking about the needs, skills and circumstances of the particular set of students sitting in front of us. We should remember that the teacher's guide is just that: a *guide*, and that a major part of our job as teachers is making the most out of our textbooks. Some, like the dogme-ists, might dispense with the textbook altogether. I've taught such courses myself, and count them amongst the most rewarding I've been involved in. Nevertheless, in many situations (for teachers and students alike) a textbook offers security, clear goals and a framework for study. It may, too, be handed down to us from above – in which case we need to learn to make the best of the materials we are given.

Choosing your book



Questions to ask yourself

Choose a textbook you are currently using.

- Were you involved in its selection?
- What is it that you like and dislike about it?
- Do you think the students would say the same things?
- What does the author believe is the best way to teach and learn a language? Do you share those beliefs? Do your students?

For those of us in a position to choose our own textbooks, the options can be bewildering. The textbook market is extremely competitive these days, which means that publishers' representatives will be happy to send you samples for review, offer suggestions and advice, and may even come to visit your institution to talk through your options. Most conferences, even the smaller ones, will have publishers' stands and there will often be sponsored presentations from authors or representatives to introduce new products.

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Gathering information, then, is not difficult. Sifting through it all is the challenge! Your actual starting position should be the students, but textbook decisions often have to be taken before you have even met your students. In such a case, you will have to draw on the information you have (test scores, student profiles) and your experience (or the experience of those around you) to find a book which is generally appropriate for a class of its type.

Jeremy Harmer has an excellent checklist for textbook selection. He encourages us to focus on both the practical (price, availability) and the methodological (cultural appropriacy, language skills). Sometimes it is surprising to hear students' feedback on the textbooks they use. For example, the

size and weight of a book can be very important to them – I suppose if the book is one of many that you have to heave around all day, you will appreciate a more compact edition!

Evaluation before, during and after the course is also very important. Inevitably, what looks like the perfect textbook before the course starts will throw up some unexpected obstacles when classes are underway. How we react to them, and what we learn from them, is key. Of course, once teaching begins we can begin to gauge the students' reactions, both formally (through questionnaires or class activities) and informally (classroom atmosphere or energy).

Finding out what the rationale behind the book actually is can be harder than it sounds, although it is a very necessary enterprise. The explanatory notes in the introduction to the book, the teacher's guide or in the publisher's catalogue may give us an idea, but from a marketing perspective the publishers have to make every new textbook sound innovative and fresh, yet similar to another successful series you are already comfortable with. By going through a unit carefully, one can make assumptions about the pedagogical beliefs of its authors. For example, if the grammar point is carefully laid out at the opening of the unit we can probably assume that the author thinks form should be taught explicitly *before* practice. On the other hand, if grammar is tucked away in the back of the book or in a supplementary handbook, the author probably prefers learners to discover patterns through *using* the language. Aspects which will influence the way a textbook is put together include attitudes towards L1, fluency/accuracy balance, learner autonomy, error correction, integration of skills, ways of learning vocabulary and many others. If you find that your fundamental beliefs as a teacher are incongruent with those of the author of your textbook, you may need to change the book (or at least change the way you teach it).

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Using your book

Questions to ask yourself

Choose a unit from a textbook you are currently using. Look at each activity and the unit as a whole.

- How would you arrange the activities, and how many classes would they take to teach?
- Would you drop any activities? Why?
- Are there any activities which need no alteration?
- Which activities would you change? How and why?
- Do you know/use all the supplements that come with your textbook?

If you don't get to pick your own books, or even if you do, then you will probably want to put your own spin on things. At the *macro* level, you have to fit the book into your syllabus. How much time do you want to spend on each unit, and in what order do you want to teach them? Then at the *micro* level, each lesson will be comprised of one or more textbook activities. Neville Grant gives us five options for each one: *adapt, replace, omit, add* or *use*. I would add one more option (*move*), but other than that, I think this summarises the choices available to the teacher very succinctly.

So *when* do you do *what*? Here are some of the most common reasons for doing things differently:

1 'It's too difficult!'

It may help to add a couple of extra stages of pre-task set-up. Maybe you need to pre-teach some of the vocabulary; perhaps you need to make a skeleton conversation into which lower-level students can plug their own language. You may need to set a reading as homework, rewrite it in simpler language or exchange it for another reading. It might be a good idea to use the tapescript in a listening activity before playing the audio.

2 'It's too easy!'

You probably encounter both 1 and 2 in the same class sometimes. Is there any way you can build some flexibility into an activity to enable the more able students to expand? Once the more capable students have finished the

discussion questions in the textbook, ask them to make two more of their own. If some students read quicker than others, ask them to go back through the text and find their favourite word, or an example of the present perfect continuous.

3 'It's too fiddly!'

Some textbook activities involve a lot of flicking backwards and forwards between pages, or complicated rules, or elaborate scenarios. It is worth thinking about streamlining your activities to get the most language out of the least instruction. Efficiency is an important element of classroom management. If an information-gap activity requires one student to look at page 39 and the other to look at page 40, you know that they will both end up flicking between the two. Remove the temptation and the confusion by making handouts and having the students close their books.

4 'It's boring!'

For some students, perhaps. Can you keep the activity but change the context to make it more relevant or interesting? You know about your students' interests (both professional and personal), so utilise that knowledge. Addition (in the form of supplements) or adaptation can make the class much more interesting. Don't forget, too, that the students have paid for their book. If they don't use it, some of them might get disgruntled. Omission is acceptable within reason, but the students will wonder why they bought the book at all if they use less than half. If you do change activities, you should let them know which part of the textbook they can refer to later.

5 'It's irrelevant/inappropriate!'

It is not difficult these days to find locally-produced textbooks or local editions of international books, but there may still be readings about outdated celebrities, pictures considered 'racy' in your milieu, or activities pitched too young or old for your learners. You may need to substitute more interesting or appropriate material. Who is in the news in your area? Keep up with current trends and issues which are relevant for your students by reading the business section of the paper or trade magazines, by watching popular TV shows or by asking your students who or what they care about. (Bear in mind, though, there is nothing worse than a trendy uncle!)

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6 'The book doesn't meet my goals!'

The goals here could be the students' goals, the course goals or the teacher's goals. Imagine a class of young businesspeople who are required to take the TOEIC test at the end of the course. Most of them are just interested in chatting about this and that and learning English that way. The textbook the teacher has been given has no listening activities. The teacher is interested in teaching through drama. This is a mismatch in every way. Yet some of the elements are fixed, others can be accommodated. The course goals, in this case, are immovable – failure to perform in the test equals failure in the course. But the teacher can 'sell' their ideas to the students and work with what the textbook has to meet everyone's goals. Remember the interplay between these four elements (book, course, learner, teacher) and remember that the easiest to change is probably the book.

7 'It's too thin!'

If your textbook doesn't offer enough to fill a class, it may be that you are not exploiting the language to its fullest. Reading exercises can yield vocabulary and grammar work. Dialogues can be practised as dramas, drilled, adapted to gap fills, rewritten, dictated ... sometimes we move on too quickly without allowing the students time to get to grips with the language, especially if we teach the textbook as it is all the time.

8 'It's only a book!'

If you only use the textbook, you may be missing out on the supplements that come with it. These days, it seems that no series is complete without a CD-ROM, DVD, workbook, interactive website, test-making kit and complementary kitchen sink! It is quite easy to ignore these elements, but they can be excellent not only for classroom supplementation but for additional work outside class. Make sure you are familiar with the extras and advise students as necessary to help them work on their problem areas.

Beware, though – sometimes it is just not realistic to expect students to do everything offered with a set of course

materials, and don't let the book dictate the pace of your class. If you have to rush to get through it all, you have a problem. I find it better to choose a book with less material and to personalise it.


9 'I only have one student! I have 30 students!'

How will your student introduce a partner to another student when he is the only learner in the room? Won't it take forever to listen to 30 two-minute presentations, one by one ... and what do the other 29 students do while they are waiting for their turn? Using pair and group formations can solve the second problem, and creative alterations such as board games or card games can keep one-to-one classes fresh.

10 'It doesn't fit!'

Many textbooks these days are 'multi-syllabus'. That is, they are designed to teach *everything*, from grammar to vocabulary, across the four skills and including a variety of functions. If you want to focus on speaking, a reading or writing activity dropped into the middle of your textbook can interrupt the flow. In addition, you may find two or three distinct teaching points in one unit. Moving activities around, using the natural breaks in the class and managing your whole syllabus holistically (not just lesson by lesson) can all help. There is no harm in leaving an activity for later if it doesn't fit today.



Despite innovations in technology and methodology, the textbook still has life in it yet. Using a textbook needn't be a safe or lazy option, but should be one of a number of tools which we use to help our learners learn. I hope this article has given you a few ideas to help you do that. 

Harmer, J *How to Teach English*
Longman 2007

Grant, N *Making the Most of your Textbook*
Longman 1987



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