Coursebooks: Is there more than meets the eye?

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This article responds to Jordan and Gray's critique of the global coursebook and the call to have open, critical discussions about coursebook use in light of SLA research (Jordan and Gray 2019). I make a case for why the assumptions made about what constitutes a global coursebook are too narrow. I also dismiss the idea of one type of global coursebook and that the two coursebooks mentioned as examples of a typical global coursebook follow a wholly synthetic syllabus with an explicit instruction model. Most modern global coursebooks, I posit, have both synthetic and analytic characteristics. I point to research which gives evidence in support of the benefit of explicit instruction within the context of communicative language practice. In defence of publishers, I present an alternative viewpoint showing that major publishers do not simply publish coursebooks with little regard to educational research in pursuit of profit. I end by addressing the issue of why a coursebook—or course package—can be a valuable set of resources for teachers.

Introduction

In their article, Jordan and Gray make a number of arguments against coursebooks that warrant closer inspection. The first is their claim about what denotes a coursebook. Although they state that they are interested primarily in 'global coursebooks produced by [major publishers] for general English courses aimed at secondary and tertiary education students and adults' (Jordan and Gray 2019: 2), this narrow definition puts the entire premise on shaky ground. In the first instance, they fail to recognize the difference in the target users of coursebooks, whereas it is important to make a distinction between state schools that follow a national curriculum that has to be reflected in the choice of coursebook, and private language schools in which there may be more freedom for teachers to adapt the syllabus. The former category far outnumbers the latter. Secondly, global coursebooks produced by UK ELT publishers constitute only one type of the coursebooks published. Some global coursebooks are adapted for a region, but publishers work with teachers and institutions within regions to produce region-specific coursebooks, generally based on local ministry requirements. *Accelerate* (OUP), for example, is a course specifically for Brazil which has an emphasis on reading, as well as on the analytical and critical thinking skills needed for their specific context. In addition, local publishers actively compete with major publishers. In the Netherlands, for instance, the biggest

competitors of the global coursebook are local ones, and there are many countries in which major publishers hardly feature at all. Jordan and Gray's focus on 'contexts reached by UK ELT publishers' (ibid.: 3) fails to take into account the vast quantity of contexts, publications, and the differences between them.

Jordan and Gray criticize synthetic syllabi, which are primarily organized around language which is taught as discrete items and built up over time. A look at the content pages of many coursebooks does show units organized around a grammar point, though the contents pages will usually have a topic theme and a list of the objectives related to vocabulary, pronunciation, reading, writing, listening, speaking, and functions. A deeper look into the activities within the units often reveals an integrated skills approach and a focus on practising language in real-life contexts. However, all general English global coursebooks aimed at secondary and tertiary education students and adults are not the same, and a more robust look at a range of coursebooks is needed. Many coursebooks have moved to a more integrated skills and grammar-in-context approach alongside other approaches or aims: **task-based aim** (*Outcomes*—National Geographic Learning; *Cutting Edge*—Pearson), **focus on skills** (*Q-Skills*—OUP; *Skillful*—Macmillan), and inclusion of concepts such as **pragmatics** (*Wide Angle*—OUP), **critical thinking** (*Life*—National Geographic Learning), **focus on exam skills training** (*Solutions*—OUP), and **inquiry-based learning** (*Q-Skills*—OUP).

In reality, one would find it difficult to find a modern (global) coursebook that is wholly synthetic—the overriding problem that Jordan and Gray associate with coursebooks. Analytic syllabi are organized around the communicative purpose for language and so address situations, topics, tasks, school subjects, etc. Increasingly, learners recognize the need to be able to use language outside of the classroom and to have topics of interest to them, so the demand from learners, teachers, and institutions is high in this regard. Nor are modern coursebooks simply books. On the contrary, the book is only one part of today's course 'package' which generally includes a wide range of additional resources: video content, photocopiable activities, online components, teacher's guides (which include ideas for tasks, extensions, and projects), apps, dyslexia-friendly pages, workbooks, e-books, interactive presentation tools, web-based extra resources, etc. Modern coursebooks can be seen less as books and more as a set of resources that teachers can choose to use as-is or adapt, extend, or supplement. Most include topics that are 'googlable', i.e. authentically sourced so that students can find them online, but simplified for the level to ensure the comprehensible input needed for acquisition. Reading and listening texts may also contain 'enhanced input'—an implicit learning approach with the aim of increasing the 'saliency of the features so that they will be noticed by the learners while they are trying to comprehend' (Ellis 2015: 272). In fact, the modern coursebook 'package' provides just the 'bank of materials' that Jordan and Gray (2019: 9) hail as necessary.

Synthetic coursebook and contexts

Jordan and Gray criticize the synthetic syllabus of two popular coursebooks, *Headway* and *Outcomes*. Both *Headway* and *Outcomes* are open about their grammar-based, presentation–production–practice (PPP)

approach; however, Jordan and Gray present merely a cursory look at their unit structure, ignoring elements of each that encourage communication and support interlanguage development. For example, in *Headway 5e*, each unit opens with a discussion of a photo, and the teacher's guide gives additional ways to extend and personalize that discussion. In the reading section, there is an activity where students are asked to notice language forms—an inductive or 'weak interface' type of explicit instruction found to be effective (Ellis 2015: 244, 264). Grammar explanation is in a separate grammar reference section at the back of the book, so is less explicit than has been described. In unit 3 (p. 33) there is a research project where students are tasked with finding a news story of interest to them to bring into class for sharing and discussion. The unit—as do all the units—contains multiple opportunities for discussion and personalization. In unit 3 the story excerpt is followed by a 'what do you think?' discussion, and a 'go online' section where students find out about the *Titanic*. The unit concludes with a narrative writing task which involves comparing stories. In addition, there are multiple opportunities for speaking, listening, reading, and writing using the online platform. While the unit does have some grammar and vocabulary practice activities, it would be hard to justify the book follows a simple, explicit PPP approach of the sort Jordan and Gray claim, and their brief overview presents an inadequate analysis of the book's contents.

Equally, a look through a sample unit of *Outcomes* (Dellar and Walkley 2018) reveals a similar mix of synthetic and analytic exercises. The unit opener lists seven tasks which form the framework and aims for the unit: 'describe accidents and injuries, talk about law and regulations; discuss compensation culture, talk and think critically about texts, discuss the pros and cons of internet use' (ibid.: 141). It also starts with quite a long group discussion based on a photo of an extreme urban climber who lives in Ukraine.

Jordan and Gray's list of what is absent in the coursebook—looking at the learner's needs and the language needed to meet those needs, opportunities to engage in meaningful communication, inducing of language rules, scaffolding, feedback, and information about language (Jordan and Gray 2019: 8) are all elements of both *Headway* and *Outcomes*. So, whilst *Headway* and *Outcomes* may look to have a synthetic syllabus focused around grammar, in reality both are a blend with a wider range of explicit and implicit activity types than can be analysed within the scope of this paper.

Willis (2006) lists a set of questions that teachers can ask to assess an activity that involves real language use and is thus task-like:

a) Does the activity engage learners' interest?
b) Is there a primary focus on meaning?
c) Is there an outcome?
d) Is success judged in terms of outcome? Is completion a priority?
e) Does the activity relate to real world activities? (Willis and Willis 2006 in Willis 2006: n.p.)

Many of the activities in *Headway* and *Outcomes* could easily tick these boxes.

Synthetic syllabus and explicit instruction

Jordan and Gray criticize synthetic syllabi and explicit instruction for being out of sync with the way in which people learn language, though SLA research exists which indicates the effectiveness of explicit instruction and the PPP approach (see Lightbown and Spada 2006; Ellis, 2015). A synthetic syllabus breaks down language into parts, and explicit instruction, or intentional learning, is often associated with the approach. However, explicit instruction varies widely—from decontextualized presentation of language rules followed by practice activities, to more integrated and consciousness-raising approaches (Ellis 2015). Studies measuring the effectiveness of explicit instruction have shown that 'instruction that includes an explicit explanation of the target feature is, on the whole, more likely to be effective than instruction that does not—i.e. consists only of practice activities' (ibid.: 264).

Jordan and Gray are critical of the PPP approach in *Headway* and *Outcomes*, but they do not explain that the type of explicit language presentation in each is of the type that embeds explicit information in context and communicative practice activities. Instead, they make an assertion that 'coursebook-driven ELT emphasises explicit knowledge, and has the teacher spending most of classroom time talking about the language' (Jordan and Gray 2019: 5). They present no evidence for this claim, and it is questionable whether even a newly CELTA qualified teacher would teach in this way.

In *Headway*, students are asked more often than not to notice grammar rules in texts they have read or heard rather than having them presented out of context in a more traditional concept of explicit instruction. Although no SLA research is definitive, Ellis points to research suggesting that:

> Presentation–practice–production (PPP) instruction results in improved accuracy that is manifest not just in controlled language use but also in free production. Crucial to the effect of this kind of instruction is the presence of activities that cater for the use of the target features under real operating conditions– i.e. communicative language use. Instruction consisting of only a pattern practice is unlikely to lead to improved accuracy in free communication. (Ellis 2015: 264)

Implicit instruction, including task-based learning, has, of course, been shown to be effective, but only when there is also a focus on form (Ellis 2015). Definitions for task-based learning vary, though the most common conception of a task-based approach is a focus on authentic tasks one might do in the 'real world', Tomlinson (cited in Mackey, Ziegler, and Bryfonski 2016: 104) explains that a task-based learning task might also involve analysing a conversation or text to discover how or why certain features might be used. Underpinning the task-based approach is a shift in *focus* to communication rather than form, but without excluding attention to or discovery of form.

Both explicit and implicit instruction have been shown in the SLA literature to be effective (Lightbown and Spada 2006; Ellis 2015), and

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many popular modern global coursebooks have elements of both. Ellis states that there is no need to choose between implicit or explicit—both are needed for balanced L2 development (Ellis 2015: 288).

Jordan and Gray rightly argue that 'interlanguage development is dynamic and non-linear' (Jordan and Gray 2019: 5) and that what is taught is not necessarily what is learned. What is needed are ample opportunities to engage with spoken and written language as well as systematic recycling and revisiting language and topics. Modern coursebooks succeed in doing this. Grammar and vocabulary are revisited across levels, and revision, recycling, and extending are part and parcel of most major publisher course packages.

Commercial interests and educational concerns

Global coursebooks are an easy target for anti-coursebook critics. Jordan and Gray see attempts by publishers to align coursebooks with the CEFR as 'motivated by commercial interests' (Jordan and Gray 2019: 7) because it 'facilitates packaging' (ibid.). This is a superficial view of the use of the CEFR and does not take into account the research behind the Pearson's Global Scale of English. Nor do they take into account the fact that the use of CEFR descriptors is largely a reaction to requests from teachers and institutions themselves. Mayor, Seo, de Jong, and Buckland (2016: 3) point out that: 'In Japan, widespread dissatisfaction with the outcome of English learning in terms of practical communicative ability has led to the adoption of performance-oriented frameworks such as the CEFR for instruction and assessment.' Pearson Education recognizes the non-linear process of language learning and acknowledges that learning time estimates are created 'to help educators, institutions, and ministries set realistic and attainable learning goals as well as compare different programs' (Benigno, de Jong, and Van Moere 2017: 3).

While there is no doubt that publishers, like all businesses, aim to make a profit (with the exception of university-based publishers such as Cambridge and Oxford which are non-profit charities and use any surpluses to fund education and research within their respective universities and worldwide), it is a leap to suggest that their motivation is purely commercial. I would like to make three points here:

1 Publishers such as Cambridge University Press (CUP), Oxford University Press (OUP), and Pearson Education all have an education mission that underpins their publishing. This mission affects the way in which they develop a new course series: they work with subject-matter experts, authors, teachers, and institutions who all help to inform methodology and content. CUP and OUP both have expert panels of academics who advise and review coursebooks and publish position papers that help to inform the methodological decisions around coursebook design (Cambridge 2019; OUP 2019). Coursebook authors also contribute their expertise as current or former classroom practitioners. A final point is that many publishers also publish academic texts to support those studying to become teachers, and resource books to support teachers in the classroom. Coursebook publishing is only one part of what is published.

2 Publishers work closely with teachers and institutions to get feedback on and pilot course materials. A coursebook goes through a number of

testing and piloting stages prior to final draft. Nick Sheard, publisher at OUP, says that in the case of *Navigate* (OUP), 280 teachers in 18 different countries reviewed the course prior to publication (interview, 2018). Sheard reveals that 'the stakes are high, so we have to listen to teachers ... dialogue with teachers is critical' (ibid.). Publishers also study how effective their coursebooks are by carrying out research. *Oxford Impact* and *Pearson's Efficacy* studies are examples of publishers working with teachers to improve materials and ensure they are useful resources for learning (OUP 2018; Pearson 2013).

3 Publishers put an enormous amount of time, resources, and money into the creation of free teacher resources and professional development support. Macmillan's OnestopEnglish, the blogs and webinar programmes of National Geographic Learning and OUP (to name a few) are examples of how publishers provide free resources and a means for teachers to engage in professional development that they otherwise would not have access to. From personal experience as a teacher trainer working for a number of publishers, I know first-hand that publishers working within countries world-wide run training and professional development face-to-face and webinar events free of charge—events that do not necessarily have any link to a particular course promotion. It is unknown how much this free provision translates into profit for the publisher, but their existence provides further weight to the proposition that publishers are not simply 'profit-driven'.

The three 'alternative' approaches

Before addressing the three 'alternative' approaches Jordan and Gray (2019) discuss, I would like to consider the benefits they list in favour of coursebooks:

> Coursebooks offer order, security, purpose, direction, a beginning and an end, and a clear way through. They also save time; and in any modern teaching environment, time is money. (ibid.: 6–7)

It is important not to dismiss these concerns too quickly. Dodgson (2019), who admits to having a historical dislike for coursebooks, nonetheless lists reasons he thinks they are useful. Like others, he recognizes that coursebooks provide a structure and save time, and he also likes the fact that they are 'professionally produced and edited' with characters and stories that students find engaging. One thing he does not mention which is also of importance is the need for standardization across classes within an institution and school district—something that coursebooks can provide.

The reality for most English language teachers throughout the world is that they face a heavy workload with classes of 30 or more students five days a week. Saving teacher time is less about money and more about ability to plan lessons that adhere to the curriculum, mark student work, ensure students are prepared for exams, cater for students who are falling behind, and in some cases liaise with parents. While in some countries, teachers may not have access to a coursebook, for others, teaching without a coursebook would most likely lead to burn-out before the end of the year. It is no wonder that teacher well-being is a recurring topic of interest in blogs and teacher interest groups (see Mercer 2017).

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Jordan and Gray also question whether the need to adapt a coursebook negates its purpose. This shows a limited view of what a coursebook is, namely a bound set of resources teachers can use. Dodgson recognizes that the extra resources provided by a coursebook package—when well designed—are useful in their provision of extra support and challenge for students. He also recognizes that teachers can work around any limitations afforded by coursebooks (Dodgson 2019). Major publishers do not dictate how teachers should use the coursebook, and provide ideas for adaptation and extension in the teacher's guide that accompanies a course. No one would disagree that teachers should adapt a coursebook according to the needs and interests of their students, and this could include making activities more task-based. Willis (2006), in her IATEFL conference presentation summary, gives tips on how to 'tweak' a coursebook in order to produce a task-based lesson by reordering activities or adding a goal. She lists seven types of task-based teaching tasks of the type usually found in global coursebooks—listing, ordering and sorting, matching, comparing, problem solving, sharing personal experiences, projects, and creative tasks (Willis, 2006).

Jordan and Gray propose three alternative approaches which are not coursebook-based, but which they insist are more aligned to SLA principles. As I have shown, coursebooks can also be aligned to SLA principles, so the main difference in these approaches appears to be the fact that course content is negotiated between students and the teacher. In Breen's Process Syllabus, teachers have access to a 'bank of materials' and they consult with the students who 'participate in decision-making about course objectives, content, activities and assessment' (Jordan and Gray 2019: 9). Although this approach might work in some contexts, it would not in institutions where classes are large, where students have to pass exams, where the objectives are set (as is the case in Prep Year Programmes where the objective is to pass an exam to allow students to pass into a university programme). It is also worth noting that teachers can (and often do) consult with students or allow them to make decisions on content, activities, and in-class assessment, even if they are using a coursebook. Coursebooks do not dictate how a teacher will use them.

The idea of a 'bank of materials' also raises some serious questions. Who is in charge of developing the bank? What kinds of material does the bank consist of, and are the materials sourced without infringing copyright? Who assesses its quality and relevance? How will the bank ensure the consistent recycling of previously presented topics? And, importantly, how can the teacher ensure that it provides the regular, structured practice activities over time that—according to Jordan and Gray—are demanded by SLA research? In their critique, Jordan and Gray have not explained how a bank of materials could adequately replace or surpass a coursebook package.

The second alternative approach that Jordan and Gray list is Meddings and Thornbury's dogme approach. Dogme is highly dependent on a number of factors, not least class size and the teacher's ability to think on his or her feet. In some settings where materials are readily available, classes are small, and curricular aims permit, dogme could be a viable option.

However, for many teachers, dogme would not be feasible for reasons listed previously. Meddings and Thornbury (2009) themselves admit that modern coursebooks have positive attributes and include topics and texts which are motivational to learners. They suggest ways in which teachers can selectively use the resources to make lessons more student-centred.

The final approach in the list is Long's task-based language teaching (TBLT). This is a more interesting approach due to several key methodological principles: rich input provision, inductive 'chunk' learning, focus on form, promotion of cooperative and collaborative learning. These are principles many teachers follow whether or not they use a coursebook. Many modern coursebooks do promote cooperative and collaborative learning, aim to provide rich input, have an inductive or guided approach to grammar and vocabulary, and include elements of task-based learning, so it is unclear how Long's TBLT as described by Jordan and Gray is much different. Nor do they explain how the lead up to students carrying out a 'target task' in the L2 (Jordan and Gray 2019: 9) is any different from a coursebook approach.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the vast array of global coursebooks renders a lump comparison invalid; and likewise an assumption about the way they can or should be used. More importantly, a deeper look into the SLA principles and activity types which encourage discussion, guided discovery, personalization, critical thinking, communication (written and spoken), pragmatic competence building, emphasis on building the four skills, use of project work, etc., is needed before coursebooks are dismissed entirely. Practical issues of time, resource management, course structure, and local context must also be factored into any discussion about the suitability of coursebooks.

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