We need to talk about coursebooks

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General English coursebooks have dominated classroom-based ELT for 40 years. Their legitimacy seems unchallengeable; we can hardly remember a time when things were different, or imagine a time when coursebooks will not be used. And yet, coursebooks make assumptions about language learning that are contradicted by robust SLA research findings; they give teachers and students little say in decisions affecting course content and delivery; and they are influenced by commercial interests which some blame for the increasing commodification of education. This article reviews the case against coursebooks and briefly presents three alternative approaches to ELT. We argue that these alternatives have not been given the exposure they deserve in journals, conferences, and teacher training programmes, and that it is time to engage in more open, critical discussion about the strengths and weaknesses of the ubiquitous coursebook.

Introduction

Ten years ago, in a survey of current ELT practice, Akbari (2008) suggested that communicative language teaching (CLT) had been so completely replaced by coursebooks that CLT was now 'part of history'. Today, English coursebook series such as *Headway* (Soars and Soars 2012) and *Outlooks* (Dellar and Walkley 2015) with their grammar-based syllabuses and their presentation, practice, and production (PPP) methodology have established themselves so solidly as the paradigm for ELT that Akbari (2008: 647) concludes:

> It seems, then, that the concept of method has not been replaced by the concept of postmethod but rather by an era of textbook-defined practice. What the majority of teachers teach and how they teach (the things that are supposedly taken care of by methods) are now determined by textbooks.

Not everybody is happy with the ongoing domination of coursebooks in ELT. Thornbury (2013), a leading discontent, sees coursebooks as purveyors of 'mcnuggets', unappetizing, processed bits of language served up to passive students by deskilled teachers. Long (2015) is equally critical, arguing that coursebooks adopt an approach to ELT which makes impossible demands on learners and flies in the face of research findings in SLA. More radically, Copely (2018) argues that coursebooks exemplify the effects of neoliberalism and the commodification of education. In 1956, a UK Ministry of Education report first used the word 'commodity' to describe the 'valuable export' that English teaching had become

(Pennycook 1994, cited in Copely 2018: 60), and since then the industry has expanded so much that a report by Pearson (2016) puts the estimated annual turnover of the global ELT industry at a staggering US$194 billion. Copely argues that coursebooks spearhead a relentless drive towards packaging and marketing ELT in the interests of profit, to the detriment of educational principles.

In this article, we first delineate the type of coursebooks to which we are referring and the contexts in which they are used, and then examine the characteristics of a synthetic syllabus which provides the framework for such coursebooks. Next, we look at the nature of L2 learning, and at the development of interlanguages. This leads to our main argument, which is that the assumptions about L2 learning which underpin coursebooks are contradicted by robust findings from SLA research. Having examined the claim that commercial interests are more responsible for the coursebook approach to ELT than educational concerns, we then briefly outline three alternative approaches. Finally, we argue that these alternatives deserve more attention, and that more open discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of coursebook-driven ELT is urgently required.

Coursebooks

When we use the term 'courseboooks', we refer to global coursebooks produced by publishers such as Pearson, National Geographic, Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Delta, and Macmillan. These books are used in what are called 'General English courses'; they are aimed at secondary and tertiary education students and adults, and they are used by state and private schools, universities, and by private language academies, all over the world. Coursebooks of this type are produced in series that now follow the CEFR scale, so that *New Headway Beginner* takes the student through A1, *New Headway Elementary* then covers A2, and so on. The teachers are a mix of native and non-native speakers, with a wide range of qualifications and experience.

Coursebooks are divided into units, each unit consisting of a number of sections. For example, in *New Headway, Pre-Intermediate*, Unit 3, we see this progression:

1. Grammar (Past tense) leads into (→)
2. Reading Text (Travel) →
3. Listening (dialogue about travel) →
4. Reading (Travel) →
5. Grammar—(Past tense) →
6. Pronunciation →
7. Listening (based on Pron. activity) →
8. Discussing Grammar →
9. Speaking (A game & News items) →
10. Listening & Speaking (News) →
11. Dictation (from listening) →
12. Project (News story) →
13. Reading and Speaking (About the news) →
14. Vocabulary (Adverbs) →
15. Listening (Adverbs) →
16. Grammar (Word order) →
17. Everyday English (Time expressions).

And if we look at *Outcomes Intermediate*, Unit 2, we see this:

1. Vocab. (feelings) →
2. Grammar (*be, feel, look, seem, sound* + adj.) →
3. Listening (How do they feel?) →
4. Developing Conversations (Response expressions) →
5. Speaking (Talking about problems) →
6. Pronunciation (Rising &falling stress) →
7. Conversation Practice (Good / bad news) →
8. Speaking (Physical greetings) →
9. Reading (The man who hugged) →
10. Vocabulary (Adj. Collocations) →
11. Grammar (*ing* and *ed* adjs.) →
12. Speaking (based on reading text) →
13. Grammar (Present tenses) →
14. Listening (Shopping) →
15. Grammar (Present cont.) →
16. Developing conversations (Excuses) →
17. Speaking (Ideas of heaven and hell).

The activities follow a PPP approach, whereby some vocabulary and grammar are first presented, using written and spoken texts, grammar boxes, vocabulary lists, pictures, etc., after which students are led through a series of activities aimed at practising the material that has been presented. Practice activities involve further grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation work, and include drills, written exercises, listening and writing activities, problem-solving activities, discussions, role-plays, and games.

Although, in our opinion, these two examples fairly represent the coursebooks under discussion, we recognize that many coursebooks do not conform to this picture, and that there are some which fall outside the scope of this article—those used by teachers working in local schools where ministry-approved coursebooks are used, are one notable exception. The focus in this article is on contexts reached by UK ELT publishers. Despite these limitations, coursebooks of the type described here have been used during the last 25 years to teach English to hundreds of millions of people around the world (Pearson 2016), and we think it is fair to say, following Akbari (2008), that the methodology these coursebooks implement is the current model for ELT worldwide.

The synthetic syllabus

A 'synthetic' syllabus (Wilkins 1976, cited in Long 2015) treats language as an object of study. The language is broken down into small items of grammar, vocabulary, etc., and these items are presented one by one in a linear sequence to learners, whose job is to reassemble, or 'synthesize', these items into a coherent knowledge of the language. Coursebooks such as *Headway* and *Outcomes* follow this kind of syllabus; they divide English up into different kinds of items—grammar rules, words, collocations, sentence patterns, for example—so that they can be presented and practised in a predetermined sequence. Explicit instruction and explicit learning play the dominant role in this syllabus. Each item is carefully presented and the teacher ensures (through concept questions, for example) that students have understood the presented item. This

is followed by controlled practice, and only at the end of the process is some time devoted to 'production', where students might spontaneously, without conscious effort, produce the item being taught.

The basic problem with this approach is that it fails to appreciate that language learning is essentially implicit, and that L2 learners build up their knowledge by following their own mental developmental route through a series of interlocking linguistic systems called 'interlanguages'. We will now outline the L2 learning process.

L2 learning

Unlike learning other subjects in the curriculum such as geography or biology, there is a big difference in language learning between knowing about the language and knowing how to use it. For example, a student who knows that *had* is the past form of the verb *have* is often unable to use that knowledge in real time when participating in a conversation. This leads to a distinction being made between *declarative knowledge*—conscious knowledge about English—and *procedural knowledge*—unconscious knowledge of how to use English in communicative situations. A synthetic syllabus assumes that by starting out with the presentation of an item, and then practising it in various ways, declarative knowledge will be converted to procedural knowledge. But SLA research does not support this assumption. While there is some dispute among SLA scholars about the roles of these two types of knowledge, there is general consensus that implicit learning is more important than explicit knowledge. Long (2016: 16) cites a review by Whong, Gil, and Marsden (2014) which stresses that implicit learning is more basic and more important than explicit learning, and superior.

> This is because access to implicit knowledge is automatic and fast, and is what underlies listening comprehension, spontaneous speech, and fluency. It is the result of deeper processing and is more durable as a result, and it obviates the need for explicit knowledge, freeing up attentional resources for a speaker to focus on message content.

Thus, although coursebooks devote a lot of space to the explicit presentation and practice of discrete formal items of the target language, research strongly suggests that students learn faster and better if teachers spend the majority of classroom time giving students scaffolded opportunities to engage in communication activities with each other about matters of mutual interest, focusing on meaning.

Interlanguage development

Further doubts about the efficaciousness of coursebook-driven ELT arise from considering studies of interlanguages. Myles (2013, cited in Long 2015) states that findings on interlanguage development are widely accepted among SLA scholars. The research suggests that learning an L2 is a process whereby learners develop their own autonomous mental grammar with its own internal organizing principles. Development of individual structures is not categorical or linear; rather interlanguage development is dynamic, so that at any one time, lots of different parts of the mental grammar are being revised and refined. Learners pass through well-attested developmental sequences on their way to different end-state proficiency levels, slowly mastering the L2 in roughly the same way, regardless of the order or manner in which target-language structures are

presented by teachers. Although the process is predominantly a matter of implicit learning (learning through doing), teachers can speed up the rate of learning by briefly bringing adult learners' attention to formal aspects of the L2 during meaning-focused tasks (Long 2015).

Thus, people learn an L2 in a non-linear way, and, as Pienemann (1987) demonstrates, learnability (i.e. what learners can process at any one time), determines teachability (i.e. what can be taught at any one time). It follows that presenting grammatical constructions in the way coursebooks do contradicts research findings; coursebooks prise apart and then attempt to present grammatical constructions bit by bit, ignoring the fact that all the bits are inextricably interrelated. As Long (2015: 64) says:

> Producing English sentences with target-like negation, for example, requires control of word order, tense, and auxiliaries, in addition to knowing where the negator is placed. Learners cannot produce even simple utterances like 'John didn't buy the car' accurately without all of those. It is not surprising, therefore, that interlanguage development of individual structures has very rarely been found to be sudden, categorical, or linear, with learners achieving native-like ability with structures one at a time, while making no progress with others. Interlanguage development just does not work like that.

False assumptions made by coursebooks

To summarize, we may list four false assumptions made by coursebooks.

1. Explicit knowledge about the target language is the basis of language learning. In fact, it is not: implicit knowledge of how to use the language underpins the learning process.
2. Declarative knowledge converts to procedural knowledge. In fact, no such simple conversion occurs.
3. SLA is a process of mastering, one by one, an accumulated collection of 'items'. In fact, it is not: the items are inextricably interrelated, and interlanguage development is dynamic and non-linear.
4. Learners learn what they are taught when they are taught it. In fact, they do not: as Pienemann (1987) has demonstrated, teachability is constrained by learnability.

Coursebooks and the ELT industry

ELT is packaged through coursebooks, which greatly facilitate the marketing and delivery of classroom-based English courses by transforming the rather nebulous idea of a classroom-based course into an easily recognized, tangible product. 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. Pearson's Global Scale of English (GSE) framework shows how international companies are extending their range of products to cover all areas of ELT. Four distinct parts of the GSE make up 'an overall English learning ecosystem':

1. The scale itself—a granular scale of proficiency aligned to the CEFR. (The term 'granular' here refers to the level of detail provided about each step in the scale: the more 'granular', the more detail provided.)
2. Learning objectives—over 2,000 'can-do' statements across reading, writing, speaking, and listening.
3. Coursebooks aligned to learning objectives for each level.

4. Assessments—placement, formative/summative assessments, and high-stakes tests aligned to the GSE.

Copley (2018) sees Pearson's GSE as the reification of the language learning process: the abstract concepts of its 'granular descriptors' are converted into real entities, and it is then assumed that these entities represent language learning and communicative competence. We have some sympathy for this argument; when one examines the Pearson GSE, it is undoubtably the case that all the difficult-to-define-and-measure processes involved in language learning, and all the myriad kinds of knowledge and skills that make up communicative competence, have been flattened out, granularized, and turned into measurable entities. Since research suggests that learning an L2 is gradual, incremental, dynamic, uneven, exhibiting plateaus, U-shaped or zigzag trajectories, and having no fixed end point, it seems reasonable to suggest that the motivation for Pearson's version is that it facilitates packaging and marketing. More generally, the learning objectives of coursebooks portray learners moving unidimensionally along a line from A1 to C2 in the CEFR scale, making steady, linear progress along a list of can-do statements laid out in an easy-to-difficult sequence, leading to communicative competence. There is surely some justification for thinking that this idealized picture is motivated more by commercial interests than by a concern to accurately describe how people learn an L2.

In defence of coursebooks

Those who defend coursebooks say that teachers adapt, modify, and supplement coursebooks; that all the items are recycled and thus students get several bites at the same cherry; that the synthetic syllabus gives order, continuity, and direction to a language course; and that coursebooks are convenient.

As to the first point, we must ask to what extent teachers modify coursebooks. If they do so to a great extent, then the coursebook no longer serves as the syllabus, and the main point of using a coursebook disappears. If they only modify and supplement to a small extent, then the coursebook drives the course, learners are led through a predetermined series of steps, and the argument holds. However, we stress that what teachers actually do is *ameliorate* coursebooks; in dozens of different clever and inventive ways they make the best of them.

As to the second point, it is certainly true that recycling is a feature of coursebooks, and of course the same structures and vocabulary appear in successive coursebooks in the same series. However, the problems of the emphasis on explicit teaching, of cutting the language up into so many isolated bits, and of expecting students to somehow proceduralize the declarative knowledge that they are taught, remain.

Alternatives to coursebooks: the analytic syllabus

And regarding the final points, we do not contest them. But what is the point of an orderly, convenient, time-saving method if it expects students to learn English in a way that research findings suggest does not lead to communicative competence?

Instead of treating the language as an object that can be taken apart, presented in a sequence of items, and then reassembled by the learner, an analytic syllabus treats the language holistically and organizes the course

according to learners' needs and the kinds of language performance that are necessary to meet those needs. 'Analytic' refers not to what the syllabus designer does, but to what learners are invited to do. Grammar is not taught in the way it is in coursebooks; rather learners are provided with opportunities to engage in meaningful communication on the assumption that they will slowly analyse and induce language rules, by exposure to the language and by the teacher providing scaffolding, feedback, and information about the language as it is required.

Breen's process syllabus

Breen's (1987) distinction between 'product' and 'process' syllabuses contrasts the focus on prespecified linguistic objectives with a 'natural growth' approach that aims to expose learners to real-life communication without any preselection or arrangement of items. The syllabus is negotiated between learners and teacher as joint decision-makers, and emphasizes the process of learning rather than the subject matter. No coursebook is used. The teacher has access to a bank of materials and implements the evolving syllabus in consultation with the students, who participate in decision-making about course objectives, content, activities, and assessment.

Dogme

Meddings and Thornbury's (2009) dogme approach to ELT was born from frustration at 'materials-driven lessons' and from a belief that teaching should centre on the local and relevant concerns of 'the people in the room'. Nothing, they insist, should interfere with the free flow of learner-driven input, output, and feedback. They recommend an emergent syllabus of lexis, constructions, and genres, which evolves as a negotiated response to the learners' developing needs and abilities. The teacher motivates and scaffolds interactions between learners, providing instruction at the point of need, using materials contributed or accessed principally by the learners themselves.

Long's TBLT

Long's (2015) version of task-based language learning (TBLT) starts from the premise that ELT should be based on practical hands-on experience with real-world tasks. A needs analysis identifies the 'target tasks' that learners will actually have to carry out in the L2, and pedagogic tasks are derived from them. Pedagogic tasks build learners' ability to perform the target tasks, often culminating in a full simulation of the target task. Materials are selected on the principle of 'input elaboration'—improving the comprehensibility of relevant spoken or written texts by adding redundancy and regularity—and the syllabus consists of a sequence of pedagogic tasks implemented according to 10 'methodological principles' and locally defined 'pedagogic procedures'. Key methodological principles include providing rich input, encouraging inductive 'chunk' learning, focus on form, respecting learner syllabi and developmental processes, and promoting cooperative, collaborative learning.

It is important to note that each of these three quickly sketched alternative approaches to ELT acknowledges the importance of explicit teaching to help learners notice, understand, and internalize formal aspects of the language. The difference is that they emphasize 'students talking in the language' rather than 'teachers talking about the language', and that they deal with questions of grammar, pronunciation, lexis, collocation, etc., not

in a predetermined order, but as the need arises. Furthermore, they all reject coursebooks on the same grounds; namely, that they

- fail to respect learners' interlanguage development
- fail to provide the rich input learners need
- fail to involve the learners in decisions affecting what and how they learn
- fail to give learners enough opportunities to engage in meaningful communication
- adopt a sentence-level approach to language that places too little emphasis on discourse
- are full of cultural biases.

In contrast, the alternative approaches treat the language holistically, emphasize implicit learning, and embrace the principles of interactivity (teachers and students together build the course they participate in), of a proactive approach to content (students engage in the creation and discussion of content), of the construction of knowledge (learning is social and dialogic, knowledge is co-constructed), and of learner-centred education.

Conclusion

Coursebooks oblige teachers to work within a framework where students are presented with, and then asked to practice, dislocated items of language in a predetermined sequence. Teachers have little say in the syllabus, and students have even less say in what and how they are taught. Furthermore, we argue that much of the time that teachers devote to talking about the language could be better spent on giving the students themselves opportunities to talking in the language. Finally, although reliable data is hard to find, we hypothesize that, given our criticisms, and those of Tomlinson and Masuhara (2013) and Thornbury (2013), a significant number of students who enrol in General English courses where coursebooks are used do not reach the level of proficiency that they were led to expect. We urge more studies to be done to test this hypothesis.

Despite its manifold problems, coursebook-driven ELT continues to dominate, and the three alternatives outlined above seem to be starved of the oxygen they need in order to become serious rivals. It is rare to see any of the alternatives discussed in journals, or at conferences, or in teacher training courses such as CELTA; and on the few occasions when they are publicly discussed, they are usually described as 'utopian', 'unrealistic', and 'over-demanding', rejected on the grounds that they are unable to offer anything like the convenience and face value of the coursebook. This, we suggest, is unfair, when you look at their records.

Breen's Process Syllabus has had considerable success, as the collection of reports in his book (Breen 2000) make clear. Meddings and Thornbury (2009) have refined their original proposal and they report on many examples of their approach being successfully implemented. Perhaps most persuasively, a recent meta-analysis by Bryfonski and McKay (2017) of TBLT implementation reports high levels of success and stakeholder satisfaction. The authors discuss studies of TBLT programmes carried out in real classroom settings, including parts of the Middle East and East

Asia, where sceptics claim it could never work for 'cultural' reasons, and also in primary and secondary foreign language settings, where sceptics dismissed TBLT as unworkable. Over 60 studies were analysed, and the results found a positive and strong effect for TBLT implementation across a wide variety of learning outcomes, and positive stakeholder perceptions towards a variety of TBLT programmes.

We need to talk more openly and critically about the efficacy of coursebook-driven ELT, and about alternative approaches that respect SLA research findings and embrace the principles of learner-centeredness, learning by doing, and scaffolding learners' development towards communicative competence. The future of real language learning, and hence perhaps ELT itself, may be at stake.

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