POINT AND COUNTERPOINT

A response to Hughes

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Hughes's committed defence of coursebooks seems to consist of a number of rather disjointed points. Rather than attempt to sort them out and deal with them systematically, I will deal quickly with a few introductory points and then concentrate on the main issue: the efficacy of General English coursebooks.

Hughes begins with the claim that our narrow definition of General English coursebooks 'puts the entire premise on shaky ground'. In fact, we made the careful delineation of a 'General English coursebook' precisely to put our argument on firm ground. Locally produced coursebooks, ESP books, EAP books (e.g. *Q-Skills*), exam preparation books, any coursebooks that do not fit our careful description are deliberately excluded. What is left is the type of coursebooks we described, which Tomlinson and Masuhara (2013) review, and which have dominated ELT practice for more than 30 years.

I fail to see the point of Hughes's claim that these books when used by public schools are more strictly adhered to than when used in private schools. Either way, the coursebook provides the syllabus—unless it is treated as no more than a materials bank. Likewise, that coursebooks today come with lots of additional resources does not change the fact that teachers work through the main Student's Book; and if teachers work through it systematically, our argument holds.

To the issue, then. Hughes claims that coursebooks do not follow a wholly synthetic syllabus: they contain 'a blend of elements from synthetic and analytic syllabuses', with 'a wide range of explicit and implicit activity types'. Although it is a matter of fact that coursebooks contain a wide variety of activities, and that these can be seen as elements of analytic syllabuses, I do not think this affects our main argument, which is that by presenting and then practising a great number of items of the L2, coursebooks oblige teachers to spend too much time talking about English, leaving too little time for students to engage in communicative tasks in English. Of course coursebooks offer some opportunities for students to focus on meaningful use of the language, but our argument is that there are not enough opportunities, and that the language use which results is often not communicative or meaningful—replies to 'display

questions' being the most frequent source of student speaking practice (Nunan 1999).

Coursebooks adhere to Caroll's (1966: 96) view that L2 learning starts with explicit knowledge:

> Once the student has a proper degree of cognitive control over the structure of a language, facility will develop automatically with the use of the language in meaningful situations.

This contrasts with the modern view, supported now by strong evidence referred to in our original paper, eloquently expressed by Hatch (1978: 404):

> Language learning evolves out of learning how to carry on conversations. One learns how to do conversation, one learns how to interact verbally, and out of this interaction syntactic structures are developed.

General English coursebooks of the type we discuss put the cart before the horse. We argue, following Hatch, that it is more efficacious to take a holistic approach to the target language and to concentrate on engaging in relevant communicative tasks. We stress that the key question concerns efficacy. We do not dismiss coursebooks as 'useless' or 'bad'; we do not 'blame' teachers for using them; we accept Hughes's point (not that we ever disputed it) that coursebooks are not concerned exclusively with grammar or with explicit teaching. We limit ourselves to the claim that the set of coursebooks to which we refer make false assumptions about L2 learning, with the result that students often do not learn what they are taught, and do not achieve communicative competence as quickly as they would if their teacher used an analytic syllabus where most of classroom time is devoted to activities focusing on meaningful use of the language, and where explicit (grammar) teaching is limited.

Hughes misrepresents our case when she says that we are against explicit instruction; in fact we stress that it plays a vital role in ELT. But we follow Long (1991, 2015) in recommending 'focus on form' (drawing learners' attention to formal elements of the language during a communicative activity), not 'focus on forms' (teaching a predetermined list of discrete linguistic structures in a predetermined sequence). Articles by Doughty (2003) and Goo et al. (2015) point out that the goal of discreet 'focus on form' is for learners to develop communicative competence, and therefore it is important to test communicative competence to determine the effects of the treatment. Consequently, explicit tests of grammar do not provide the best measures of implicit and proceduralized L2 knowledge. Furthermore, the post tests done in the studies reviewed in Norris and Ortega (2000) were not only grammar tests, they were grammar tests done shortly after the instruction, giving no indication of the lasting effects of this instruction. Newer, post-2015 meta-analyses have used much better criteria for selecting and evaluating studies. The meta-analysis carried out by Kang, Sok, and Han (2018: 45) concluded that:

> [I]mplicit instruction ($g = 1.76$) appeared to have a significantly longer lasting impact on learning … than explicit instruction ($g = 0.77$). This

finding, consistent with Goo et al. (2015), was a major reversal of that of Norris and Ortega (2000).

Finally, I agree with Hughes that Long's TBLT is the best of the three options we mention, and apologize if it is 'unclear' from our brief summary how it differs from coursebooks. I urge everybody to read Long's (2015) book, where the differences between his very particular version of TBLT, and the coursebooks we have discussed, are described and explained with exemplary clarity.

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