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■ Andrew Boon ■ Anna Hasper ■ Alison Shepherd ■ George Murdoch

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Of course we want coursebooks

Robert McLarty shares some opinions he has gathered on the benefits and drawbacks of these teaching resources.

When I was first teaching English, coursebooks were the norm. Your students bought the book, there was only a Student's Book in those days, and you systematically worked your way through it at about three hours per unit. If you were teaching on intensive courses in the UK, this would be around a unit a day. Abroad it would be around one unit a week. You could supplement it with other materials which were more personalised or up-to-date or indeed relevant, but that was up to you.

A few years later, when I was running in-company courses in Paris, there was suddenly a whole range of new coursebooks around, including the *Cambridge English Course*, *Meanings Into Words* and, of course, *Headway*. They were written with the kind of teacher who had done a TEFL course in mind. There was Presentation, Practice and Further Practice. There were interesting short texts with the language point neatly embedded and there were good listenings where you looked at some vocabulary first, predicted some content and then listened intensively and extensively. I remember when our teachers started to question the content and its relevance to our learners who were all adults and learning English for a variety of reasons including to get a job, to keep a job, to help their children with homework, to revise what they had studied at school and so on. Suddenly the coursebooks were not quite so relevant.

At that point, like many other schools, we opted for designing our own courses, putting materials together from various sources to suit the needs

Question 1 What do you see as the main benefits of using a coursebook?

It means you can plan more easily and teach systematically. Students like to look at the lesson afterwards as well.

Clearly defined framework for both teacher and learner. Progress can be measured and is consistent. A ready-made variety of interesting materials and activities covering all skills.

Generally they provide good quality, authentic-ish material to use. They are usually well structured and there is a logical progression. In-house prepared material can be hit and miss in terms of quality and most centres underestimate the difficulty of creating their own material.

Graded language, generally well-designed question types, can have interesting topics, pictures, etc. for exploiting.

Usually a coherent and logical teaching and learning sequence.

The students like to have a book they can use for pre-learning and for independent learning. If the textbook is appropriate, this can form the core of the lessons and supplementary material can be added by the teacher according to the students' needs.

Convenience. Preparation-free. Trusted and interesting material in some cases.

Provides structure, resources and ideas.

It provides a structured syllabus that ensures that students at each level will cover all the grammar and vocabulary necessary. The coursebook is the spine of the course, doing a lot of the heavy lifting, freeing up time so that teachers can spend their time to produce creative lessons alongside it. It also allows for easy revision of the course. Students don't have to sort through piles of photocopies to find the target language that they are trying to revise.

of our learners. This was fine, but it was time-consuming and lacking in the professional finish which published materials had. It also meant excessive amounts of photocopying and lots of one-off lessons which did not always appear that coherent. Since then, I have worked in schools which use coursebooks and those which don't. I have also helped to write coursebooks and published them so I have seen the story from all sides. Currently, I am teaching in an institute where the

courses are 18 weeks long and offer 600 hours of learning per semester. To do that without core texts would take an inordinate amount of time and make it hard to ensure that all learners had the same programme at a particular level, irrespective of their teacher.

When I talk to teachers, they are often critical of the coursebook.

The texts are outdated, boring, inauthentic, irrelevant and so on.



Audiofiles are too stilted and not lifelike enough.

The language points are not covered in the right order or are too difficult/easy.

*The book takes too long to finish or it doesn't include my favourite way of teaching **much** and **many**.*

The pronunciation sections are not useful for students from country X where I teach.

There are too many components so we can never do it all.

They are too expensive!

The publishers are always bringing out new editions which barely change, but we have to buy new copies.

I only teach what my students need, so I never use published materials.

So what has caused this love-hate relationship with coursebooks? I asked 20 teachers I know to answer four questions and the results make interesting reading. They share many of the feelings outlined above, but in the end, the general trend is towards using a coursebook if possible.

My summary of the responses to Question 1 is that the coursebook has become, to all intents and purposes, the syllabus for many institutions. It can still be tweaked and personalised to suit specific learning needs and outcomes, but the publisher will have done the research, will have ensured continuity over at least four or five levels and built in some graded vocabulary progression. Most of our learners do not study with us from beginner to advanced, they do a stage somewhere between those levels, so it is important for them that they are offered an appropriate syllabus for their current level. A coursebook provides this. It also ensures that we teach what is needed not just what we enjoy teaching, no matter how good the feedback might be for certain of our favourite lessons. One teacher talks about the coursebook being the spine of the course with supplementary materials and lessons branching off from it where and when necessary. There is also a famous analogy of the coursebook being the classic pizza with tomato and cheese. On top of that we can add other ingredients to cover ESP, EAP, Remedial Grammar,

Question 1 Continued

Allows students and less experienced teachers to have clear structure for their course; introduces interesting up-to-date themes that can be explored further with non-coursebook material.

Practical: it speeds up the process of putting together the week's lessons. It also means the teacher does not have to think as much (not really a benefit at all).

Ready-made resources.

Low preparation work / structure / according to the curriculum / overthought.

Texts and activities readily available and produced at a high standard.

It serves as a guideline for the overarching syllabus for many courses. Probably perceived as a hidden syllabus. It provides teachers with great ideas and can reduce workload. They can be especially useful to teachers who are new to the profession and they can assist more experienced teachers through periods of change. They provide suitable content for a range of student levels and they make it easier for teachers to choose a suitable coursebook to match the broader language needs of their students, at an appropriate designated level.

I feel I can be confident in the quality of the materials, which were prepared by people with expertise in material development.

Provision of a structured lexical and grammatical syllabus; a wealth of accessible associated resources.

Professional looking / well researched / trialled / safe.

A massive reduction in preparation time (compared to developing or compiling your own resources); hopefully a well-balanced mix of skills content; tried and tested activities.

A lot less time spent preparing your own materials. The quality of the contents – they've been edited by professionals and trialled under controlled conditions. The variety of the contents – good authors spend a long time looking for interesting and unusual contents. The carefully prepared and balanced syllabus – without this we tend to do what we like best as teachers, rather than covering everything our learners need.

Provides a ready-made skeleton syllabus in a logical order. I think this is particularly useful at lower levels. Handy to use as the basis for building a coherent more personalised syllabus. Easy to pick up and work from if you have to cover a teacher or if you are teaching several different courses in the same semester. When students buy a book and cover most of it, they have a feeling of continuity and completion and can keep their book afterwards with annotations to take on to further study.

Question 2 What are the drawbacks?

I find some of the texts are too short.
Topics may not be relevant to learner needs. Too rigid a framework.
No coursebook fits exactly the needs of a cohort. Outside General English this is particularly true. EAL materials often, in our case, don't meet our specific cohort needs. Books also become out-dated very quickly.
Not enough texts, outmoded or uniform ways of looking at / teaching language, especially listening and grammar.
Lack of fit to learning outcomes, dictating what is taught and learned (rather than meeting learner needs). Typically, reading and writing is not as well covered as oral skills.
If the textbook is not level appropriate, it can cause learning problems for the students (either boredom or stress depending whether the level is too low or too high).
Can get repetitive.
Price and the expectation it can generate for teachers to follow it when the students or parents buy it.
Topic fatigue: students don't want to spend lesson after lesson on the same subject, especially if they aren't interested in a particular subject.
Grammar and functional input often repetitive and predictable.
You are stuck to the book's curriculum. Students often expect you to stick to it, when you would rather move away from it.
Prescriptive grammar points, often over-simplified explanations.
No link with news topics / no creativity if you stick to it.
Topics may not suit your students' needs, context or situation.
Coursebooks can be quite inflexible and they reflect the preferences of the writers, without necessarily taking current proven research into account. They often dictate what teachers do and the coursebook becomes the curriculum; in addition, by allowing coursebooks to dictate the material covered in class, teachers may not be taking their student cohort's needs into consideration.
Some activities are not closely related to what is assessed in our teaching context and materials about other parts of the world can cause difficulty for lower-level students who work better with topics/contents they are familiar with.
Often dated, culturally limited, uninspiring.
Dull / hard to personalise / dated / not relevant to students' lives.
If students buy the book, I feel obliged to use as much of it as possible, even when the activities are irrelevant to our purposes or the cultural content is a poor fit.
Not all of the topics are of interest to your students. Many of the topics are bland or over-used because of the need publishers have to satisfy local market cultural or religious restrictions. Following coursebooks can generate a sensation of routine that is demotivating for some students and teachers. The teacher's own personality can be 'squeezed out' of the classroom. They're not cheap.
Not all teachers are experienced enough to lift the lesson off the page and use the material as a starting point. If teachers follow a book religiously rather than being selective, it can get quite tedious and lack creativity. Many of the books we use are American or Euro-centric which is not always applicable if you live elsewhere. The teacher needs to personalise material to make it more relevant to the context of the students in front of them. Another problem occurs when students buy hand-me-down books from a previous group, which often contain all the answers, so they don't see the need to pay attention in class.

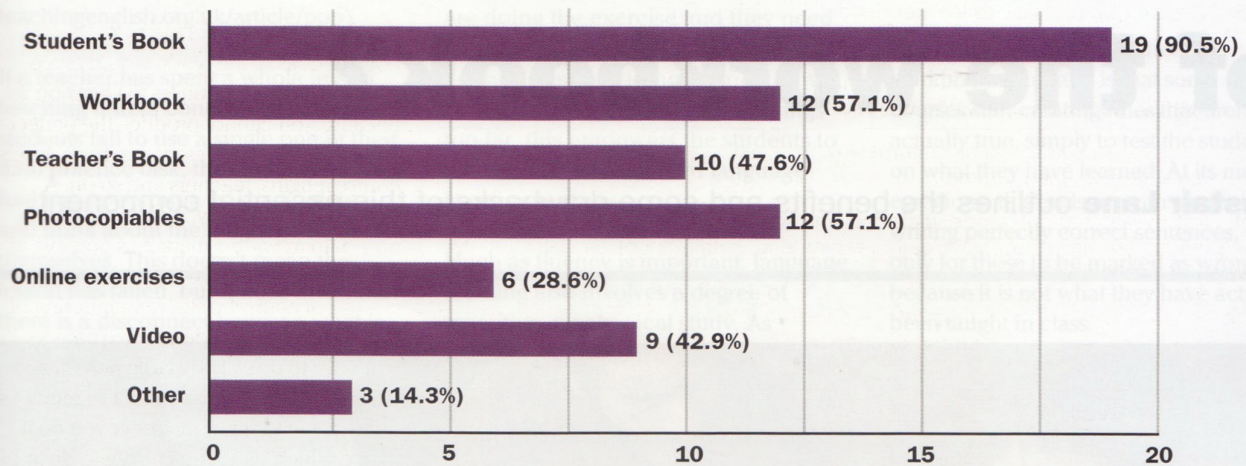
etc. I am sure your views of coursebooks will be found in some of the statements and your doubts might well be reflected below in the next question.

Even the publishers of the best coursebooks in the world would agree with a lot of the responses to Question 2 because you cannot produce the perfect fit for all ages, cultures, generations, levels, course lengths, teachers and so on. A coursebook can only, by its very nature, appeal to as wide a market as possible at a given time. We have to be creative in our use of coursebooks, remembering of course that if the students have paid for it, you have to use a fairly large percentage of it. Of course, you can adapt as much as you want in terms of the order you do it in and which parts you choose to do in or out of class. You can add your own tasks to reading and listening texts and find your own way of presenting new grammar and vocabulary.

I suggested earlier that years ago there were only two components, the Student's Book and the Teacher's Book complete with guidance, additional activities and answers. These days there might well be seven or eight components and this was the aim of my third question.

Clearly the leader of the pack is the Student's Book, but it is interesting to note how important the Teacher's Book is, particularly when it contains photocopiables, those instant lessons which help us revise the main language points from the coursebook. Many of them are available online these days, so don't worry if you can't always get a copy of the TB because a colleague has *borrowed* it. Video is also popular, either as a drama series or mini documentaries, but the jury is still out on the usefulness of online activities. This might be explained by the fact that in many institutions there is already a preferred language learning platform such as Blackboard or Moodle and students cannot be tracked unless their activities are being done on that platform. By asking them to go to a separate platform or website you can no longer track them, which is of little interest to other than highly motivated learners.

Question 3 Which of the following components do you regularly use?



Question 4 When you don't use a coursebook, where do you get most of your materials from?

- Newspaper, internet, supplementary materials in staff room.
- We create them ourselves, devoting a huge amount of resources to doing so.
- Make them myself, adapt from online video such as TED or YouTube.
- I often adapt materials from online sources (videos, news articles, images).
- I make them or find them online.
- BBC website.
- YouTube, TED (including TED-Ed and Ideas.ted).
- I make them – often adapted from online resources.
- Authentic materials online.
- Websites like BusyTeacher.
- I frequently design my own materials or use photocopiable resources, such as the excellent ETpedia range of resources.
- Other coursebooks or resource books containing contents suitable for the level(s) I am teaching.
- Own material generated from news, journals, etc.
- Teacher resource books and photocopiables.
- The internet or newspapers and magazines, although increasingly these are online. I also use literature – poems and songs, mainly, but sometimes short stories or excerpts from a longer piece.
- I mainly write supplementary material myself. Sometimes I will get these from other teachers and occasionally from internet sources.

adapting them for their classes, and long may this continue. A coursebook's content is planned probably two years before publication, so the chances of having up-to-the-minute topics are low. There will, on the other hand, be what my very first editor called *intrinsically interesting* texts. These you will find in most successful coursebooks.

I would just like to end by thanking the 20 contacts who contributed to this article. You know who you are and thanks for finding the time. Enjoy your next coursebook, but make sure you find ways to teach it in your own way with *your* personality showing through.



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So it looks to me as though coursebooks have evolved into a fairly key part of most English language learning programmes, except for the very short or totally personalised ones. My last question is an important

one because we must never end up teaching *only* from the coursebook.

Again, there is a certain amount of overlap, but teachers are still going online, finding resources, videos and texts and