Applying Language Learning Principles to Coursebooks

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Abstract For many teachers the course book is the curriculum. Furthermore, because of contextual constraints such as those imposed by an external examination, the course book becomes an unexamined curriculum. Yet in such circumstances the learning outcomes may not be optimal because teachers are not applying principles; principles, in this sense, refer to research and theory about best practice in language teaching and learning. This chapter explores this issue, beginning with an examination of classroom practices in relation to course books, followed by a brief examination of the relationship between course book publication and research-based principles. It then examines and exemplifies principles teachers can apply to ensure that their classroom practice is better informed by research and theory than it would be if they relied on the course book alone. The focus will be on key principles that the survey of course books suggests appear to be absent from this conveniently ready-made but too often unexamined curriculum.

Keywords Course books • Principles • Fluency • Interference • Frequency • The four strands • Curriculum

1 Introduction

The situations in which English is taught across the globe are many and varied. Given this reality, it would be unwise to generalise about the English language classroom. Rather, it might be useful to consider the English language classroom – and the experiences of teachers and learners – as ranging along a continuum. At one end the situation is that of freedom and choice. Only when the teachers and learners meet for the first time do decisions begin to be made about the goal of the course, the materials to be used, the way in which learning will happen, and how learning will be assessed. This is the world of the negotiated syllabus (Clarke 1991) and may perhaps be most commonly found in the private sector (as exemplified by Boon

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2011). At the other extreme is the situation where teachers and learners are working with a set course or textbook towards tests or examinations closely tied to a national curriculum. There is no need to make decisions about the course goals, the materials, the way in which learning will happen, and so on. These decisions have already been made. The coursebook is accepted as the curriculum, and remains largely unexamined.

To some extent, the continuum imagined in the preceding paragraph is a theoretical one, for there is not a great deal of information in the literature about how teachers actually use textbooks in the language classroom. Indeed, as has recently been pointed out, "textbook consumption studies are sorely lacking in the ELT literature at present" (Grammatosi and Harwood 2014, p. 200). This may be a reflection of limited time and funding being available for research in ELT, and priorities being given to other areas of investigation (Harwood 2014).

One such study, however, examines teaching in a middle school classroom in Korea. This is a situation where the national curriculum is the prime determiner of what occurs in the classroom; the teacher is positioned "at the terminal end of the curriculum chain" (Parent 2011, p. 186). While there is some scope for teacher-created activities, this only occurs in the advanced class where the students progress more quickly through the prescribed material than those in the lower-level classes. The teachers, in this study, may be characterised as 'curriculum-transmitters' (Shawer 2010). There is no attempt to suit the materials to the learners. One example is that, despite the homogeneity of the student population, they follow the unit on introducing themselves; this, Parent suggests, "is seen to send a message to the learners that what they are to learn are theoretical constructs" (2011, p. 193). The constructs have no immediate use; they have no meaning focus for the students, in the sense that the students have no need to know or use them. This seems reminiscent of the situation described by Connelly and Clandinin (1988) of teachers lacking agency in the classroom, of being passive transmitters of the curriculum.

Curriculum-transmitter is not, however, the only role proposed by Shawer (2010). His two other roles are those of curriculum-developer and curriculum-maker, both of which Menkabu and Harwood (2014) identify in their seven teachers working in an EAP context at a Saudi Arabian university. Here, there was evidence of teachers making decisions based on their knowledge of the students, such as engaging with culturally inappropriate material (or occasionally deleting it). Menkabu and Harwood recognise, however, that their teachers were rather conservative in the adaptations they made and in the occasional additions of external material (ibid. 2014, p. 166). By contrast, unquestionably a curriculum-maker is the teacher in another case study (Grammatosi and Harwood 2014), who rejected the coursebook as he did not like it. He appeared to be constructing his teaching around source materials rather than course materials, an approach favoured by Prabhu (1989), the architect of the influential Bangalore project (Prabhu 1987).

A characteristic shared by the teachers in Parent's and Menkabu and Harwood's case studies is that they worked in situations where teaching was driven by high-stakes examinations. The Korean middle school students needed to enter high school; the Saudi Arabian university students were preparing for nursing careers.

For the teachers in these studies, the coursebook became the curriculum. And, even though he disliked the required text, the curriculum-maker in Grammatosi and Harwood's study still found that "the book's syllabus (table of contents) made it 'easier to plan […] and link my lessons'," (Grammatosi and Harwood 2014, p. 194). In varying degrees, then, the coursebook plays an important role in determining what happens in the classroom.

2 Course Book Publication

In an examination of the extent to which corpus data inform coursebook writing, Burton (2012) compared the stance of applied linguists and publishers and made the following somewhat depressing observation: "The only incentive for real change is demand from the market" (Burton 2012, p. 97). Market feedback is, for example, credited with a reduction of inferential comprehension questions and an increase in explicit questions in the revision of one coursebook series; these changes were made because the earlier edition was judged "a bit difficult" (Freeman 2014, p. 101) and so was seen as less attractive to potential purchasers. While no-one could blame publishers for paying attention to commercial imperatives, for the publishing industry is unlikely to benefit from a spate of bankruptcies, one could ask about the extent to which coursebooks are informed by research about effective language learning.

3 Teachers and Coursebooks

Teachers have a limited range of options when facing issues with using a coursebook. Issues may not lie in the coursebook itself, but may arise from environmental factors, such as the time available for teaching. (Another environmental factor, the learners themselves, is considered in the chapter "Current Issues in the Development of Materials for Learners of English as an International Language (EIL)" of this volume). But, whatever the cause of the issues, the options remain the same; whether considering the content or the methods teachers have the option to adapt, to replace, to omit, to add, or simply to use as is (Grant 1987, pp. 16–17). The extent to which teachers do make changes can be surprising; for instance, in a study in a Vietnamese high school, of 64 oral textbook tasks across Grades 10–12, teachers adapted 12 and replaced 43 (Nguyen et al. forthcoming). In other words, only nine were used as is.

In the case studies mentioned earlier, the teachers also demonstrated their facility with exercising choice among these options. For example, the teachers in Saudi Arabia tended to delete speaking and writing activities, because they were not skills that were examined. The middle school teachers in Korea added their own activities to the advanced class. These included songs, games, and the introduction of additional vocabulary as a means of maintaining student interest. A similar impetus for change was demonstrated by the teachers in the Vietnamese high school; they were

attending to the socio-affective dimension of the classroom in the changes they were introducing. They wanted, in their own words, to replace tasks they viewed as 'dry' or 'boring' with others that might be 'fun' or 'interesting'.

In making these decisions, it does seem that the teachers were making pragmatic choices rather than principled ones. They were, it seems, primarily responding to factors that, in curriculum design terms (Nation and Macalister 2010), emerged from an environment analysis of their learning and teaching context. Environment and needs analyses should not, however, be the sole determiner of decisions teachers make. Principles should not be overlooked as a lens for examining the unexamined curriculum. The remainder of this chapter, then, considers ways in which teachers can apply principles in order to achieve optimal language learning outcomes for their students.

4 Principles

Principles, in this sense, refer to research and theory about best practices in language teaching and learning. Specific sets of principles have been proposed for different aspects of language learning, with well-known examples being those suggested by Day and Bamford (2002) for extensive reading, by Ellis (2005) for instructed second language acquisition, and by Cotterall (2000) for promoting learner autonomy. Less well known examples of specific sets of principles are those for blended learning (Liu 2011) and for the use of video games in the classroom (Gee n.d.). While seemingly diverse, it is often worth looking at the commonality behind different sets of principles for they often draw on the same general research. For example, the importance of input is a feature of different sets of principles no matter what the explicit focus of the principles. Input is achieved via listening and reading, and Cotterall (2000, p. 111) proposes that "Course tasks are explicitly linked to a simplified model of the language learning process", of which input forms a core component. Day and Bamford (2002, p. 138) advise that "learners read as much as possible" – that they receive a large amount of comprehensible input – and Ellis (2005, p. 217) is clear that "Successful instructed language learning requires extensive L2 input." While extensive reading and instructed second language acquisition may not seem, at first glance, to share many common features, at least some of the principles that should be applied in order to achieve successful outcomes are the same.

A more general set of principles has been suggested by Nation and Macalister (2010), whose model of language curriculum design makes it clear that principles should play an important role in informing what occurs in the classroom. They propose 20 principles and these relate to all aspects of classroom decision-making – that is, decisions about content and sequencing, about format and presentation, and about monitoring and assessment. There is a great deal of commonality between this list and those more specific lists mentioned above; to illustrate this commonality, and returning to the input example given in the preceding paragraph, Nation and

Macalister (2010, p. 52) have a principle relating to comprehensible input – "There should be substantial quantities of interesting comprehensible receptive activity in both listening and reading" – which fits very closely with the extensive reading and instructed second language acquisition examples given earlier. The key difference between this more general set of principles and the more specific lists is that these 20 principles are intended to be generally applicable. While it is not the case that all principles will receive equal attention in every course, the remainder of this chapter will focus on four key principles that experience suggests appear to be absent from many course books and thus, especially for teachers for whom the course book represents the curriculum, can provide a basis for making decisions about how to use the course book.

4.1 The Principle of the Four Strands

The four strands (Nation 2007) is an approach to curriculum design that advocates that a language course should have a balance between the four strands of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. The four strands should not be confused with the four macro-skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, although the four skills are variably present in the strands. For instance, listening and reading are the means of providing meaning-focused input, while fluency development needs to occur across each of the four skills.

Each strand has a number of conditions attached to it, and without the conditions being met the strand does not exist. Thus, an activity in a course book labelled 'reading' may not form part of the meaning-focused input strand; it may be a poorly disguised form of grammar instruction in which case it is much more likely to be contributing to the language-focused learning strand. This is not the place to delve into the conditions for each strand (Macalister 2011 unpacks two of the strands in terms of teaching reading; the conditions for all four strands are discussed by Nation 2007), but it is worth drawing attention to the phrase 'meaning-focused' that precedes 'input' and 'output.' When learners are interested in the message they are receiving or communicating, the activity is much less likely to be a thinly disguised excuse for grammar instruction. Attention to meaning is important to all the strands and is perhaps the unifying condition of this approach to curriculum design, even in language-focused learning where the focus should be on how language is used to convey and create meaning.

A skilled teacher is generally capable of adapting an existing activity or adding an activity to the published material as a way of making the material more meaningful for the learners, and thus increasing the proportion of meaning-focused input and meaning-focused output in the course. A teacher may, for example, precede a listening or reading activity with an activity to activate top-down processes as a way of promoting meaning-focused input. One such activity is the construction of a semantic map which both finds out what students already know about a topic, and

provides a framework for making sense of new information encountered during the reading or listening (Chia 2001 discusses semantic maps and other top-down processing activities). The strand that is often missing, however, and that may be overlooked if teachers do not apply the four strands principle to any evaluation of the coursebook is that of fluency.

4.2   The Fluency Principle

This principle states simply that "A language course should provide activities aimed at increasing the fluency with which learners can use the language they already know, both receptively and productively" (Nation and Macalister 2010, p. 54). It is a slight expansion of the old teaching adage: learn a little, use a lot. An example of this attention to fluency is the recent promotion of extensive listening (Chang and Millett 2014; Renandya and Farrell 2011), which has been described as "learners doing a lot of easy, comprehensible, and enjoyable listening practice such as listening to audio books or radio programmes" (Chang and Millett 2014, p. 31). The ever-increasing range of on-demand, on-line listening resources, and the ability to alter playback speeds, should encourage teachers to make more of this type of activity.

A peculiarity of coursebooks is that material that is introduced in one unit or chapter is often not encountered again in that book. This may be most obviously seen in the treatment of vocabulary. Topic is a common organising approach in coursebooks; as a result, vocabulary relating to one topic lacks currency in other topics. Without repeated opportunities to encounter or use new lexical items the likelihood of their being learned, let alone of learners becoming fluent with processing or producing them, becomes greatly reduced.

It is not difficult for teachers to add fluency development activities to coursebook materials; it can be as simple as preceding a reading input activity with a listening activity that uses language and content that learners will meet in the reading, or adding a spoken output activity to a writing activity so that learners have the opportunity to re-use content and language already produced in one mode. Teachers do object, it is true, that such additions reduce the time available for covering the course, but this should be balanced against the desirability of optimising language learning outcomes. Teachers should also bear in mind Ray Williams' wise words: "Teachers must learn to be quiet" (Williams 1986, p. 44). Quite possibly less teacher talk would translate into greater time available for fluency development.

4.3   The Frequency Principle

One reason why learners do not have sufficient opportunities to encounter or use new lexical (or grammatical) items is that coursebook writers have not applied the frequency principle which says, "A language course should provide the best possible coverage of language in use through the inclusion of items that occur frequently in the language, so that learners get the best return for their learning effort" (Nation and Macalister 2010, p. 40). Common sense suggests that the higher the frequency of occurrence in a language, the greater the likelihood that learners will meet it again. That repeated meeting may be in the coursebook, or in the classroom, or beyond the classroom. The more frequently encountered, the more likely it is to be learned.

Focusing for the moment on vocabulary, coursebooks raise two concerns in terms of the frequency principle. The first is that they do not provide sufficient exposure to high frequency items; O'Loughlin (2012), for example, estimates that after completing three levels of one popular coursebook series, learners would have had exposure to fewer than 1500 high frequency words. The second concern is that, as a result of the topic-based approach to coursebook organisation, learners are presented with a mix of low frequency as well as high frequency items simultaneously. Attention to low frequency vocabulary that is not important for understanding the text is usually not time well-spent. Learners' vocabulary development is more likely to be enhanced through attention to useful items (Nation 2004 provides useful guidance on how to treat vocabulary in intensive reading).

Similar concerns have been raised about the presentation of grammatical items. The modal, *will*, for example, is introduced after *going to*, despite the far greater frequency of the former in language use (Mindt 1996). Similarly, early attention is often given in coursebooks to relatively low frequency verb forms, such as the present continuous, despite information about verb form frequency having long been available (George 1963).

It is difficult for teachers to ignore entirely the sequencing of content in a coursebook, but directing attention towards higher frequency and away from lower frequency items is one means of paying attention to this principle. It may also be necessary to add material to ensure sufficient exposure to high frequency items; in this regard, extensive reading cannot be overlooked. One of the features of graded readers, the material commonly used on extensive reading programmes, is that they are written with a controlled vocabulary of high frequency words; thus learners have repeated exposure to useful vocabulary through reading.

For teachers who want to check the lexical burden of a text so that they can be properly informed about frequency, a very useful resource is the website designed and hosted by Tom Cobb, http://www.lextutor.ca/.

4.4 The Interference Principle

A common feature of topic-based coursebooks is the introduction of lists of new semantically-related lexical items. This violates the interference principle, which states that "The items in a language course should be sequenced so that items which are learned together have a positive effect on each other for learning, and so that interference effects are avoided" (Nation and Macalister 2010, p. 48). An example of this principle in this chapter was the discussion of the four strands and the four skills in the same paragraph. If any readers were not already familiar with the concept of the four skills, then they would be learning about skills and strands simultaneously, and would be struggling to keep the two separate. In other words, the learning of skills and strands would be interfering with each other. However, as the assumption was that readers would already be fully conversant with the four skills, the interference principle was not being violated; only one potentially new item was being introduced.

It can be a challenge for teachers to work against the interference effects that coursebooks sometimes seem determined to promote. Teacher responses can include decisions about sequencing in order to avoid introducing all members of a lexical set at once, and selection. Here, there may be some interplay with the frequency principle; learner attention may be directed away from low frequency items in a set and towards high frequency items.

To illustrate the interference effects that coursebooks can, no doubt unintentionally, cause, consider the introduction to words for describing colours in four randomly selected introductory level coursebooks (Bygrave 2012; Clandfield 2007; Eales and Oakes 2012; Kay and Jones 2007). All introduce words for colours at approximately the same point in the course, and in all cases these words are introduced as a lexical set. One coursebook introduces six word types, another seven for colours. Both include two items, *brown* and *yellow*, from the second thousand word family list (using BNC data, Nation 2006), and the higher frequency, *green*, being from the first thousand word list, is omitted from one coursebook. In other words, neither the interference nor the frequency principle seems to be operating. The interference principle does not operate because a number of colour names are being learned simultaneously, the frequency principle because less useful words are being learned at the same time as more useful. This is also true of the other two coursebooks, with one introducing 10, the other 11 word types for colours. Both include three words from the second thousand word family list – *grey*, *orange*, and *pink* – and the book with the longest list also includes *purple*, which comes from the 3000 word family list.

4.5 Other Principles

The four principles, which have been the focus of this discussion have been chosen because their application often appears to be absent from published material. They have not been chosen because they are necessarily more important than the other 16 proposed by Nation and Macalister (2010, pp. 38–39). However, it is worth noting that attention to these four principles triggers many of the others. The fluency principle, for instance, links to principles about the importance of time on task and of repetition, or spaced retrieval. As another example, application of the interference principle also relates to the principle focussing on reducing the learning burden. Possibly, the most linked principle is that of the four strands; in order to ensure this principle is operating, other principles, such as those referring to comprehensible input and to output, are drawn on. Finally, the application of principles leads to a course that gives learners a more successful learning experience than would otherwise have been the case, and success is a motivating force – motivation being another of the 20 principles. Motivated learners and successful learning are surely outcomes all teachers desire.

5   Concluding Remarks

Paraphrasing Socrates, William C. Miller (1978, p. 60) suggested that "The unexamined curriculum is not worth implementing." Although his focus was on the hidden curriculum (Snyder 1970), his warning is deserving of consideration by all teachers with a concern for effective language learning and teaching, and especially perhaps those for whom the coursebook represents the curriculum. Rather than it being viewed as a constraint, as a straitjacket, as a brake on innovation, the coursebook is best viewed as presenting an opportunity for the critical application of principles derived from research and theory that will lead to success in the language learning classroom. Such an end is surely worth the effort involved.

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