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How to use a coursebook *and* deal with emergent language

RACHAEL ROBERTS

We hear a great deal about the so-called 'coursebook debate', with the strong implication being that you have to be either 'for or against' coursebooks. Those who believe in dealing with language as it arises — for example, proponents of Scott Thornbury's materials-light 'Dogme' approach — will generally be considered to be anti-coursebook. But surely coursebooks are ultimately a collection of topics, texts and tasks – the bedrock of any course. Why shouldn't it be possible to use a coursebook *and* deal with emergent language? As Scrivener and Underhill comment when talking about 'breaking free' from the coursebook (2012):

Some teachers see Dogme and assume that that is the only other place to go – but it is a fairly drastic extreme to dump materials and syllabus and wander naked through the Dogme forest.

Wandering round the forest naked may well be liberating for some but it isn't what everyone would choose to do. Some of us like to take a nice rug and a picnic hamper. And there's nothing wrong with that either. That doesn't mean, to stretch the metaphor even further, that we should go in armed to the teeth. That's the equivalent of those teachers who have to go in with hundreds of worksheets, just in case there's a minute where they might actually have to interact spontaneously with the learners.

For me, there's a middle ground, and the coursebook, along with other kinds of pre-prepared materials, can be a useful tool. And, to be fair, Thornbury has often said that coursebooks aren't the fount of all evil, they just shouldn't be 'the tail that wags the dog' (Thornbury & Meddings, 2002, p. 36). It's probably true to say that Thornbury's biggest gripe about coursebooks is the way they are generally built around a structural syllabus. Each unit has a handful of language points (which is what he famously refers to as 'grammar McNuggets') and the assumption is that these points will be presented, practised and learnt. It's admittedly something of a false assumption: language doesn't develop in a linear and predictable fashion and while we may hope to teach a particular point, ultimately all we can do is to expose students to stretches of language, create opportunities for meaningful dialogue and opportunities to notice and, crucially, enable students to *engage* with language. But none of this militates against using a coursebook as a basis.

Engaging students

A key tenet of Dogme is that the learners' experiences, beliefs, knowledge and so on should be the content, rather than what's on the page. As Meddings and Thornbury put it in *Teaching Unplugged* (2009, p. 7):

Materials-mediated teaching is the 'scenic route' to learning, but the direct route is located in the interactivity between teachers and learners and between the learners themselves.

For me, however, the really interesting interactions lie not just between the people in the classroom, but also between what's on the page (or video) and where the learners currently are. By bringing material into the classroom, we can provide learners with content which is *outside* their experience, which stretches them to see things differently.

Rather than materials mediating teaching, surely one of the primary roles of the teacher is, in fact, to mediate the material to ensure that the students are engaged and challenged. Materials writers can't do this for you because they don't know your class. This isn't an argument for not using coursebooks, however; it's an argument for using them better. For example, if students are reading an article, you might let them set their own questions before they start reading, based, perhaps, on the title and/or any illustrations, in order to help them to see the relevance to their own lives and to have some investment in finding out what the article says. Another idea is to use the questions in the book slightly differently: for example, as the questions usually follow the main points of the text, the students can use them to predict the content of the text.

Noticing and restructuring

As Jack Richards put it, in *Moving Beyond the Plateau* (2008, p. 8):

For learners' linguistic systems to take on new and more complex linguistic items, the restructuring, or reorganization, of mental representations is required, as well as opportunities to practice these new forms.

In order to restructure, students need to actively notice language. Increasingly, coursebooks do provide opportunities for this. That doesn't mean, however, that we can't build in further noticing, repetition and recycling activities, for example, by following up work on language in texts with dictogloss activities, or by asking students to translate the text into their L1 and then, a few days or a week later, try to translate it back. Both these activities will enable students to notice their individual difficulties and language which they need to focus on.

Similarly, as a follow up task to a comprehension, you could ask students to listen again and note down any phrases they think could be used to give opinions. Having picked these out, you can ask students to remember how the phrases were completed, complete them in different ways, discuss the level of formality and so on. Then students can have the opportunity to use them in a discussion.

Alternatively, try some self-recording and transcription tasks. Ask the students to record themselves carrying out a short speaking task and then make a transcription of what they said. They can make any changes they wish before handing it in. This in itself will be a valuable awareness-raising activity. The teacher can then reformulate what each student has written, as appropriate, and the student can then compare their version with the teacher's version (if you have a large class, you could do this with one or two anonymous examples, and look at them with the whole class).

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, whether or not you use a coursebook, your lessons need to be engaging, motivating and relevant, with plenty of opportunities for noticing, restructuring and recycling. A coursebook is like a set of recipes: some people will prefer to stick to the recipe at least to start with and just produce what's in the book; some will start experimenting and producing their own take on the recipe; and some people just love making everything from scratch. No one wants to live on a diet of 'grammar McNuggets', but pre-prepared food (or lessons) can also be nutritious, delicious and definitely labour-saving!

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