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# INCREASING PUPIL PARTICIPATION THROUGH THE CREATIVE USE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE COURSE BOOKS

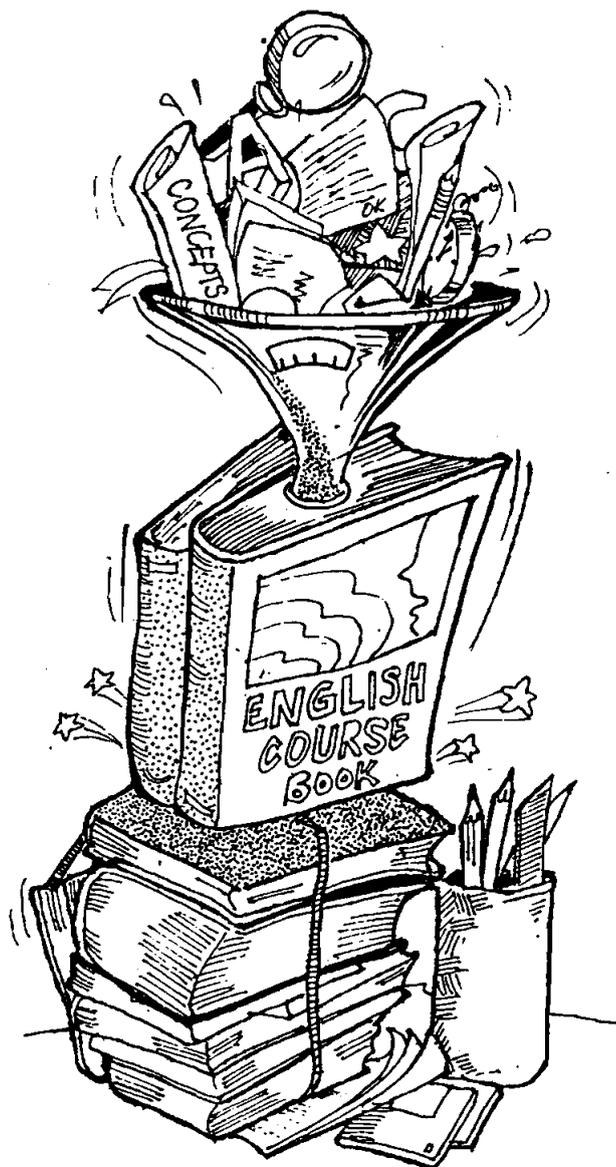
Review by Sue Nair

## INTRODUCTION

In many English language classrooms, a course book provides the framework and much of the content of the operational curriculum (Ariew, 1982; Ben-Peretz, 1990). Where a course book is accompanied by a teacher's guide, even the teacher's style of delivery may be influenced by this choice of teaching materials. There are many good reasons for this widespread use of course books. Amongst other things, they can provide:

- a core grammatical and functional framework for a course
- the opportunity for learners to revise and prepare for lessons
- convenient, bound, good quality presentation of materials
- a comforting level of predictability
- a means of implementing change
- a basis for creative improvisation and adaptation

This article will discuss the last feature, the use of course books as a basis for creative improvisation and adaptation. The purpose of such improvisation and adaptation is to encourage greater learner participation in the course. To successfully achieve this, "teachers (must have) the knowledge and skills needed to evaluate and adapt textbooks and to prepare them to use textbooks as sources for creative adaptation" (Richards, 1993, p. 52).



## REVIEW OF RESEARCH

As a number of commentators have pointed out (Allwright, 1981; O'Neill, 1982; Prabhu, 1989; Lee, 1995), the impact course books make in the classroom is mediated through the teacher's and learner's exploitation of those materials, and the interactive nature of classroom events. In the past in Singapore,

the use of course books appears to have been characterised by dependence rather than exploitation. In 1979, these comments were made on teachers' use of course materials: "The teachers, we understand, rely heavily on the textbooks, to which they gear what they say and which they ask the children to memorise. The parents, likewise, we are told, need the reassurance of seeing textbooks in the home. Methods which evade the use of textbooks can be, and have in the past been deeply disturbing to parents" (Morris and Thompson, 1979). As the phrasing indicates, the statements are based on anecdotal evidence, which was gathered over a twelve day visit. There has been no recent published research to cast light on the current situation in Singapore.

Barr and Dreeben's and Durkin's work in America, as reported in Stodolsky (1989) suggests that textbooks have a powerful influence on the teaching of reading at the primary level, dictating content, sequence and the pace at which new vocabulary items are introduced. Very little of the course material was omitted. However, teacher's guides were not consistently followed. In particular, suggested pre-reading activities tended to be ignored. Comprehension questions and skill exercises, for example those concentrating on phonics and vocabulary, were used regularly. Supplementary materials were used rarely.

These changes are likely to have been made for the teachers' rather than the learners' convenience. Teachers' choice of course materials, too, is likely to be made for reasons of personal survival. Low (1987) suggests teacher evaluators of language teaching materials may give a high priority to factors like how much preparation is needed to use the materials in the classroom and whether the learners will be occupied for most of the lesson.

Evaluators of course materials need to understand the relationship between approach, design and procedure (Richards and Rodgers, 1987). That is, they will need an awareness of:

- the theoretical views of language which explicitly or implicitly underpin the materials;
- how those views have affected the design for language teaching, for example the rationale for the selection and sequencing of content, the roles of learners and teachers, and the types of instructional materials;
- the impact of these decisions on the ways in which it is recommended techniques, practices and activities be carried out in the classroom.

Creative adaptation of course materials, then, requires an informed and insightful evaluation of materials in use. Such an evaluation will be characterised by a knowledge of the cognitive and linguistic needs and interests of the target audience (Breen and Candlin, 1987; Ellis, 1997).

## CONCLUSION

The creative use of English language course books demands that teachers recognise them as useful resources, but not as worthy of "reification" (Richards, 1993). The teacher, not the materials writer, is best placed to respond to the learners' needs. Since the aim of adaptation is to encourage greater learner participation, teachers need to consult learners about their interests and involve them in making adaptations (Clarke, 1989). Essential to the successful improvisation and adaptation of course books is an understanding of the underlying philosophy of the book in use. Teachers have to be

skilled evaluators of course books (Ball and Feiman-Nemser, 1986) so that changes made to the materials result in a systematic development of the learners' linguistic and cognitive abilities. Uninformed changes could result in a ragbag of activities which

may entertain rather than inform the learners. Creative improvisation and adaptation will provide learners with the skills and opportunities to entertain each other within a coherent framework of language development.

## IMPLICATIONS

There are a number of ways in which teachers can imaginatively and intelligently exploit course materials so as to increase learner involvement. Implemented creatively, the following suggestions will provide learners with increased opportunities for interaction, enjoyment and success. Learners will use the knowledge they have gained to inform and entertain themselves and their fellow learners (Swan, 1991).

**1. *The order in which the units of work are presented in the text could be changed.***

Such decisions may be made to reinforce teaching across curriculum areas. For example, the language skills needed to describe a process could be taught in the English lesson to support work in, for example, home economics. However, if the course book has been identified because it progressively develops learners' language skills, it is unlikely that teachers will rearrange the order in which those skills are presented. ***Structural changes, then, will be confined to the order of activities within a unit.*** These may be reorganised to achieve greater internal coherence (Low, 1989) and/or to maintain learners' interest if they have become bored with a predictable sequence of activities.

**2. *Materials could be omitted.***

Ariew (1982, p. 15) points out that to satisfy "the greatest number of people, publishers often insist that the text contain *everything*". Thus, some grammatical items may be redundant in some classes. Fry and Mercer (1979) suggest that activities which test rather than teach could be identified and omitted. Where the course materials are clearly excessive, decisions regarding what to leave out need to be made well in advance to avoid the situation in which the last units, perhaps practising valuable skills, are omitted by default.

**3. *Teachers and learners need to negotiate decisions about the standard of achievement they expect, and the class time they are prepared to give to reaching it.***

Such decisions will affect their interaction with the course book. The time allocated and emphasis given to skills taught will vary from class to class and learner to learner. For example, the balance between activities designed to develop accuracy and fluency in speech will be affected by the quality of the learners' English speaking environment, their desire to speak standard Singaporean English, and the teacher's perception of their need to do so.

**4. *Adjustments and additions can be made to suggestions in the teachers' guide.***

Coleman (1985) found that many teachers' guides do not satisfy teachers' needs, and recommends that teachers supplement them in the following ways:

- examine the stages in a given task, and introduce new ones where appropriate. For example, more pre-listening activities could be included to prepare for a particularly challenging task;
- changes may need to be made to the suggested interaction patterns, or to the way in which group activities are carried out. Jacobs and Ball (1996) found that the structure of group activities in a number of ELT course books did not sufficiently encourage positive group interdependence or individual accountability;
- oral questions intended to promote discussion and/or questions intended to develop reading and listening comprehension may need to be adjusted to suit different teaching and learning situations. Richards (1993) recommends using a taxonomy of levels of reading comprehension to develop exercise types for each level to accompany different kinds of texts.

**5. *Supplementary material could be incorporated into the course book.***

This may be necessary if certain skills are neglected. It may be, too, that a wider range of resources than the course book provides is necessary to help learners with different learning styles. For example, visual learners will benefit from the inclusion of more drawings, diagrams and films (Davis et al, 1994).

**6. *It is essential to monitor teachers' and learners' responses to any changes made to the course book and the supporting materials.***

Questionnaires, interviews, self-report forms and journal writing activities can all be used to ascertain whether learners are indeed participating more in the learning process.

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