Do our Coursebooks Live up to the Challenges of Today?
Adopting an Interdisciplinary Approach to TEFL

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ABSTRACT

In an ever-changing world, foreign language instruction remains faithfully devoted to teaching by means of coursebooks, the design of which is based mainly on the skills or the structural syllabus paradigm that arranges language according to complexity of grammatical phenomena. In this paper, I aim to explore the appropriateness of the materials we English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers use in our classrooms, and to present a number of reasons why it might be worth reconsidering a more interdisciplinary approach.

INTRODUCTION

Questions regarding teaching materials for the EFL classroom have been previously posed by a multitude of theoreticians and practitioners alike (e.g., Rowe, 1983; Nunan, 1988; Mohan, 1986). Is teaching language for the sake of language enough? Is language not a medium of communicating notions and ideas, as opposed to a means to an end, aiming at language competency per se (Prabhu, 1987)? How is it that only a handful of times do our students actually leave the classroom having learned something about the world, its history, and the great personalities and their achievements that have helped shape it as it is today? These questions are surely worth exploring, especially today when Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has gained momentum and constitutes an utterly valuable resource for teaching. To a great extent, we have been teaching language for the sake of language alone; with the exception of some bright examples where texts of knowledge are used for reading comprehension exercises, learners usually leave the class only having practiced a skill that will help them pass a test. I believe it is time to adopt a more holistic approach to language teaching and learning that will involve a broader range of disciplines, such as history, geography, the arts, and the sciences, just to name a few.

COMMON CLASSROOM PRACTICES

With the exception of English for Special Purposes (ESP), usually adult courses, in which some degree of tailorability occurs (Graves, 1996), General-Purpose English courses (GPE) tend to rely heavily on coursebooks which often follow a linear, multi-syllabus approach, focusing on skills, lexis, functions, and structures. Teachers adapt the material by stressing some activities, omitting others, or by adding visuals or inserting a video from the web. This is more work for the
teacher, and practitioners (understandably) often avoid large-scale adaptation of their materials. Thus, it is the book that mostly determines what is being taught. However, the vast majority of coursebooks aim at meeting the needs of broader audiences around the world, and inevitably will not make specific reference to particular errors Spanish or Greek learners make, or will not include topics that may challenge critical thinking as this may not be acceptable in specific cultural contexts. The question that emerges then is, to what extent do our coursebooks serve our role as educators? Do they equip students with knowledge and transferable skills that will prove useful in their daily lives? What is the purpose of our materials, and are they enough? Meddings, (2004) argues that

We’ve gone materials mad. We consume published materials like McDonalds’ breakfasts, all too readily. Both have their place in the grand scheme of things, but neither can be enjoyed every day without things eventually seizing up. We use coursebooks because they make it easy to get from 9 o’clock to 10 o’clock, not because they are a good way to promote learning. (p. 2)

How and why have we let the coursebooks become so influential as to practically dictate our teaching content or even our methodology? This brings me to the syllabus issue: The books we use definitely have an impact on the overall content of the courses we teach. Within the multi-syllabus, the themes of the units in coursebooks are usually as general as sports, the environment, or being a teen. Yet, is there evidence informing teachers that such topics are of interest to our students? Do you like the themes of the coursebook you are using? My experience in the classroom tells me that if the topic under discussion interests the learners and the teacher, the lesson is bound to be successful.

THE INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

Why should we consider shifting to an interdisciplinary model of instruction since current methods and approaches seem to work fine? We must do so because the world is changing, and the demands placed on individuals are far beyond the mere acquisition of a language. Today’s learners are expected to have a range of knowledge and skills, as well as personal qualities that equip them to compete in the modern job market, but they also need an education that will help them be informed. What is needed most in today’s society are thinking individuals able to thrive in a global environment of change. The world does not so much expect learners to know all the metalanguage regarding the passive voice, or advanced grammatical terminology for instance, but one would be embarrassed not to know the capital of France. Interdisciplinary language teaching focuses on content, and thus imparts knowledge through the use of the target language. An additional reason for considering this shift involves our perception of our role as professionals, remembering that we are educators as opposed to mere exam proctors. Our role involves the development and personal growth of our learners.

An interdisciplinary approach to TEFL means encompassing and involving all possible fields of study that are within the sphere of the learners’ interests, through which students will acquire the target language. Upon adopting such an approach, it would seem that language is not so much at the forefront of instruction. Rather, learners (depending on their age, level, and a number of other variables) are exposed to other subjects through English. Learners will, hopefully, want to find out more and explore the topic under investigation, rendering the language a “delivery mechanism” of the target information to be communicated (Clark, 1994). Language acquisition occurs implicitly in accordance with Krashen’s natural approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983), and should the teacher and learners wish to focus on a specific linguistic item,
There might be a shift to a more language-oriented session through noticing techniques (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, pp. 29-50). There is nothing new to this approach, as it has been tried in immersion schools around the world and has been advocated in the past by numerous scholars (e.g., Prabhu, 1987; Mohan, 1986; Swain & Lapkin, 1995).

### POSSIBLE LIMITATIONS AND WAYS TO OVERCOME THEM

#### Teacher Preparation

Admittedly, there are few interdisciplinary, ready-made materials designed specifically for the EFL classroom. This means that the teacher needs to prepare them according to their learners’ interests, which in turn, acts as a deterrent, since practitioners may not be willing to invest the time and effort. Yet, in advocating an interdisciplinary-based syllabus, I do not mean that EFL teachers need to become experts in materials design or write their own coursebooks. Rather, using the web as a resource, the teacher can collect up-to-date, authentic material that they can use with groups of learners that share common features (e.g., 15-year old, intermediate-level students preparing for the Cambridge English for Speakers of Other Languages [ESOL] First Certificate in English [FCE] examination). Keeping a record of such websites, links, articles, and videos, we can then have a bank of materials at our disposal with which we can work, modifying and enhancing yearly, depending on the class. The point is that we will have chosen the content, and chosen how we use it in our classes. Integration in the curriculum can also occur if our materials are designed and taught in combination with content or books specified by the school in which we work, making this approach not as revolutionary as it would first appear.

#### Appropriateness of Content

Another conundrum relates to the different fields of study we might wish to bring into the EFL classroom. Some learners may dislike biology or math for instance, while others may be keen on, and have an aptitude for, languages or music; rarely do we have learners who share the same interests, hobbies, and aptitudes. How do we ask learners who may dislike studying a subject in their mother tongue, to do so in the foreign language classroom?

Prior to the course or at its beginning, the teacher might collect learners’ preferences on topics (through check lists, for instance), in order to gather materials that will be in the realm of their interests. This way, the students are given some control of what is being taught; they feel involved, and are partly responsible for the content of their course. Thus, potential complaints might be kept to a minimum.

### CONCLUSION

Adopting an interdisciplinary approach to TEFL is indeed a challenge for the teaching community as we search out material and design activities for our learners. It is my firm belief that the experience is utterly rewarding, both for us (another benefit of this approach is for the educator—we will also learn about other fields of study) and for our learners who are eager and thirsty to learn about the beauty of our world, as well as the greatness of human endeavor. Through interdisciplinary teaching and learning, this thirst can be quenched, and we can finally deviate (to some degree) from the coursebook and exams that seem to play so dominant a role that they have come to stifle our creativity as well as our students’ desire to learn.
In all fairness to coursebooks, I should make it clear that I am not averse to their use. On the contrary, they serve realistic and utilitarian purposes, and there are some that are great teaching tools. Yet, we cannot solely rely on them to do our job. It is time we re-assumed responsibility for the content of our classes.

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**REFERENCES**


