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empty chairs at empty tables

Check it, choose it, use it!

Using a checklist to facilitate analysis and selection of new coursebooks.

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Coursebooks play a very important role in Portuguese ELT classrooms. The choice of coursebook can determine, to a great extent, the quality of learning—teaching that occurs. Evaluating such materials requires a focussed and theoretically-grounded approach.

Introduction

Many ELT coursebooks are launched onto the Portuguese market every year by local and international publishing houses. These coursebooks vary from level to level, and from publisher to publisher, according to an annual schedule decided by the Ministry of Education. Teachers are already under considerable pressure from heavy workloads (both curricular and administrative) and the additional, predictive task of coursebook selection (Ellis, 1997) needs to be taken seriously, if for no other reason (and there are many) than for its long term consequences.

The perfect coursebook does not exist (Richards, 2001), so we had better select the best options available if we want to improve the quality of our educational system. Using a checklist can allow hard-pressed teachers access to an up-to-date, criterion-based, balanced and straightforward evaluative tool (Tomlinson, 2003). Both more experienced and less experienced teachers can benefit from employing such a tool to analyse the potential suitability of a coursebook with more ease and choose the best one for their and their learners' needs without falling into the temptation of relying on 'impressions' or commercial presentations (AbdelWahab, 2013).

The use of a ready-made coursebook checklist allows teachers to analyse all the coursebook options available according to pedagogical parameters, to go through these coursebooks in more systematic and theoretically grounded manner

(Mukundan & Ahour, 2010). Such checklists must include parameters of specific areas of ELT practice, bearing in mind that the chosen coursebook will provide the students with a crucial learning framework, both inside and outside the classroom, and, teachers, their main support in fulfilling the Ministry designated learning objectives.

The checklist accompanying this article is intended to be both simple and effective, recognising that “[n]o coursebook evaluation checklist in the literature is complete. Regardless of the number of items it is made up of, any checklist can be modified by adding or deleting items depending on the circumstances of a given instructional setting” (Demir & Ertas, 2014, p.247). Users of this checklist may wish to expand or revise the checklist to include further categories or items; for example, related to physical or utilitarian aspects, the layout or even the weight (Mukundan, 2011).

This checklist provides a list of parameters divided into four main categories: ‘Cultural content’, ‘Language work’, ‘Skills work’ and ‘Teachers’ zone’. This format allows the user to easily evaluate the most important pedagogical aspects of a coursebook by going through the items listed and simply selecting ‘always’, ‘sometimes’ or ‘never’. It is also designed to be easily photocopied; this means not every possible criterion or perhaps even category is included here, the choice is, by definition, subjective (McGrath, 2016).

Cultural content

Learning a new language means more than just being able to use its grammar and vocabulary correctly; it's about intercultural communication between communities, it's about cultural products, cultural perspectives and cultural practices (Moran, 2001).

Therefore, the coursebook must fulfil the challenging task of providing cultural content that embraces many Englishes and their associated cultures from all around the world.

We live in a multicultural world, it is imperative that students get ample opportunity to learn and to develop their intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and to mature into globally aware citizens. This content (whether 'implicit' or 'explicit' in separate sections) should be evenly distributed through the coursebook, and if possible, be complemented by additional materials included in the 'extras' package.

There are many ways to introduce cultural content to students, it cannot simply consist of knowing about some 'famous' actor, football player or the iconic local dish or festivity. The coursebook must depart from what we usually find: an unreal, stereotypical English-speaking 'world', where everything is clean, affluent and consumeristic (Hurst, 2014).

Keeping it interesting might pose a challenge because fashions and trends change fast and students are unique, they have different tastes and interests. The coursebook must present cultural content which is interesting (motivational) enough to nurture students' curiosity, for them to want to learn more, and at the same time develop their ability to understand themselves and the 'Other'. The more diverse the sources and types of the cultural content the better, since these will enlarge the students' window on the world (Gray, 2002).

Language work

The language work category is divided into the subcategories of vocabulary and grammar.

Normally coursebooks will have standard exercises to practise the new vocabulary being introduced, which follow texts or even grammar exercises. The coursebook normally presents new vocabulary through the texts, through the unit's theme,

through the listening activities, the further reading and so on; but, some vocabulary might already be known by the students and the book must challenge this knowledge and also stimulate their curiosity to learn more. Above all, vocabulary is very important because it is directly implicated in the production work done by students (Nation, 2005).

Students aren't big fans of learning grammar because most exercises tend to be mechanical and are seldom varied. This subject poses a challenge by itself, because even if the teacher wants to keep it interesting, most of the time the grammar presentation method is 'old fashioned'. Normally, grammatical content is presented through the PPP format (Presentation – Practice – Production). This is, in fact, a standard way of teaching new language items, and if the coursebook fully embraces it, it is almost guaranteed that students will be demotivated and bored (Hurst, 2010).

As with vocabulary, the teacher can use the coursebook as a means of reference, i.e., present the tables with the rules of grammar 'use' but supplement the presentation with new, more up-to-date materials that are more relevant and interesting to students. Teachers should give more time for students to produce new language with the grammar and vocabulary they have learned, thus practising fluency. Pronunciation must also be practised, but above all, students should have ample opportunities to make personal use of the language items they are learning, to 'experiment' and to be spontaneous.

Skills work

The most recent teaching methods are more centred on the student's learning needs and expectations; students must be able to use the new language presented and that can only be achieved through a continuous focus on productive skills (Paran, 2012). Activities should be purposeful, with a clear communicative function.

Coursebooks rely heavily on texts to provide students with cultural and linguistic input. These texts comprise both the cultural content and the language that will be taught and practised in the subsequent activities. The texts included in the coursebook are of major importance given that they also prompt the development of the receptive skills.

These texts should come from various sources and be authentic, accurate and appropriate. Moreover, the texts selected can be in the coursebook for various reasons, and their relevance must be evident to the students, otherwise they will question their significance. For instance, the texts can be associated with the unit's theme, with the grammar or vocabulary being taught or they can also be used to practise reading skills.

Nowadays, one of the main objectives of learning a new language is the possibility of using it to communicate with other people. The coursebook must include activities that intend to prepare them for the use of 'real' language whether the students are working on the pronunciation, fluency or practising a language structure accurately (Nobuyoshi & Ellis, 1993). These language production activities must provide a learning challenge appropriate to the students' level, so that success is achievable and only minimal teacher intervention is required.

Teachers' zone

In Portuguese-produced coursebooks, teachers and students have basically the same layout and contents, but the teacher's version is normally a more complete one, including suggested answers and teaching tips. This version should present relevant information that connects its content with the official national programmes ('Metas Curriculares', 'Aprendizagens Essenciais', etc.).

A clear connection between any extensive reading resource and the students' coursebook should be demonstrated, highlighting its relevance to the unit's theme and to its presence in the book. Not all materials and exercises in the book are suitable for the individual teacher's method (some of them can be too mechanical and repetitive), so the Teachers' zone could present some alternative approaches or additional activities or for 'pushed output' or 'differentiated learning' (Ur, 2013).

Normally, the teacher's book includes references to the audio/video materials to present the listening/viewing activities to students, this could also be complemented by other multimedia support relevant to the coursebooks themes as well as assessment activities that the teacher could hand out to students to assess their progress.

Finally, one major aid for teachers, and for their lesson preparation and reflective practice, could be the inclusion of lesson plans, term plans and teacher's diaries (Mathew, 2012). With these materials teachers could keep up to date and adjust their teaching to their students' particular needs.

Conclusion

Using a checklist to evaluate a coursebook provides a useful foundation for textbook selection. Given the centrality of coursebook in the ELT teaching-learning process, it is vital that teachers are equipped with instruments to guide them in exercising their choices. This is especially true in Portugal where teacher training courses have rarely included any formal input and/or training in the principles of materials development; this is despite the existence of extensive publications in the area, dating back to the seminal work of Sheldon (1988) and Cunningsworth (1995). Furthermore, conducting coursebook evaluations as a 'team' effort can also provide an opportunity for including more teachers in institutional decision making and promote 'in-house' teacher development.

Main references

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Book details	Title:		
	Author(s):		
	Publisher:		
	Level:	Nr. of pages:	Price:

Coursebook categories		Always (3)	Sometimes (2)	Never (1)
Teachers' zone	Does the content correspond directly to the official Ministry documents (' <i>metas curriculares</i> ' etc.)?			
	Does it include methodological suggestions about using the coursebook?			
	Does it come with useful associations between the coursebook and 'off-book' extension activities?			
	Is an answer key provided for activities?			
	Does it include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - differentiated exercises and activities? - teacher's tips for varying activities? - information on potential difficulties? 			
	Additional materials provided: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does it provide multimedia support (ppt, YouTube, flashcards, active internet links, etc)? - Does it provide assessment materials (tests)? - And self-evaluation activities? 			
	How does it help the teacher organise his/her practice? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - with lesson plans? - with term plans? - with teacher diaries? 			
	Is cultural information evenly distributed throughout the coursebook?			
	Are there extra separate sections on specific cultural topics?			
	Is the cultural content relevant to unit it is included in?			
Cultural content	About the cultural content: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - does it present the various English 'cultures'? - is it stereotypical of the English 'world'? - does it only portray a 'perfect' and unrealistic world? - does it stimulate students' curiosity to learn more? 			
	Does it allow students to explore different cultures?			
	Can students connect these different cultures and world views to their own culture/community?			
	Is the cultural content: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - age appropriate? - from varied 'real world' sources? - interesting for students? 			

Skills work	Receptive skills: listening and reading	Does it allow for students to develop their intercultural communicative competence (ICC)?			
		Can the texts be used for both listening and reading?			
		Are the texts appropriate to the unit's theme?			
		Is the reading task focussed on the language (i.e., vocabulary, grammar) being taught?			
		Can the reading texts be used to practise a specific sub-skill (skimming, scanning, reading aloud, etc.)?			
		Are the texts:			
		- heavily edited and adapted?			
		- largely from authentic sources?			
		- appropriate for the learner's level?			
		Do the texts connect explicitly with the pre- and post-exercises/activities?			
		Does the book include a variety of text genres and types?			
		Do the listening activities provide a variety of genuine accents?			
		Is the listening activity appropriate to the learner's level (length and complexity)?			
		When listening to a text is the student supposed to memorise the content?			
		Are the students required to analyse and/or summarise the message as a listening activity?			
		Are the speaking activities focussed on practising:			
		- pronunciation?			
		- fluency?			
		- a language structure?			
		Can students work autonomously in a speaking activity?			
		Do the speaking activities result from working on texts?			
		Do the activities allow students to produce 'real' language?			
		Is teacher validation needed to be successful in speaking activities?			
		Do the writing activities intend to:			
		- develop specific writing skills?			
		- practise different written registers?			
		- identify and correct errors?			
		Does the book provide opportunities for students to practise writing both inside and outside the classroom?			
Are the writing activities intended to practise content learned through previous exercises?					
Does it make use of model texts of different types?					
Does the distribution of new vocabulary allow for a continuous progression and development of the students' lexical resources?					
Are different varieties of English included?					
Are the 'target' lexical items both 'real' and 'up-to-date'?					

Grammar	Is the vocabulary presented connected with the units' theme?			
	Can students learn more vocabulary through:			
	- audio content?			
	- further reading?			
	Relevance of the vocabulary presented:			
	- is it connected with grammar work?			
	- is it intended for memorization only?			
	- is it included as a text comprehension activity?			
	- can it be used in communication activities?			
	- can it also be used for language production?			
	What different types of vocabulary are presented:			
	- formal?			
	- colloquial?			
	- idiomatic expressions?			
	- contractions and slang?			
	- theme related only?			
	Does the book contain			
	- reference lists of 'important' vocabulary?			
	- vocabulary glossaries for each unit?			
	The exercises provided are:			
	- focussed on structural accuracy?			
	- varied in types of answers required?			
	The kind of approach used:			
	- is it inductive via tables of 'rules'?			
	- is it introduced through other sources?			
	- is it deductive, derived from other tasks?			
	- does it follow the P-P-P framework?			
	Is the grammar connected to the theme (lexis/ideas)?			
Is the grammar content highlighted in the units' texts?				
Does it contain 'real' examples of the grammar in use?				
Does it allow for students to practise the spoken forms?				
Does it contain exercises/tasks for students to practise the spelling rules?				
Can students use the new grammar to use the language for themselves (fluency)?				
Observations:				
Score:				



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