6 Using coursebooks effectively

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Key words

Deficiency view of coursebook use

Difference view of coursebook use

Coursebook use of beginning and experienced teachers

In this chapter, we ask the following questions:

What is the role of coursebooks in Austrian ELT classes?

What can teachers expect their coursebooks to contribute to their teaching?

What can teachers not expect from coursebooks?

How can teachers entering the profession use their coursebooks effectively?

How does effective coursebook use develop as a teacher gains more experience?

Theoretical perspectives and the Austrian context

In the Austrian school system, the coursebook has a particular legal status (see suggestions for further reading at the end of this chapter), and any discussion of the role of coursebooks in the language classroom must take this into account. Since educational reforms in the 1970s, Austrian school students have been provided with personal copies of coursebooks free of charge (*Schulbuchaktion*). The state checks and approves all coursebooks available this way to make sure they follow the curriculum and fulfill certain other minimum requirements (*Approbation*). This means that, in Austria, every learner at a school can be provided with their personal copy of a book to use in class and at home, which has made coursebooks an integral part of ELT in the Austrian school system.

Although schools are not obliged to use the approved coursebooks, in practice coursebook use is widespread in Austria. How the choice of coursebook is made varies from school to school. Some leave the choice to the individual teachers, while others ask all teachers of a subject (*Fachkonferenz*) to agree on one book. Depending on the kind of school, the law states that the final decision is to be made either by all teachers collectively (*Schulkonferenz*) or a parent-teacher conference (*Schulforum*). The book budget is limited, so sometimes difficult decisions have to be made on which coursebooks can be afforded.

This specifically Austrian situation has contributed to a special status of coursebooks in Austrian school ELT classes. However, this special status does not regulate in detail how coursebooks should be used in the language classroom. Some teachers mistakenly believe the coursebook to be the curriculum, rather than materials intended to help cover some parts of it. This does not seem to be an exclusively Austrian idea, as Appel (2011) comments: "In no other school subject do coursebooks exert a similar influence as in language teaching. The book is in fact often treated as the syllabus" (p. 39). Teachers who subscribe to this idea might place a lot of emphasis on 'completing' or 'finishing' the coursebook with a class, thinking they can follow the curriculum by doing all tasks in the book from cover to cover.

The move in Austria towards standardisation of teaching, learning and testing, particularly in connection with the centralised *Matura*, which was introduced in 2007, has increased the importance of coursebooks in classes. In response to increasing standardisation, teachers might be implicitly or explicitly expected to follow the progression of their assigned coursebook, completing as much as possible in the available time. When principals ask their teachers to write similar tests in parallel classes, for example, it is often easiest for teachers to agree on certain chapters of the coursebook which all of them will cover to prepare the students for a test.

Overall, coursebooks play an important role for ELT teachers at Austrian schools, providing both structure and content for their lessons. However, this does not mean that coursebooks are accepted without question. One criticism is that coursebooks are only used by lazy or unskilled teachers. Language teachers are likely to come across this criticism both in their time as student teachers and in the early years of professional practice. This extreme view of the role of the coursebook in language teaching is encapsulated in the deficiency and difference views discussed by Allwright (1981).

The deficiency view sees teaching materials, including coursebooks, as a means of saving learners from the deficiencies of their teacher in that the coursebook can be relied on to cover the syllabus and to present carefully crafted, meaningful activities. Allwright (1981) argues that this view could lead to coursebook use being regarded as superfluous by skilled teachers but also as a way of compensating for poor teaching. In contrast, the difference view posits that decisions about what to teach are best taken by someone other than the teacher: teachers are in the classroom to teach, and it is not their role to produce materials, which is a task better left to experts.

These extreme positions are worth discussing because they are arguably at the core of negative attitudes towards coursebook use. Let us first address the question of

laziness. Is it true that reliance on coursebooks is the prerogative of lazy teachers? We argue that this is not the case. Popular textbooks employed in language teacher training courses in Austria (e.g., Grimm et al., 2015, Harmer, 2015; Ur, 2012) provide a more balanced and reasoned perspective on the role of coursebooks in the language classroom. Grimm et al. (2015), for example, emphasise the link between coursebook use and three teacher-related factors: academic background of the teacher, teaching experience and degree of personal commitment. They argue convincingly that the extent to which teachers rely on coursebooks depends on how well trained they are, on the stage they are at in their career, and on the amount of time they are willing and able to spend on preparing lessons.

Grimm et al.'s (2015) commonsense approach to coursebooks in the language classroom is one which we share: it is simply unrealistic to expect the same degree of commitment to materials development from all teachers. Teachers with extensive knowledge of language acquisition and of language in general, who have taught for many years and are both well established in their profession and prepared to invest in further training, are less likely to follow a coursebook systematically than an inexperienced teacher, who may additionally have to contend with less favourable working conditions (too many contact hours, large classes, precarious contracts). We must also remember that teachers have other commitments outside of the classroom, including family duties. To equate coursebook use with laziness is therefore unfair and ignores the key variables of teacher education, experience, professional commitment and working/life context.

The deficiency view can thus be rejected. The difference view, however, does have some validity. As Pit Corder (1973) pointed out in an influential publication, language teaching involves several players apart from classroom teachers, including materials designers, curriculum and syllabus writers as well as educational planners. Pit Corder (1973) uses the term "language teaching operation" to refer to this complex context for language teaching (pp. 10-15). This discussion of the language teaching operation is highly relevant to Austria for several reasons.

First of all, Austrian schools are not independent entities but are subject to centralised regulation, for example, in curriculum design and the centralised *Matura*. These external constraints may be forgotten by opponents of coursebook use. Secondly, Pit Corder's (1973) recognition of materials designer as a distinct role in the language teaching operation points to a distinction between classroom teaching and materials design. Although some teachers may also be skilled materials designers, this is not necessarily the case, and we should be cautious about conflating

these two roles: designing materials is clearly not the same as teaching while effective teachers are not necessarily good materials designers. Further, writing single tasks involves less time and effort than designing a syllabus or sequence of tasks. Writing materials is extremely time consuming, and it is unrealistic to expect beginning teachers to write all their materials themselves at the same time as they get to grips with classroom practice.

Clearly, the question of whether to use coursebooks in the language classroom or not cannot simply be reduced to a yes/no question. There are simply too many factors which have to be taken into account, ranging from teaching context to individual teachers' expertise and experience. Bearing this diversity in mind, the next sections of this chapter will take a closer look at how to use coursebooks to full effect both at the beginning of a teacher's career and as the teacher becomes more experienced.

What can teachers expect from a coursebook?

To become an effective teacher, it is essential to know what you can or cannot expect your coursebook to do for you. This enables you to choose the best possible book and make good use of the strengths of your chosen coursebook while compensating for what it cannot provide. There are several features of approved coursebooks which teachers should be able to rely on (see Harmer, 2015, pp. 71-72).

Firstly, a well-edited coursebook should be well-researched and virtually free of errors. You should be able to depend on your coursebook to teach correct English in a coherent syllabus, both in vocabulary and grammar. The instructions for tasks should be clear and the tasks should work as described, without needing a lot of extra explanations. The tasks should suggest methodology which is similar to or at least compatible with your own. If the coursebook explains grammatical concepts in a different way from how you have chosen to present them in class, the two approaches should not be confusing to the learners.

Your coursebook should offer practice and reference materials intended for self-study by learner. These can be presented in a workbook plus answer key or a website, or both. If the book offers many tasks learners can do without much input from you, this allows you to spend valuable one-on-one time with those learners who need additional support. In addition, materials for self-assessment can provide valuable feedback to students which can complement your own. A good coursebook can thus help learners to take more responsibility for their learning and be less dependent on their teacher (Ur, 2012).

Writing exam materials is a complex affair, especially when the tasks are meant to mimic standardised exam formats such as the *Matura* accurately. Good coursebooks offer a regular supply of tasks without letting classes deteriorate into 'teaching to the test' situations by integrating the test formats into teaching sequences. Furthermore, exams keep evolving, and with them, approved coursebooks. Therefore, using a coursebook that is as up-to-date as possible will prove enormously helpful to teachers when devising tests: ten-year-old exam tasks might be very different from current examples.

Secondly, while it would be unrealistic to expect reading the coursebook to become your learner's favourite leisure time activity, the coursebook should be somewhat engaging, providing some fun tasks from time to time and not demotivating for your learners. Since learners are used to professionally designed images, the book should be more visually appealing and well-designed than you could make your own materials look on a regular basis.

Finally, coursebooks save teachers valuable time. Finding relevant authentic materials is time-consuming and judging whether their level is appropriate for learners is demanding work, even more so for audio and video materials than for written texts. A coursebook can take some of that load off your shoulders by offering a range of appropriate texts as well as audios and videos that can then be supplemented with materials on current topics of interest to your learners. The teacher's guide which accompanies the learner's book is not just useful for its answer key, but also for ideas on the intended learning goals and on how to best do the tasks in class.

Overall, a good coursebook should not only help you teach your learners, but should also support you in becoming a more highly skilled teacher. It might suggest activities you would not have thought of yourself, encourage you to try out a variety of approaches to different topics and keep you up-to-date with developments in teaching and testing methodology. If a coursebook succeeds in doing so, it can definitely be an "agent for change" rather than a crutch (Crawford, 2002, p. 83).

What can a coursebook NOT do?

If coursebooks are really such an invaluable resource in the language teaching classroom, as indicated above, why is coursebook use so often equated with laziness or incompetence on the part of the teacher? The reason for the bad reputation of coursebooks can be summed up in two mistaken views about their purpose. Firstly, coursebooks may be seen as prescribing a correct methodology which teachers are

expected to follow; in other words, methodology is seen as integral to the design of the coursebook.

This view is questionable: following a coursebook is not a substitute for considering appropriate methodology and coursebook writers do not see prescribing methodology as part of their remit. Of course, certain methodological approaches will seem more appropriate than others, but teachers will always have to give careful consideration as to how to present new material to learners and how to practice this material in an effective manner. In short, no coursebook can ever substitute for methodological considerations.

A related problem is that using a coursebook may be regarded as a straightjacket to the creative teacher. This view is particularly damaging to the inexperienced teacher because it equates using a coursebook with the teacher's lack of creativity. This does a serious injustice to the skill of the coursebook writer as well as to the ability of the teacher. A more useful way to view the coursebook is as a "scaffold for what happens in the classroom" (Levrai, 2013, p. 5). Coursebooks give less experienced teachers support and guidance concerning how to implement the curriculum while more experienced teachers can employ them as a useful source of materials which they can select and adapt according to the needs of their learners.

Scrivener (1998) sums up this more balanced view of coursebook use as follows:

> [U]ntil you feel secure, use your coursebooks exactly as intended by the author. When you are ready, then experiment a bit […] by personalizing a few exercises, choosing not to do some of them, etc. Gradually assume control over the book and use it increasingly as a resource rather than the centerpiece of the course (p. 43).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have attempted to provide teachers with a practical approach to coursebook use which recognises the varied teaching contexts they are likely to confront both at the beginning of their teaching careers and as they gain professional experience. Our discussion is firmly contextualized in the Austrian school system, where the coursebook has a specific legal status which, we argue, cannot be ignored. Well-designed coursebooks contribute in important ways to effective language teaching, and their value changes according to the experience and teaching context of individual teachers. Levrai's (2013) discussion of the role of coursebooks sums up our position succinctly:

> Love them or hate them, commercially produced coursebooks are with us
> and will remain with us for the foreseeable future. As our profession con-
> tinues to grow and evolve, so must these coursebooks and our attitudes to-
> wards them (p. 4).

Practical applications

We have already said that a beginning teacher might be expected to follow the pro-
gression and suggested tasks of the coursebook used quite closely. In contrast, ex-
perienced teachers can be expected to have a clearer idea of the level of their learn-
ers and the intended learning outcomes. In addition, it is likely that they can draw
on a wide range of self-produced materials for all kinds of situations. Therefore,
experienced teachers may have less need of a coursebook to structure their lessons
or provide appropriate materials. Such teachers can afford to use the coursebook
and its accompanying materials more selectively, only choosing single tasks that
suit their aims and replacing the rest with their own materials.

The two following examples show how a coursebook text might be used differently
depending on the experience of the teachers involved. Example 1 is designed for
beginning teachers, while Example 2 is intended for more experienced teachers.
Both use pages 24 and 25 of the coursebook *way2go! 6,* which you can access via this
link: www.oebv.at/flippingbook/9783209091895/24/.

Example 1:

Goal: learners will read for specific information; learners will become familiar with
a *Matura* test format

Activity: reading task

Rationale: to prepare for a *Matura* test format

Pre-knowledge: previous introductory work on the topic of art and museums

Level: CEFR B1+

Procedure

1. The teacher asks learners to work in pairs to talk about the questions given in
exercise 14a.

2. The teacher walks around the class, listening in on conversations without inter-
rupting.

3. After about five minutes, the teacher asks three learners to give a short summary of their conversation to the whole class.

4. The teacher asks learners to read the 'Strategies' box, then answers any questions they might have about the task.

5. The teacher shows the class an example of a multiple matching listening task they have done previously and points out the similarities.

6. The teacher asks learners to read the texts and complete the task.

7. After about fifteen minutes, the teacher goes through the correct answers with the class. The learners are asked to justify their answers with the corresponding sentences of the texts. Any wrong answers are discussed to find out what kind of misunderstanding occurred.

Example 2:

Goal: learners will read for meaning; learners will summarize findings orally; learners will become familiar with a *Matura* test format

Activity: integrated reading and speaking task

Rationale: to reflect real-life language use; to prepare for a *Matura* test format

Pre-knowledge: previous introductory work on the topic of art and museums

Level: CEFR B1+

Procedure

1. The teacher divides the class into five groups. The members of each group read one of the five texts.

2. The teacher asks learners to prepare an oral summary of their text for the other learners and to choose three expressions from their text to explain to their peers.

3. After about five minutes, the teacher puts the learners into new groups so that each group has at least one expert for each of the five texts.

4. The teacher asks learners to present their text to the group and listen to the presentations of the other members. Learners have to take notes on the content and the expressions they are presented.

5. After about fifteen minutes, the teacher stops the group work and asks learners to match the statements in the task to the five texts.

6. Once learners have matched as much as they can, they are allowed to read all five texts and compare their understanding with the ideas they got from the group work.

7. The teacher goes through the correct answers with the class and asks learners to justify their answers with the corresponding sentences of the texts. Any wrong answers are discussed to find out what kind of misunderstanding occurred.

8. The expressions learners have chosen are collected on a learning platform to be practiced and expanded on in the following lessons.

Activities and questions for reflection

1. For this activity, you should have a particular class in mind. Select a unit from a coursebook which you are using or have used in school. Identify a task in the unit which you would like to adapt, for example, to focus on a specific language point, and design a teaching sequence based on your chosen activity. One idea is to employ a story included in a unit to focus on the use of past simple and progressive.

2. Select a task from a coursebook which you are using or have used in school. Adapt this task for a different learning goal. For example, you might take a listening or reading task and devise a writing activity, or a reading task and devise a speaking activity.

3. Are coursebooks just for lazy teachers? What is your opinion now?

4. How does the coursebook you currently work with (or one you have at hand) support your work? What do you have to add or adapt to fulfill the requirements of the curriculum?

References

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Suggestions for further reading

Grimm, N., Meyer, M., & Volkmann, L. (2015). *Teaching English*. Narr Francke Attempto Verlag.

This book discusses key issues and trends in language teaching and learning. It is of particular interest because the discussion focusses on the German educational context and therefore offers the reader the opportunity to draw parallels between Austrian and German teacher education and language learning.

Students and beginning teachers are recommended to familiarise themselves with the legal basis for coursebook choice and use in Austrian schools by accessing these documents:

Rechtsinformationssystem des Bundes, Schulunterrichtsgesetz (SchUG)

Legal basis for coursebooks in §14

https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokument.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Dokumentnummer=NOR40119622 [August 23, 2019]

Rights of students and parents to have a say in the choice of coursebooks

§58 students

https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokument.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Dokumentnummer=NOR40019426 [August 23, 2019]

§61 parents

https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokument.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Dokumentnummer=NOR12126608 [August 23, 2019]

Obligation of the Austrian state to pay for school books

§ 31 Familienlastenausgleichsgesetzes 1967 (FLAG)

https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/NormDokument.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Geset-zesnummer=10008220&FassungVom=2019-08-22&Artikel=&Paragraf=31&An-lage=&Uebergangsrecht= [August 23, 2019]

The details are published yearly as an *Erlass* from the ministry

https://www.schulbuchaktion.at/sba_downloads/sba2019/Schulbucher-lass_2019_20.pdf [August 23, 2019]

Commentary on reflection questions

1. to **2.** Your answers to these reflection questions will depend on your personal teaching experience. The point of these questions is to encourage reflection on your use of coursebooks.

3. A good starting point would be to reflect on any comments you have heard from school teachers or teacher educators concerning the role of coursebooks. Bearing in mind what you have read in this chapter, how would you react both to negative and positive comments?

4. First of all, read the curriculum for the specific school type and year group which the coursebook is aimed at. Try to find tasks in the book which specifically address features of the curriculum. Is there any area which is missing? Two areas which you should pay particular attention to are writing tasks and extensive reading. With writing, check to see how much instruction and guidance is given concerning specific text types.

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