The controversy over ELT coursebooks: A review of the literature of their evolution, advantages, and disadvantages

The aim of this review is to explore the history and the value of English language teaching textbooks (called also interchangeably ‘coursebooks’). Studying ELT materials, especially coursebooks, has always been an important topic to address viewing the importance of these teaching aids in shaping learners’ and teachers competence. The production of coursebooks has witnessed important improvement starting from 1761 to become a global business by the 20th century with the emergence of the global coursebook. However, ELT specialists and practitioners have disagreed about the value attached to these teaching materials for pedagogical as well as cultural reasons.

Keywords: ELT, coursebooks, culture, globality, global coursebooks

The starting point of this review will be the early textbooks of English (before 1900) and the 20th century textbooks of English respectively. While in the first section the early phases of development are considered, in the second section the concentration is mainly on the global coursebook and its “globality” in terms of content prior to focusing on the advantages and disadvantages of ELT coursebooks.

Early textbooks of English: 1530-1870

Michael’s (1993) Early Textbooks of English documents historically the appearance of English textbooks since the 1530s. He describes the textbook in relation to the difference between it and a text advocating that a textbook is a compiled work designed “for the use of schools” (p. 2). As Michael (1993) attests, the appearance of textbooks of English dates back to the 16th Century. In his study of the early textbooks of English in terms of the numbers and contents, Michael (1993) identified four phases:

- The first phase: 1530-1700
- The second phase: 1701-1760
- The third phase: 1761-1830
- The fourth phase: 1831-1870

The first phase 1530-1700 is characterised by the appearance of the first textbooks which were about rhetorics and spelling. The second phase 1701-1760 is marked by textbooks containing secular and doctrinal texts. The third phase 1761-1830 is characterised by the increase in the number of textbooks published each year while the content witnessed a slow
change. The fourth phase 1830-1870 is marked by the impact of social changes on textbooks with the spread of education across society especially in the public sector fostering the production of textbooks (Michael, 1993).

Investigating the production of textbooks of English, he was able to detect four categories of textbooks, which are Reading, Spelling, and Pronunciation (RSP), Reading and literature (RL), Expression and performance (EX), and Grammar and Language (G). Table 1 illustrates his findings.

Table 1: Numbers of new textbooks, by phase and skill, 1530-1870 (Michael, 1993, p. 6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1530-1700</th>
<th>1701-1830</th>
<th>1831-70</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RSP</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RL</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>377</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EX</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>1231</td>
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The exploration of the table shows that textbooks of English increased in their importance gradually but the most remarkable increase occurred in what Michael (1993) identified as the third phase (1831-1870) in the development of textbooks of English. During this period, there occurred a shift from 182 new textbooks, during the second phase, to 1231 textbooks. Such an increase is according to Michael (1993) the result of the changes in society and the spread of education.

What Michael (1993) identified as striking is the closeness characterising the number of grammar and literature textbooks, as the total of Grammar textbooks produced in all phases is 923 while for literature it is 972 (see table 1). Additionally, the exploration of the table shows that the majority of textbooks published in all phases are under the category Reading and Literature (RL) textbooks, which contradicts the stereotype that “grammar was the dominant part of English teaching until the second half of the nineteenth century” (p. 7). However, this could be also explained by the fact that learners need only one grammar book for many purposes while reading and literature can be varied.

Michael reports that the publishers of the textbooks did not state clearly or even implicitly that their books are for school use or for public use in order not to lose both markets (p. 2). What could be deduced from this fact is that authors and publishers, as early as the
appearance of textbooks of English, tried to cater for the widest audience in order to maximise profit.

Put in its historical context, the textbook could not be marketed outside a given border easily. This is in contrast with the situation today (2013) in the globalising world where the spread of English together with publishers’ attempt to seek worldwide distribution resulted in the appearance of a new kind of textbooks that were global in content (Gray, 2002) and use (Graddol, 2000; Crystal, 2003).

However, the worldwide emergence of global coursebooks did not occur until the second half of the 20th century, as during the first half the concern was primarily laid on methods research (Howatt, 1984).

**Early 20th century English textbooks**

According to Michael (1993), there are no historical studies of the textbooks of English that it is difficult to trace their detailed evolution. Surveying the history of ELT, Howatt (1984) covered English language teaching materials, even though not systematically. He suggests four segments of improvement in ELT since 1900:

- Laying the foundations (1900-1922)
- Research and development (1922-1939)
- Consolidation (1945-1960)
- Change and variation since 1960

Howatt (1984) claims that during the “laying the foundations” phase of ELT, a “series of works which have since served as indispensable source-books for every English language teacher” (p. 214) have been written. Examples include *The Pronunciation of English* (Jones, 1909) and *An English Pronouncing Dictionary, on Strictly Phonetic Principles* (Jones, 1917).

During the second phase named Research and Development, Howatt (1984) mentions the textbooks written by Palmer (1938) *The New Method Grammar* and Palmer & Palmer (1925) *English Through Actions* in addition to Eckersley (1933) *A Concise English Grammar for Foreign Students*. What Howatt (1984) identified as new in this textbook is the “more relaxed and livelier atmosphere [that were different from] the severely pedagogical texts of some of the rival courses” (p. 216). Howatt (1984) argues that such ‘livelier atmosphere’ is the result of Eckersely (1933) responding to the needs of his foreign learners who are in need of everyday English, which was absent in the existing materials at that time.
The historical survey conducted by Howatt (1984) does not contain a study of the textbooks written during what he identified as the “consolidation” (1945-1960) and the “change and variation” (since 1960) phases. In fact, in these phases he concentrates on the publishing of journals and the evolution of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as a branch of ELT.

Starting from the sixties, and for political and economic reasons (Phillipson, 1992), ELT coursebooks witnessed an important change as they have become used in many contexts around the world, which resulted in the appearance of globally used textbooks.

**Global coursebooks**

Block and Cameron (2002) define the global coursebook as “a kind of text designed to be used in English language teaching worldwide” (Block & Cameron, 2002, p. 10). The term global, collocating with the term coursebook, makes the meaning of ‘global coursebook’, an ELT material that targets learners all over the world. The appearance of global coursebooks is most of the time related to business and globalisation (Graddol, 2000; Gray, 2002). This is so as “the need to cater to international markets has given rise to (...) ‘the global coursebook’, which can be used by students at a particular level and age group anywhere in the world, regardless of culture” (Ranalli, 2003, p. 3-4). There are many coursebooks that can be said to have global pertinence. One could mention *Headway* (Soars & Soars, 1986, 1996, 2003), *Market Leader* (Muskull & Heitler, 2007), and *Cutting Edge* (Canningham & Moor, 2005) with their various levels designed to meet the needs of various targeted population of learners.

Of rising importance in contemporary studies in linguistics is the exploration of the cultural content in ELT materials (Gray, 2002; Mineshima, 2008). In fact, the rise of interest in the importance of the cultural content was the result of the spread of the ELT market and that such spread fostered the exportation of British and American textbooks to be used in teaching English in newly created markets (Phillipson, 1992; Canagarajah, 1999). Various organisations from what Phillipson (1992) calls the Inner Circle (North America, Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) promoted the use of British and American textbooks under the aid projects such as the Ford Foundation and the British Council (Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1994; Canagarajah, 1999), thus possibly paving the way for the promotion of global coursebooks along with the spread of English, whether intentionally or not.

**The value attached to ELT coursebooks**

The value attached to coursebooks will be dealt with in terms of the advantages and disadvantages of these teaching materials through their functions in English language
teaching. Understanding the various views as to the necessity (or redundancy) of ELT coursebooks is informative as it can help appreciate the value attached to them in general. Emphasising the importance of textbooks, Hutchinson and Torres (1994) argue that

[r]ather than denigrating and trying to do away with textbooks, we should recognize their importance in making the lives of teachers and learners easier, more secure and fruitful, and seek a fuller understanding of their use in order to exploit their full potential as agents of smooth and effective change (p. 327).

Hutchinson and Torres (1994) stress the fact that coursebooks are important for learners and teachers for various reasons.

The advantages of coursebooks

Various researchers have documented the advantages of using coursebooks in English language teaching, which could be summed up in two main general benefits; (1) facilitating the job of the teachers and (2) scaffolding learners in their attempt to learn the language. For instance, Hutchinson and Torres (1994) assert that “[n]o teaching-learning situation, it seems, is complete until it has its relevant textbook” (p. 315). Thus, for Hutchinson and Torres (1994), ELT coursebooks play a central role in the process of learning and it is inevitable to use a coursebook in teaching English.

Indeed, the coursebook is an effective way of organising ELT materials because compiling, sequencing, and grading texts, pictures, and exercises in a coherent textbook is extremely helpful for the English teacher (Tomlinson, 2001). Similarly, the piling up of the materials in one body adds reliability and connection to courses and provides the learners with ready-made coherent materials that could make their learning progress at a steady pace predictable for them as well as for the teachers (Haycroft, 1998).

Another function of coursebooks is the promotion of learners’ autonomy, which means providing them with a good opportunity to rely on themselves through self revision and rehearsal (Richards, n.d). Then, the coursebook is claimed to be of paramount importance both for the learners to revise and for the teachers to prepare their courses (ibid). Richards (n.d) states eight advantages of ELT coursebooks:

- Providing a coherent syllabus
- Promoting the standardisation of instruction
- Maintaining quality
- Providing a variety of learning resources
- Guiding teaching
- Providing valuable language models and input
- Training teachers
- Motivating learners

First, coursebooks provide “a structure and a syllabus for a program” (Richards, n.d, p. 1), which is important as learners are better helped when they could go back to a concrete reference that contains content relevant to the syllabus. Second, “[Textbooks] help standardize instruction” (ibid) in the sense of providing all learners regardless of their group of study with the same content, which is important specifically for better administration. Third, “they maintain quality” (ibid), that is providing learners with tested, theory-based, and graded material. Publishers of global coursebooks claim that these qualities are manifested in global coursebooks.

Fourth, “they provide a variety of learning resources” (Richards, n.d, p. 1) when they are supplemented with other novel motivating resources such as CDs and workbooks. In fact, supplementary materials are very helpful as they provide relevant homework activities that meet various learning styles. Fifth, “they are efficient” (ibid) as they are time and energy preservers for teachers who could as a result keep focused on how to help learners learn not on what to use as materials. Hence, the coursebook acts as a means of facilitating the job of the teacher.

Sixth, “they can provide effective language models and input” (Richards, n.d, p. 2) especially for EFL teachers who speak English as a second language. Seventh, “they can train teachers” (ibid), as a ‘good’ coursebook could help beginner teachers find their way in the profession of teaching on the basis of previously checked materials. Finally, Richards (ibid) states that coursebooks are “visually appealing” in the sense of attracting learners’ motivation, which serves effective learning.

These functions fulfilled by ELT coursebooks legitimate their importance for each learning situation especially for two basic reasons: facilitating the job of the teacher and scaffolding learners. By the same token, ELT coursebooks are claimed to be the most practical way of providing learners with coherent syllabus (Swales, 1980; O’Neill, 1993; Hutchinson & Torres, 1994; Harmer, 2001; Toms, 2004). However, coursebooks are not merely considered sources of input of a benign nature for both learners and teachers as their content can be interpreted differently by the end users regardless of the authors’ intentions.

Because textbooks have always been approached from a utilitarian perspective, the ideological dimension is generally down-played and even missed out. This means that it is
possible that teachers and adult learners at IBLV might see the coursebook they use as a necessary source of language input for them that they give little attention to the ideologically-loaded or offensive content.

**The disadvantages of coursebooks**

The value of the coursebook as an indispensable component of the language teaching operation in educational contexts is questioned by some scholars such as Thornbury and Meddings (2001) who contested that a learner does not need a coursebook.

Maybe other subjects – like geography or history, or mathematics – do need textbooks, but we're not sure that language does. For a start, language is not a subject – it is a medium. Giving language subject status by basing the teaching of it around books is a sure way of paralyzing its capacity to convey messages (parag. 4).

Thus, considering language as a medium of communication, there is no need for intervening in the process. Indeed, Thornbury and Meddings (2001) are suggesting approaching language differently in educational institutions by separating it from subjects taught using coursebooks as it is not a subject but a medium. They argue that among the drawbacks of coursebooks are their embodiment of cultural values and their distortion of preferred learning strategies and styles effective with particular learners. They claim also that the problem of coursebooks is that they are designed for tremendously different users.

[Textbooks] have *subtexts* – the dissemination of cultural and educational values that may have little to do with the needs of the learner of English as an *International* Language – and may even serve to "undermine the alternative styles of thinking, learning, and interacting preferred by local communities" (Thornbury and Meddings, 2001, parag. 5, italics in original).

Thornbury and Meddings (2001) condemn textbooks for two reasons. First, they consider textbooks to incorporate hidden ideologies, or what they called 'subtexts', that could be irrelevant to diverse learners around the world. Second, they contend that textbooks might impose alien learning styles and distort locally preferred strategies effective with particular learners.

However, every discourse is loaded with culture (Wardough, 1992) and it is impossible to learn a language without learning the culture inherent in it (Valdes, 1991, p. 20). With
reference to English language textbooks, Canagarajah (1999) contends that the situations the textbooks provide represent only western norms of communication and, especially in role-playing, the dialogues “confront students with certain cultural biases regarding appropriate language use” (p. 86). Moreover, although he states that EFL coursebooks do not overtly promote a particular ideology, Rinvolucrì (1999) asserts that “UK EFL writers’ topic choice and treatment is powerfully ideological, precisely because of its avoidance of any specific ideological statement” (p. 7). Viney (2000) replied criticizing Rinvolucrì’s (1999) stance by arguing that it is an ambiguous philosophical position to say that UK EFL coursebooks are ideological because they do not contain an ideology.

It seems to be worth noting that if every textbook is bound to contain culture and ideology (Valdes, 1991; Rinvolucrì, 1999), learners’ perception of these problematic issues are also bound to be considered in the design as well as the selection of coursebooks.

Additionally, Thornbury and Meddings’ (2001) criticism of coursebooks covers even what coursebooks are assumed to be ‘good’ at; that, is activities. They argue, in fact, that these activities are nothing but “passivities, serving merely to put words into [learners’] mouths rather than serving as vehicles for the communication of their own meanings” (parag. 8, italics in original). What is meant by this position is that coursebooks deprive teachers from investing the lives of the learners in teaching, which is highly important for effective learning, by basing the teaching on non-interesting mechanical pre-identified drills (Swain, 1992). Swain (1992) emphasises the importance of stimulating rather than simulating in the sense that it is more important if the teacher starts from learners’ own experiences.

In response to the claims about the importance of coursebooks in providing a coherent syllabus, Thornbury and Meddings’ (2001) state ironically that “[c]oursebook syllabuses have about as much relation to learning processes as the night sky does to whether you will be healthy, wealthy or wise” (parag. 9). This position from Thornbury and Meddings’ (2001) is labelled by Harwood (2005) a “strong view [advocating] the abandonment of all commercial materials per se” (p. 150).

In fact, there is no clear cut evidence that learners learn exactly in the same order and at the tempo presented in coursebooks (Thornbury & Meddings, 2001), which weakens the idea that ELT coursebooks are advantageous for providing a coherent syllabus that correlates with learning processes. It is for this reason that Thornbury and Meddings’ (2001) condemn the use of coursebooks and suggest using other materials such as real books, magazines, and newspaper.
The coursebook is sometimes considered the syllabus by learners and teachers (Harwood, 2005, p. 152). While this misunderstanding is, evidently, the result of learners’ ignorance of ELT pedagogy, teachers consider the coursebook as the syllabus in order to make their job easier regardless of the limitations of coursebooks to deal with the needs of their specific learners and regardless of the content of the material (Block, 1991; Howard & Major, 2004). This claim is also illustrated in Apple’s (1989) confession that “in most cases [the coursebook] (...) becomes the ‘real curriculum’” (p. 282).

In addition, it is argued that total reliance on the coursebook “removes initiative and power from teachers” (Tomlinson, 2001) as a result of promoting what could be termed a ‘wild’ understanding of the idea of learner autonomy. In fact, promoting learner autonomy to the extent of marginalising the teacher could hinder them from receiving a coherent and relevant syllabus that is distinct from the coursebook. Talking about the inconvenience of not separating the syllabus from the coursebook Toms (2004) argues that “to allow a General English coursebook to serve as de facto syllabus is to short change our students. It is to do them, and ourselves, a grave disservice” (parag. 16, italics in original).

Syllabuses are expected to be designed for specific learners while coursebooks, especially commercial ones are designed to meet the needs of target audiences that are as diverse as learners around the globe (Thornbury, 2002; Hill, 2005). As put by Toms (2004), “A General English coursebook will not, cannot, and should not take the place of a syllabus designed to meet the specific needs of specific learners in a specific situation” (parag. 12).

McGrath (2006) investigated, using metaphors, views as to coursebooks. One of the viewpoints of learners was that a coursebook is “an angry barking dog that frightens me in a language I don’t understand”. Such a view shows the inconveniency of using inauthentic language. Exploring learners’ attitudes towards the coursebook they use is important to understand the way they perceive it.

Bashogh (2003), investigating the way language, neutrality, and ideology are addressed in three major ELT coursebooks discourse critically, found that

[T]extbooks idealise communication as involving social equals with little regard for inequality or struggles faced by learners [which makes them] a medium of market ideology with little attempt to develop critical language awareness on the part of the textbook user (p. 3).
Such finding shows how the content of ELT global coursebooks could be distorted as a result of trying to find compromises that fit global audiences. An ironical, but expressive, picture about the contradiction between the reality of the learners and the reality invested in ELT global coursebooks is the one drawn by Canagarajah (1999). Canagarajah (1999) criticised Sri Lankan teachers’ use of the *American Kernel* (O’Neil, Yeadon, & Cornelius, 1978) coursebook which reflects only western middle class life while the Sri Lankan government aircrafts are attacking Tamil Tigers outside the classrooms.

Canagarajah (1999) calls for making the content of ELT materials closer to the everyday situations of particular local learners by investing in users’ own local worries and aspirations. The point seems to be that authenticity, in the Sri Lankan context, contradicts the principles of providing ‘aspirational content’ and the guidelines of avoiding politics (Gray, 2002) in the content of global coursebooks.

For Nunan (1985) authenticity is the use of materials that are not designed essentially for language teaching (qtd in Nunan, 1988, p. 99). Martinez (2002) documents nine advantages for authentic content that are summarised below:

- Exposure to real everyday language
- Informing learners about current events
- Diversifying tasks, materials, and topics
- Encouraging incidental learning

Martinez’s (2002) advantages of content authenticity suggest it as an indispensable principle to be taken into consideration when designing ELT coursebooks viewing its importance in providing real input, cultivating, and motivating learners (Kilickaya, 2004).

However, authenticity could be considered a problematic notion, as what is authentic for a group of learners, textbook writers, and teachers in a particular place may not be so for other learners in regions as diverse as five continents. This fact challenges the claims about the “globality” of global ELT coursebooks.

Authenticity in content could be understood as the use of topics, images, and tasks directly and purely taken from real life of a given speech community regardless of cultural appropriacy problems (Martinez, 2002; Kilickaya, 2004). However, authenticity could not be absolute in global coursebooks as there are other principles to take into consideration such as avoiding inappropriacy and preserving inclusivity (Melliti, 2011). For example, cohabitation is authentic but its use is inappropriate for some cultures (Phillipson, 1992; Viney, 2000). This means that mentioning the issue of cohabitation is controversial for some cultures although “authentic” in the sense of being part of real life in many societies.
In order to avoid the drawbacks of ‘authenticity’, textbook writers eliminate problematic aspects or whatever may be considered inappropriate (Gray, 2002). This was known as sanitisation of content, which means publishers’ attempt to produce politically correct coursebooks that are as empty as possible of controversial references (Toms, 2004; Melliti, 2011).

Conclusion

As a conclusion, coursebooks are documented to be beneficial and at the same time disadvantageous for learners and learning especially for cultural reasons. However, the solution seems to be not to overthrow the use of coursebooks altogether but to use them in addition to other materials with a critical mind. This means that teachers are invited to be aware of the pedagogical and cultural flows inherent especially in global coursebooks.

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