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Textual materials as useful resources for both teachers and learners in language classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Textual materials encompass all kinds of books and other printed materials used by teachers and learners for reference before, during and after instruction. They are mainly used for presentation of information to the learners and complementing teacher presentation through the learners' private study. Examples of these include textbooks, class readers, course books, reference books, supplementary readers, newspapers, workbooks, fiction, periodicals, study guides, manuals, worksheets, and magazines among others. The teachers can choose the appropriate type of textual material to use depending on the content to be taught and the purposes of instruction. This paper is a discussion of the value of textual materials in particular textbooks in the language classroom. This paper will examine whether textbooks liberate teachers or are systems of control by looking at their advantages and disadvantages and how teachers can adapt other commercial textbooks in the language classroom.

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Introduction

Role of Textbooks

Textbooks play a very crucial role in the realm of language teaching and learning and are considered the next important factor in the language classroom after the teacher (Riazi 2003: p 52). The textbook is a tool in the hands of the teacher, and the teacher must not only how to use it, but also how useful it can be. Textbooks have brought with them a range of reactions. Responses often fluctuate between these two extremes. One position is that they are valid, useful and labor-saving tools. The other position holds that they are "masses of rubbish" skillfully marketed"(Brumfit 1980: p 30).

Any textbook should be used judiciously since it cannot cater equally for the requirements of every classroom setting (Williams 1983: p. 251). Teachers have the responsibility of evaluating textbooks. Often we have not been confident about what to base our judgements on, how to qualify our decisions, and how to report the results of our assessment. It seems to us that to date textbook selection has been made in haste and with lack of systematically applied criteria. Teachers ,students and administrators are all consumers of textbooks. All these groups of course may have conflicting views about what a good/standard textbook is, however the question is where they can turn to for reliable advice on how to make an informed decision and select a suitable textbook. The wealth of published materials for English language teaching available in the market makes selecting the right coursebook a challenging task. Moreover the selection of a particular core textbook signals an executive educational decision in which there is considerable professional, financial and political investment (Sheldon 1988).

In some situations, textbooks serve as the basis for much of the language input learners receive and the language practice that occurs in the classroom. They may provide the basis for the content of the lessons, the balance of skills taught and the kinds of language tasks students actively use. In other situations textbooks may serve primarily to supplement the teachers instructions. For learners, textbooks may provide a major source

of contact they have with the target language, excluding the input provided by the teacher. In case of novice teachers, textbooks may also be utilized as a form of teacher training that is, they provide ideas on how to plan and teach lessons as well as formats that teachers can use. Much of the language teaching that occurs throughout the world today could not take place without the extensive use of commercial textbooks. Learning to use and adapt textbooks is hence an important part of a teacher's professional knowledge (Richards 2001). Textbooks are vehicles for teacher and learner training because they provide support and relief from the burden of looking for materials. The materials may on the other hand not be in tune with the new kind of teaching being encouraged, following instead the methodology already commonly being practiced; alternatively the materials may be so difficult to use that teachers are unable to follow them as intended making them revert to their previous practice. Rather than agents of change, textbooks will be agents of conservatism reducing the likelihood of teachers trying out new, alternative approaches and methods (Garinger, 2001).

A textbook is a stronger instrument for unifying and controlling the classroom especially the officially approved, grade-specific standard textbook package, checked by authorities and tied to the content lists of the official curriculum. For textbooks to be a complete teacher proof vehicle for standardized teaching of the curriculum, they should cover various grade levels, should have a series of grade-level specific textbooks should be introduced, the package should include work books and teacher manuals. Michael Apple (1986) assesses the meaning of the textbook in school work as follows:

"how is this 'legitimate' knowledge made available in school? By and large it is made available through something to which we have paid for too little attention-the textbook"

It is estimated for example that 75% of the time elementary and secondary students are in classrooms and 90% of their time on homework is spent with text materials. Yet even given the ubiquitous character of textbooks, they are one of the things we know least about. (Apple 1986: P. 85).

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One important aspect of the influence of textbooks is the consequences of the decontextualization of language, its removal from the human life-world. It is ironical that those teachers who rely most heavily on the textbooks are the ones least qualified to interpret its intentions or evaluate its content and method (Williams 1983: p. 251). Then how necessary is a textbook? The answer depends on the teacher's own teaching style, the resources available to them, the accepted standards of teaching in every language school. There are three options open to teachers as regards the use and non-use of a particular textbook in a language classroom:

- (i) Teachers need textbooks
- (ii) They do not need them
- (iii) They select them and supplement some other materials to perfect them

No textbook is perfect, therefore teachers should have the option of assigning supplementary materials based on their own specific needs in their own specific teaching situation.

Advantages of textbooks

1. A textbook is a framework which regulates and times the program by providing structure and a syllabus. Without textbooks, a program may have no central core and learners may not receive a syllabus that has been systematically planned and developed in the eyes of learners, no textbook means no purpose. Without a textbook, learners think their learning is not taken seriously. In many situations a textbook can serve as a syllabus. It provides ready-made teaching texts and learning tasks. It is a cheap way of providing learning materials. A learner without a textbook is out of focus and teacher-dependent and perhaps most important of all for novice teachers a textbook means security, guidance and support.
2. Textbooks help standardize instruction:- the use of a textbook in a program can ensure that the students in different classes receive similar content and therefore can be tested in the same way. Many students working with a course book feel secure and

have a sense of progress and achievement. They become more confident and satisfied, a textbook provides them with the opportunity to go back and revise. They can also use the textbook for self-study and as a reference tool.

3. Textbooks maintain quality:- If a well developed textbook is used students are exposed to materials that have been tried, tested, that are based on sound learning principles, and that are paced appropriately.

4. They provide a variety of learning resources: Textbooks are often accompanied by workbooks, CDS and cassettes, videos, CDROMS, and comprehensive teaching guides, providing a rich and varied resource for teachers and learners.

5. They are efficient:- They save teacher's time enabling teachers to devote their time to teaching rather than material production.

6. They can provide effective language models and input. Textbooks can provide support for teachers whose first language is not English and who may not be able to generate accurate language input on their own.

7. They can train teachers- If teachers have limited teaching experience, a textbook together with the teacher's manual can serve as a medium of initial teacher training.

8. They are visually appealing:- Commercial textbooks usually have high standard of design hence are appealing to teachers.

Disadvantages

If every group of students has different needs, no one textbook can be a response to all different needs. Topics in a textbook may not be relevant and interesting to all. A textbook is confining i.e it inhibits a teacher's creativity.

A textbook of necessity sets prearranged sequence and structure that may not be realistic and situation-friendly. Textbooks have their own rationale, and as such they cannot by their nature