

Coursebook evaluation

Světlana Hanušová

Teaching a foreign language does not necessarily mean teaching from a coursebook. However, using a coursebook is probably the most common way of teaching English today.

First of all, it is good to establish what the role of coursebooks in the learning/teaching process is or, better still, should be. Many institutions present the syllabus in terms of the main coursebook to be used: by a certain date teachers are expected to have covered a certain number of units in the book. Such an approach obviously underestimates the role of learners, not taking their needs and specific characteristics into consideration. Teachers simply have to struggle their way through a certain number of lessons no matter how the learners respond.

It is very important to realize that a textbook is an aid, not a sacred text. Teachers should work out the best ways to use their books but they should never let the book use them. Coursebooks must be at the service of teacher and learners, not their masters.

Quite often teachers complain about coursebooks that need supplementing. The truth is: all coursebooks need supplementing. The point is just to decide how much and what kind of supplementing a coursebook requires, always according to the needs and characteristics of a particular learner or a group of learners.

The coursebook can play several different roles in the teaching/learning process. They can be:

- a resource of presentation material
- a source of activities for practice and communicative interaction
- a reference book (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation)
- a syllabus
- a resource for self-directed learning or self-access
- support for less experienced teachers

With a plethora of coursebooks on the market, teachers face a challenging task of selecting the most suitable book for their learners. It is easy to become overwhelmed by the variety. In *Choosing Your Coursebook*, Alan CUNNINGSWORTH offers very helpful guidelines aimed at assisting teachers in the process of coursebook selection.

When selecting a coursebook, the aims and objectives of a teaching programme have to be considered first. Then teachers can adopt a two-stage approach, the first stage being an **impressionistic overview** (general layout, visuals), the second **an in-depth evaluation** (can be based on a checklist of key indicators – items you will look at in a new coursebook). It is good to identify difficult areas and compare how they are dealt with in different coursebooks – e.g. present perfect, the use of articles, intonation.

The impressionistic overview should lead to the selection of 3 – 5 titles. The following in-depth evaluation should be based on a reasonable number of criteria.

Obviously teachers will want to evaluate the whole **coursebook package** (or coursebook set), not just the student's book. The whole set usually consists of

- Student's Book
- Teacher's Book
- Workbook
- Activity Book
- Cassettes
- Tests
- Video + Activity Book + Teacher's Book
- CALL materials (CALL refers to Computer Aided Language Learning)
- Internet support (available e.g. for coursebooks published by Macmillan or by OUP. Teachers who register can get materials regularly on their e-mail.)

During in-depth evaluation the following items can be considered:

THE ORGANIZATION OF COURSEBOOKS:

What techniques are used for recycling and reinforcement? (The term of recycling refers to the situation when you meet one item more than once in the coursebook to be able to store it in long-term memory.)

Are there reference sections? If so, are there pointers to them in the main text?

Is there a list of new vocabulary?

Is the material suitable for use in a self-study mode? Does it have a key to exercises? (It is important as many learners will have to study on their own from time to time, eg. when absent from school due to an illness.)

How long are the units? (Short units are believed to be more motivating than very long ones as they give learners a sense of progress.)

THE LANGUAGE CONTENT:

Grammar:

- What grammar items are included? Do they correspond to students' language needs?
- Are they presented in small enough units for easy learning?
- How balanced is the treatment of form and use?

Vocabulary:

- Is there any principled basis for selection of vocabulary?
- Is there any distinction between active and passive vocabulary, or classroom vocabulary?
- Are specific needs of Czech (or at least Slavonic) learners considered?
- Are learners sensitized to the structure of the lexicon through vocabulary learning exercises based on semantic relationships, formal relationships, or collocations?

Phonology:

- How thoroughly and systematically are each of the following aspects of the phonological system covered: individual sounds, word stress, sentence stress, intonation?
- Are specific needs of Czech (or at least Slavonic) learners considered?
- Is the pronunciation work built on the other types of work, such as listening, dialogue practice etc., or does it stand separately?
- Are there CDs or cassettes for pronunciation practice?

Style: Is there any attempt to match language style to social situations?

Which geographical variety of English is taught? British, American, other, International English?

Language skills:

- Is there practice in all four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing)?
- If so, is it balanced?

- If not, which skills are omitted?
- Does the coursebook use authentic reading material at an appropriate level?
- What kind of comprehension questions are asked? (Concept questions asking about the meaning are always better than display question that can be answered automatically without understanding the meaning.)
- Does the coursebook use authentic listening material at an appropriate level?
- How is accuracy and fluency balanced in speaking and writing? Are there both controlled and communicative exercises?

TOPIC, SUBJECT CONTENT, SOCIAL VALUES:

Topic can be real (immediate) or imaginary (made-up). Real topics are usually more interesting. Are they included in the book?

Social and cultural values are usually unstated, values system is not explicit, but the underlying values are at least as important as the language content. It is important to look at this aspect and try to identify the underlying values.

“Hidden curriculum” is the image of life presented by coursebooks, the attitudes they convey – consciously or unconsciously and the social and cultural values they communicate. In some modern coursebooks only young and happy people are depicted, which leads to a distorted view of reality.

Stereotyping can be another problem occurring in some coursebooks (eg. a simplistic profile of a typical British family is described). We do not have to worry if we come across stereotyping occasionally, we can always confront it and discuss it. However, as soon as it becomes pervasive, we should consider choosing a different coursebook.

It is illuminating to look at materials to see if and how the coursebook represents people according to the following categories:

- ethnic origin
- occupation
- age
- social class
- disability

Are characters in the book depicted in a kind of social structure (family, peer group, workplace) or not?

METHODOLOGY:

Learner needs:

- Does the material discuss and identify areas of student need?
- Is the book sensitive to what students need in order to learn well?

Principles and approaches:

- Does the book encourage deductive or inductive approach to learning – or a balance of both?
- Is accuracy balanced with fluency?
- Are learners encouraged to use language creatively?
- What is the attitude towards error?
- What is the attitude towards the use of students' mother tongue?

VISUALS:

- Are the visuals in the book used as an integral part of teaching or are they essentially decorative?
- Are they reasonably well produced and attractive?

STUDY SKILLS:

- Is there any reflection on study techniques?
- Any advice on study skills development?
- Are students encouraged to take some degree of responsibility for their learning?
- Are there any materials for independent work?

TEACHER'S BOOK:

When evaluating a teacher's book, you can ask the following questions:

1. What components does the teacher's book include?
2. Is it written so as to be comprehensible enough to less experienced teachers?
3. Is it suitable for native and non-native speakers?
4. Is the underlying approach of the writers expressed clearly and explicitly?
5. Is there cultural explanation to enable teachers unfamiliar with, for example, British lifestyles to interpret and exploit appropriately the situations portrayed in the coursebook?
6. Are learning difficulties predicted and appropriate advice given?
7. Are keys to exercises and other activities provided?
8. Are there regular progress tests?
9. Are there guidelines for evaluating how well lessons went?
10. Are there any photocopiable additional materials?

Literature:

CUNNINGSWORTH, Alan. *Choosing Your Coursebook*. Macmillan Heinemann, 1995.

HARMER, Jeremy. *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Longman, 1994.

