Why use textbooks?

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This paper, though stimulated by Allwright's article 'What do we want teaching materials for?' in the last issue of ELT Journal, *does not attempt a point-by-point rebuttal. Instead it offers arguments for the use of published textbook materials as a basis on which to mould the unpredictable interaction which is necessary to classroom language learning. It is also suggested that learners who do not work from textbooks may be being deprived of a useful medium of orientation and study outside the classroom. Finally, the author considers the gradual process of replacement by which new textbook materials evolve.*

This article is not designed as a direct reply to Dick Allwright's paper 'What do we want teaching materials for?', published in *ELT Journal* Vol. 36.1 (October 1981). There are two basic reasons why it is not. First, I think it perfectly possible to agree with many of his assumptions and still believe in the use of textbooks for a variety of purposes. For example, I agree that we should not attempt to predict the learning process of the learner in the way that some textbooks appear to do. But I shall argue that this is by no means typical of all textbooks. I can also agree that some textbooks promote over-involvement of the teacher and under-involvement of the learner. But this does not mean I think it is impossible for textbooks to be designed to promote loosely co-operative styles of learning in which the learner often takes the initiative in deciding what is the best step forward. Indeed, I believe that a number of contemporary textbooks *are* designed in this way. I can also agree that in some cases it may well be best to begin with a clean slate and rely only on materials designed after contact with a particular group and close analysis of their needs. However, I think the situations in which this is possible are far less common than Dick Allwright appears to believe. Certainly they are far less common than the particular circumstances he argues from. Relatively few groups are sponsored by organizations like the Polish Academy of Sciences, or have the favour of a British Council subsidy. Teachers and classes are often thrown together in schools or institutions in which there is relatively little time for careful analysis of each group's needs. In such cases it is often far more practical to choose from the considerable and growing variety of published textbooks. I shall argue in any case that often there is far more similarity between the needs of apparently different groups than we realize.

My second basic reason for not designing this article as a direct reply to Dick Allwright's question 'What do we want teaching materials for?' (and by teaching materials he means textbooks) is that I think it is far better to set out the positive advantages of using textbooks, as I see them, and to allow readers to judge for themselves between our two arguments.

About two years ago I happened to be teaching English in a German shipyard. It was an intensive course of about six hours a day, over six months, for a small group of German technicians who were expecting to train a

contingent of Iranians how to maintain and repair six submarines undergoing construction in the yard. The Iranian government had stipulated that all this instruction between the Germans and the Iranians was to be done in English. (This was a few months before the downfall of the Shah.) I was only one of the teachers; each of us did an intensive three-week stint and then handed over to another teacher. When my turn to hand over came, I went over with my replacement what I had done. He was a young, intelligent teacher who had just finished a course in applied linguistics at a British university. 'My God, you haven't been using a textbook, have you?' he said when he saw my notes. It was as if one doctor trained in the latest medical techniques had discovered that a colleague had been bleeding one of his patients with leeches. Indeed, I had been using a textbook for one central part of the course. My replacement believed that this was inherently wrong. His objections boiled down to the fact that he didn't want the people he was teaching to know what he was going to do the next day. 'It takes away the element of suspense. Besides, I don't like using other people's material. It's so uncreative!' he exclaimed. His attitude, although extreme, was not untypical. There are many teachers who share his views almost as an article of faith. A great deal of their training reinforces this attitude. For example, it seems to be widely believed by candidates taking the RSA Certificate for Teachers of English as a Foreign Language that they dare not teach from a textbook in the practical lessons they are required to give before an examiner. If they do, they will almost automatically be failed. Textbooks are 'out', home-produced materials are 'in'.

I began to think about my own reasons for using textbooks on that course in Germany and on others. I was, in fact, using more than one. There was a technology-oriented textbook consisting mainly of short texts describing basic workshop procedures and practices. There was another 'general coursebook' at about intermediate level, which I used for teaching or re-teaching the basic grammar almost everyone in the group needed (even though some described themselves as 'advanced'). What were my reasons?

1 A great deal of the material, although not specifically designed for this group, was very suitable for their needs.
2 The two textbooks made it possible for the group to look ahead to what we were going to do or to look back at what we had done.
3 The textbooks provided materials which were well-presented, which could be replaced by me or by someone else only at great cost in terms both of money and of my own time.
4 The textbooks allowed me to adapt and improvise while I was teaching.

Each reason, however banal, needs some additional clarification. Let me go through them again and enlarge upon them.

My replacement at the shipyard believed almost as an article of faith that any materials that were commercially available, as these were, could not possibly be suitable for this particular group since they had not been specifically designed for it. 'Only materials arising out of experience teaching the particular group can be valid for it,' he stated dogmatically. 'Whoever wrote these books has never seen this group or the inside of a shipyard. This group has its own needs and we must provide materials specifically designed for those needs.' But I and the teacher who had preceded me had not selected any old materials. We had spent several days scouring bookshops in London, looking for things we thought might be suitable. After all, there are a number of things almost any group studying

technical English will have in common. Although one group's needs diverge at various points from another's, there is often a common core of needs shared by a variety of groups in different places studying under different conditions at different times. For example, the technical processes described in the textbook on workshop practices introduced a great deal of basic technical vocabulary describing many of the machines and tools shipyard technicians use. More importantly, we did not expect the book to provide us with the exact instructions our technicians would later give to their Iranian apprentices. It is a dangerous delusion to suppose that textbooks can do this and it is quite false to believe it is necessary for textbooks to do so in order to be useful. What this particular textbook could and did provide us with were examples of instructions which our learners could adapt and transfer to their particular uses. In other words, it provided us with a grammatical and functional framework within which we could work. It is nonsense to argue that this framework is never the same from one group to another even though the ultimate, specific uses two groups may make of the language may differ. The framework is as much a result of the language itself as it is of the learner's needs. Are there many learners, for example, who do not need to learn how to explain cause and effect, to make requests, to suggest things, to ask for other people's opinions about things and to give their own, or to make basic tense distinctions such as past and present? Is there any significant use of English which escapes the need to express modal distinctions such as 'You can do it', 'You should do it' and 'You must do it'? In other words, do not almost all learners at elementary, intermediate, and even many advanced levels have to learn the same basic grammatical and functional framework in order to make use of the language in their own particular ways? Of course there are many ways of illustrating and exemplifying this framework so that different learners will see its relevance to their purposes, but this hardly means that the same textbook cannot be used successfully for a wide range of different groups. Almost always a textbook can be found which will provide the core language which is necessary and useful for a group whose needs may at first sight seem unique. Groups vary enormously in their composition and level. They vary even more, perhaps, in what will interest them and sustain their motivation. But there is an immense variety of textbooks to draw upon.

The second basic reason for using the particular textbooks we had chosen was that the books made it possible for learners who, for various reasons, had missed lessons to catch up. They also made it possible for the class to prepare in advance for lessons. There is a curious, sometimes submerged, but still formidable school of thought in the language teaching profession that would if possible discourage learners from doing this. As my replacement said, he didn't want the group to know what he was going to do because it removed the element of surprise. I sympathize with the desire to provide surprises in his lessons: surprise is useful and necessary in all aspects of life. But I do not sympathize with his desire to prevent learners from making the fullest possible use of their resources for staying in touch with the language. The chance to look ahead to future lessons and spend time preparing oneself for them is welcome to many learners. This is particularly so when the learner is having trouble staying in touch with the average level of the group he or she is in. In any case, if textbooks are used for the purpose for which they are best suited—that of providing a core framework, but not everything that happens within it—there are many

other ways of providing the useful element of surprise and suspense. This is not to argue that textbooks themselves cannot and should not be designed so that at least one part of the book relies on 'unseen' material. For example, in a book of twenty six-page units, one page could be devoted to a continuous story running through the book. This text could be designed to reinforce the language presented in the other five pages of the unit. However, the story need not actually appear on the sixth page. That page could instead be used for questions and exercises based on material provided only in the teacher's book. The teacher could read out or play a tape of the story when and as necessary, and the class would never see the full text of the story in their books.

The third reason for using the textbooks we had selected for the course was their appearance and the quality of their presentation. This is still one of the least discussed reasons for using textbooks. I do not mean that textbooks should be glossy, glittering products in full colour, packaged and sold like deodorants or American automobiles. But neither should they, simply because they must be functional in several senses of the word, look like one of those catalogues you sometimes see in funeral parlours advertising coffins or cremation urns. Home-made materials tend to get shabby very quickly and, even in these days of high-quality photocopiers and word-processors, cause enormous production and storage problems. Even though we had access at the shipyard to excellent photocopying and duplication facilities, we found we could not use them as often as we needed to without causing problems and tension with other people in the yard who needed the same facilities for purposes which they saw as far more pressing and immediate than ours. Even after a certain time had been set aside each day for us, we ran into the simple problem of expense. It costs far more to photocopy 100 pages of your own material than it does to buy 200 pages bound together in a book. This has been discovered not only in places where such copying facilities are scarce or under great pressure from other users, but in language schools on the south coast of England for example, which have generously provided such facilities and practically unlimited access to them for teachers. The cost has often turned out to be staggering, not only in paper and other direct copying costs but in service calls each time the copier breaks down. Books are good value for money simply in terms of paper alone. The fact that they are bound means they are easy to carry and to look at where and when the learner wants to, on buses, at meal times, in parks, while waiting for appointments, etc. No other medium is as easy to use as a book.

There is beyond this something enormously valuable and important about the feel and size and shape of a book. It can be argued that my sentiments here are hardly objective, since I depend largely for my income upon other people sharing my views. But I had these sentiments about books long before I got involved in writing or producing them. Sheets of paper, particularly A4 paper, issued in batches to learners throughout a course have a terrible habit of getting lost and confused, and are difficult to carry about.

The fourth and final reason has been hinted at earlier. But it needs greater elaboration. In my opinion it is important that textbooks should be so designed and organized that a great deal of improvisation and adaptation by both teacher and class is possible. Below I shall give an example of such improvisation and adaptation, and I shall try to explain why it is necessary. But before I do so, I want to consider why such a statement, on

the surface unsurprising and unexceptional, runs counter to at least one concept of language teaching that is still dominant and informs both teacher-training and coursebook-design in various places. I shall call this concept or view of language-teaching and coursebook-design the 'grandmaster' school of thought. According to this view the teacher must know exactly what will happen in the lesson and have planned for it. Anything that occurs in the lesson does so because it is part of the teacher's plan (or perhaps the plan of some other person or body, such as a textbook author or the teacher's employer). Objectives are clearly stated and adhered to. Although certain alternative possibilities of attaining them may have been envisaged in the 'plan', they are still foreseen and calculated.

There are many examples of this school of thought, although it is not always articulated so explicitly. There are concepts of teacher-training which begin with an idealized model of the 'good teacher' (the teacher that will carry out the aims of a particular methodology, organization, or textbook), and then attempt to mould all trainees to this model. There are language institutes, some of them very prestigious, which issue elaborate materials to their teachers with carefully detailed goals and sub-goals for each lesson. Each lesson moves from carefully planned 'input' stages to equally carefully planned 'output' phases (the computer terms are no accident), such as pre-planned drill or exercise. Such lesson plans may even allow for 'free' stages, but usually strict time limits are set and these 'outputs' are 'free' only in the sense that they are slightly less pre-planned than the other phases of the lesson.

What, however, do I propose as an alternative model of coursebook-design, teacher-training, and language-teaching? Put briefly, perhaps even simplistically, the alternative view begins with the simple belief that there can be no model of an ideal teacher, or lesson, or learner (or textbook). Since people are diverse in their personalities, inherent learning strategies and rhythms, such a thing as a teacher-training programme must seek not to mould all teachers according to a preconceived notion of what teachers should be, but must try to build on the individual and differing strengths of each teacher so as to make the maximum effective use of that teacher's qualities. This clearly has implications for both textbook-design and teaching methodology. No textbook can expect to appeal to all teachers or learners at a particular level. There is a basic need for choice and variety, not only in teaching-style and learning opportunity but also in the style and approach of materials available. Teachers have not 'failed' because they get on well with one group of learners but not another. Neither is a textbook necessarily unsuccessful if its style and content do not please some learners at the level at which it is aimed.

However, there are many ways of designing textbooks so that they can be used by a variety of learners with a variety of ultimate goals, and so they can be taught by a variety of teachers with a variety of teaching styles. For example, units of material can be designed so that they allow a choice of basic objectives. There might be for instance a choice of at least three such objectives for the unit. Although different, they can be related.

1 Eliciting opinions through questions like 'What do you think we should do?' 'How do you think we can do it?' 'What do you think will happen if we do it this way?'
2 Analysis of indirect questions in other contexts: 'Do you know if we can . . . ?' 'Can you tell me what is the best way to . . . ?' etc.
3 Meaning and use of contrasting stress patterns as in 'What do YOU think

we should do?' and 'What do you think we should DO?'
The unit designed around these objectives might include, for example, a short dialogue, a text, and a series of structure and intonation exercises. In the dialogue two people might propose and discuss solutions to problems. The strongly functional element of the materials—eliciting someone else's opinion—occurs in the dialogue. The text narrates the results of their decision and what they did, as well as an alternative problem for the class to discuss and try to solve. These first two components would contain other points of focus and activity as well as those mentioned above. For example, the dialogue would not only present the kinds of questions used to elicit other people's opinions; it would also be suitable for stylistic transformation: a very informal style may be used by the speakers (who seem to be very friendly with each other); then changes can be made to introduce a more formal style (such as the style one would use at an official meeting or with one's superior at work). The short text could be used for reading comprehension as well as for discussion. The exercises in intonation and in transforming direct into indirect questions would serve two functions: besides practising features of intonation and grammar, they could be done independently by the class while the teacher reflected during the lesson on how best to continue and perhaps found other material, either in the textbook or from some other source, which would be a relevant continuation. There are objectives in the lesson. The teacher's notes would suggest various ways of using the material. But it would be recognized from the outset that the lesson might develop in a number of ways which could not be predicted exactly beforehand.

Such ideas are by no means novel or original. It is possible to execute them even with many conventional textbooks. Indeed, the very form of a book makes this possible. No other medium is quite as easily handled in this way as is a book. You can jump from one part of a book to another, glancing first at one page then at another as you remind yourself of what is in it (assuming you are familiar with it, as teachers should be with the textbooks they use) in a way you cannot with a video cassette or with a set of loose materials given out in dribs and drabs but never fully surveyed by the class. What is more, if the group using the book is introduced to it in outline and briefly taken through it before the material is formally taught, they can influence selection and development of the material far more than they can with heavily media-dependent materials. Certainly, whatever the other advantages of more modern ways of presenting material, such as video, it is impossible to carry them around in your pocket, look at them as you go home or to work in a bus or train, and difficult to leaf backwards and forwards in them to see what has been or will be done.

This is not an argument against using such modern aids as video or audio recordings. It is an argument for the textbook, which may be supplemented by these modern aids but not supplanted by them. If that happens, I suspect it will not be long before the textbook is re-invented. We need such creative tools because language learning itself is nothing if it is not creative. Unless learners learn how to say what only they want to say in lessons, unless they begin to acquire the generative tools of language to do this, and unless teachers are able to deal with the unexpected, the unpredictable, and the at times irrelevant turns of spontaneous interaction in the classroom, what is taught will be not language but language-like behaviour.[1] We need objectives in our lessons and materials, and we also need flexibility and improvisation so that we can use the creative accidents

that occur regularly in lessons and not smother them with exhaustive (and exhausting) pre-determined plans.

It might also seem from what I have said that those materials put together by teachers or authors outside the commercial process of publication have no place in teaching. I am thinking of all the different kinds of materials teachers write or assemble in direct response to the needs of a class. My argument is not that these have no place. On the contrary, they are an essential part of the process through which new textbooks and published materials get written. It is a process that often begins with a nibble, which becomes a bite and then a gulp. At first the user of a textbook—the teacher—becomes dissatisfied with some aspect of it and replaces parts of it with his or her own material. It may be one or two reading texts, or the questions in the book about a text, or some of the drills. Gradually, however, more and more of the published textbook is abandoned and replaced by materials the teacher devises or finds elsewhere and regards as more suitable or relevant. This is how I started writing textbooks. Sometimes, of course, the process is more radical and less gradual. A teacher or a group of teachers set out to create what is in essence a new textbook because nothing on the market seems suitable. In both cases what one usually ends up with is a new textbook. It is the classic process described by Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, the paradigmatic process through which one theory or concept replaces another.

My colleague in the German shipyard was scornful of any materials not written directly for a group by someone with direct knowledge of that group. The assumption is that each group is so unique that its needs cannot possibly be met by material developed to meet the needs of another group. I believe this is a false assumption for two major reasons. First, the differences tend to obscure the similarities, which are great. These similarities include such things as the common need to possess enough of the generative equipment of a language to use that language as an independent, creative tool and the fact that the basic functional needs of one group often differ from those of another only in their specific applications, and these can hardly ever be foreseen or predicted by anyone. They arise spontaneously and must be met spontaneously by the learner and the learner alone. By this I mean that although we can predict that a learner will have to request things, explain how things work, make time and tense distinctions, offer and refuse to do things, understand deictic meaning, etc., we cannot predict the exact utterances the learner will have to generate, and we should never pretend that we can, except in certain very limited cases.[2] The second reason is that, particularly today, with the great and growing variety of materials devised all over the world to teach English to different groups, there is usually *something* we can find to provide the core teaching material for the group we regard as so unique and utterly different from any other. I have referred to both these things earlier and I shall end by repeating them. Textbooks can at best provide only a base or a core of materials. They are the jumping-off point for teacher and class. They should not aim to be more than that. A great deal of the most important work in a class may start with the textbook but end outside it, in improvisation and adaptation, in spontaneous interaction in the class, and development from that interaction. Textbooks, if they are to provide anything at all, can only provide the prop or framework within which much of this activity occurs. Textbooks, like any other medium, have inherent limitations. The authors of textbooks must make it clear what those limitations

are; for example, whether or not the textbook is intended as a self-study tool or aid, or for classroom use by a teacher and a group of learners. Most of all, the authors and creators of textbooks must abandon any claim that their products are anything more than the basic tools I have spoken of. Since language is an instrument for generating what people need and want to say spontaneously, a great deal must depend on spontaneous, creative interaction in the classroom. Textbooks can help to bring this about, and a great deal in their design can be improved in order to do this. If that creative interaction does not occur, textbooks are simply pages of dead, inert written symbols and teaching is no more than a symbolic ritual, devoid of any real significance for what is going on outside the classroom. □

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Notes

1 The term 'language-like behaviour' has been used by David Wilkins and others to describe what occurs when the learner of a language never acquires the basic tools of grammar.

2 There are of course examples of very stereotyped language, such as that used by Air Traffic Controllers or computer instructions.

The author

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