Syllabus Design and Methodology – A Coursebook Evaluation

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Module 3 Syllabus and Materials

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Contents

1 Introduction

This essay will make a detailed analysis of one of several coursebooks used at the writer's place of work, considering the many factors which went into its design, and paying particular attention to the syllabus and methodology employed in it. The following section will outline in detail the situation in which the coursebook is used, a section of particular importance in this case, since the book has been designed by the school itself for its exclusive use. This will be followed in Section 3 by a detailed examination of the syllabus with a discussion of the different units that make up one chapter of the coursebook. Section 4 contains a discussion of the methodology employed in the text, reasons for its choice and an examination of the coursebooks communicativeness. Section 5 examines the Teachers Manual, while Section 6 examines other factors stipulated as vital elements for a coursebook evaluation by Sheldon (1988).

2 The Teaching Situation

The coursebook was developed to be used solely by a well established international

English language school. Within the school, ability is divided among 10 levels, with three main coursebooks covering these 10 levels. The 'Functional' to 'Intermediate' Levels use a text that covers Levels 1-4, 'Upper Intermediate' to 'Advanced' Levels cover Levels 5-8 and 'Professional' Levels 9-10. These phrases used to describe levels are the schools own, and are not linked to any objective independent scale. Levels are decided by the school following an initial assessment, based on the students' functional and grammatical ability. This essay focuses on the Level 1-4 coursebook, a new coursebook introduced worldwide towards the end of 2002. It is the most widely used coursebook in the school, being used by roughly 70% of students in Japan.

The target audience of the coursebook reflects the typical student taught at the school, adults of varying ages, but with a particular focus on those working in a business environment and those wishing to use English abroad on vacation. The text was designed to be used in classes, varying in size from one to six students. It is sold as part of a package which consists of the text, which covers two levels, an audio cd and an optional cd-rom, which will not be discussed in this essay as it is designed exclusively for use at home by the student. The package costs the very substantial amount of 38,000 Japanese Yen (roughly 200 Pounds Sterling) not including cd-rom. It is used in

classes which last 40 minutes, with a 5 minute break between lessons. In a usual teaching day any one teacher could teach up to 15 lessons, with the norm being around 10 lessons. This strenuous working environment was a definite factor in the development of the text and will be discussed in Section 4.

The coursebook examined here covers the four lowest levels, 'Functional' and 'Intermediate'. One level consists of twelve chapters, two of which (Chapters 6 and 12) are review chapters. Each chapter is broken down into four units. One unit is expected to be covered in one lesson. One level therefore is expected to be covered in 48 lessons. Lessons are also taught privately where the pace of instruction is expected to be slightly quicker with one level being completed within 40 lessons. Thus from the beginning when students enroll they are given a clear standard by which to gauge their rate of progress. In reality of course not every student is the same and one level can take anywhere from 25 to 70 lessons to complete. Having clarified the working environment we will now move on to a more in-depth analysis of the coursebook, beginning with the syllabus.

3   Methodology

3.1 The Syllabus

The syllabus is clearly "Topic-based" (White 1988: 65) in nature.   The same topic recurs in the same chapter throughout the four levels of the coursebook, for example, chapter 5 in levels 1,2,3, and 4 are all related to the topic of travel. The 10 recurring topics are: greeting people, food, work, shopping, cities, home life, finding work, sports and hobbies, and health.   Within these topic-based chapters are a number of "Situational"(ibid: 62) chapters, which focus on an area typical to that topic, for example the travel topic is broken up into situations such as: 'At the Hotel', and conversations such as 'booking a room', 'checking-in', 'checking out' etc, are practiced. As well as a topic-based focus, each chapter focuses on a particular grammatical structure, evident from a brief look at the contents page. This Contents Page informs both the student and teacher which point will be studied and learnt, and at what stage. This is a clear example of a sequential-structural syllabus.   A discussion of this sequential-structural syllabus will follow in section 3.3.

3.2 A Topic-based and Situational Syllabus.

Within each topic-based chapter we are led through a number of example conversations, discussion points, lexical and structural exercises based around the specific topic for that chapter.

A problem with this situational / topic-based approach is that often categories are defined too narrowly or broadly. (White 1988:63)   Within the coursebook examined here, there are examples of both problems. Certain chapters are designed "so situation-specific that the content [has] relevance to only a limited number of students." (ibid: 63)   An example of which is one chapter, which focuses on investments.   In my experience of using this coursebook a lack of interest in this investment chapter from students has been expressed because the chapter is both too narrow, and too broad. In the case of a number of students studying English as a hobby and for general self-improvement, the chapter was too narrow and of little interest.   A student who worked in the investment industry found the same chapter too broad and lacking in relevant vocabulary and experiences to be of any practical use. If a number of students find significant chunks of a coursebook uninteresting it could be a major demotivating factor and possibly points to a syllabus that is not suitable for a school such as this with

such a wide range of students.

3.3 The Systematic-Structural Syllabus.

As previously mentioned, within every chapter of the coursebook there is a section which focuses on grammar, with this grammatical practice always appearing in the second unit of each chapter. It is immediately preceded by a unit which introduces both the chapter's topic and grammatical structure through a staged conversation, created solely for this purpose. Following on from the grammatical section in Unit 3 is a further controlled practice of expressions or conversations related to the theme, as well as freer discussion sections. This sandwiching of the grammatical focus between supposedly communicative elements is similar to the Type A syllabus described by Yalden (1983). (Cited in White 1988).

This prescribed grammatical focus, allied with the topic-based and situational syllabus already discussed, is typical of a Type A syllabus as described by White (1988). One that fails to take account of the views that language learning is holistic, and that language use is necessary for learning to take place. Students are not encouraged to

use language for the exchange of meanings. Rather the coursebook encourages the

memorization of phrases and whole conversations. This is further encouraged by the

testing system which requires students to reproduce dialogues from earlier in the chapter.

With the Teachers Manual clearly instructing the teacher that the reproduction of these

conversations is the desired outcome: "Check for correct use of verb forms in the

conditional." (Teachers Manual p. 55). By doing so, the coursebook fails to take account

of developments in SLA and the similarities between first and second language

acquisition. Instead it views language as a set of discrete entities which can be learned

in a prescribed order. Having discussed the syllabus we shall now move on to examine

the methodology at work within the coursebook.

4 Methodology

The Teachers Manual for the coursebook clearly states that in keeping with modern

trends in EFL teaching this will be a communicative text which recommends two

differing methodological approaches to be used in the classroom. The preface to the

teacher's manual first recommends the use of a Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP)

methodology, or as an alternative they suggest that 'at times' the teacher may wish to

employ a Task-Based Language (TBL) teaching cycle. (Teacher's Manual Preface viii)
Within this section I will examine the extent to which the coursebook is
'communicative', and whether the coursebook is true to its claims to allow both PPP
and TBL based teaching.

4.2 PPP

The coursebook clearly follows a PPP approach, both in general chapter layout and in
the approach taken to each individual section of the chapters. The presentation of
grammar and lexis comes in Unit, followed by the practice of this grammar in Unit 2,
then we see the freer production stages in Unit 3 and 4.   Within each activity again PPP
is employed again, an example being the initial conversation in Unit 1 with the
presentation of the text on the audio cd in stage 1.1, followed by the practice stages of Q
& A, a reading of the dialogue, and finally the production of a freer roleplay.   This
structure to both chapters and individual sections is remarkably consistent throughout
the coursebook, so much so that boredom of both student and teacher is almost certainly
a problem.

The use of such a methodological approach in this coursebook is not surprising as it has been the "commonest approach on a worldwide basis" (Skehan 1998:94) for the majority of the last thirty years due to its strong links with teacher training, its reinforcement of student and teacher stereotypes, and its ability to generate clear and tangible syllabi, goals, and testing systems. (ibid: 94) Considering the teaching situation being discussed here, a clear syllabus with clear goals is of great importance, due to the school being first and foremost a business. Showing students what can be achieved and what has been achieved is of paramount importance when encouraging students to begin or continue their studies.

Other factors which may have led to the choice of such a methodology could have been the strenuous nature of the working day, as mentioned in Section 2. As well as the nature of the teachers who are hired by the company. While Skehan goes to great lengths to point out the strong links PPP has with teacher training, the reality of teaching in large English language schools in Japan is that a majority of teachers are hired with very little if any teacher training or teaching experience. The only requirement is a Bachelors Degree, due to the visa requirements of the Japanese Government. By hiring teachers with a lack of formal training the company has realized that they need to

produce a coursebook that is easy to use and very quickly gives the teacher the sense of professionalism that PPP does. As teachers are able to package new material into a well rounded lesson that has clear goals, they themselves fulfill the role of 'teacher' which they have been exposed to during their own schooling. This lack of training is also a factor which is very important when we consider the Teachers Manual which goes with the coursebook, which will be discussed in section 6.

4.2 Task Based Language and the coursebook

Within the Teachers Manual it is suggested that as an alternative to PPP, a TBL approach could be used. However, within the coursebook and Teachers Manual it is clear that there has been little preparation for such an approach. Looking at Willis` (1996) interpretation of TBL teaching, it is clear that by following the guidelines laid out in the Teachers Manual, there are few opportunities for such an approach. Any use of tasks in the coursebook would require an excess of preparation by the teacher, which due to the working conditions is not reasonable, and is frowned upon by the employers, as any straying from the prescribed path is not permitted. In most chapters there are few activities, which fulfill the criteria for tasks set out by many writers such as Nunan

(1989). Often the teacher has to wait till the end of the chapter to find an activity which could constitute a task in the terms laid out by Skehan (1998:95), for "there is some communication problem to solve … there is some sort of relationship to real-world activities … Task completion has some priority … the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome." The entire chapter is designed to last 160 minutes, yet there are times when the coursebook provides only one activity within this time for an activity, which meets the criteria described above. The majority of this time is spent in the practicing of set phrases and conversations, along with a certain grammatical structure, which, for the chapter to be successfully passed must be reproduced in the chapter check. It is clear that almost all of the sections within the coursebook have the same characteristics that Willis (1996) described as not constituting tasks, were they found in activities. Those being that they: "give learners other people's meanings to regurgitate; … are … concerned with language display; … are … conformity-oriented; … embed language into materials so that specific structures can be focused upon." (Willis 1996. Cited in Skehan 1998:95).

The coursebook outlined here appears to include a number of the realities of ELT today. In its creation a huge number of market pressures have had to be considered, realities

such as a lack of trained or experienced teachers and realities of business. Also the realities of ELT as it is seen from the point of view of the student, who expects to be placed in a role similar to that which they have grown accustomed to during the course of their education.

In the creation of this coursebook, a number of factors which have influenced the decisions made during its creation differ to when a coursebook is created for sale on the open market. The success of the company is very much tied to the success of the coursebook. By having a vast knowledge of the environment in which the coursebook was to be used, the designers have been able to create a coursebook which completely fulfils the needs of the school. A coursebook has been created which on the surface is very attractive, great care and attention has been paid to the layout and design, at first glance it exudes quality. The syllabus has clear goals and objectives, easily quantifiable to the student. Upon entering the classroom the student quickly finds the safe roles of student and teacher at place. Had the student any previous experience of studying a language, the similarities between their previous experience and this one would reassure them that everything was normal. The coursebook is designed to fit into the tough schedule of the school and to be as easy to use for both teachers and

students.

It is clear that in the aspects mentioned above the coursebook has succeeded. However, when you consider the needs of the students in relation to their language abilities, the coursebook has fallen into "a closed circle… wherein textbooks merely grow from and imitate other textbooks and do not admit the winds of change from research, methodological experimentation, or classroom feedback." (Sheldon 1988: 239) The use of a PPP methodological approach within a sequential-structural, thematic syllabus succeeds only in continuing the norms of coursebook design, and has led to the alienation and decrease in motivation of a number of students and teachers. Without further research it is impossible to predict the extent of this demotivation, however, the observation of such an occurrence within my own school does suggest that this could be widespread.

4.3 A Communicative Coursebook

In Communicative Language Teaching dialogues are not memorized, effective communication is sought, language is created by the individual through trial and error,

intrinsic motivation comes from what is being communicated by the language. (Finocchiaro and Brumfit 1983, cited in Richards and Rogers 2001).   However, within the coursebook the memorization of phrases and conversations is encouraged and rewarded in the chapter checks (a short test which reviews each chapter's main points). At certain points in every chapter an attempt is made to encourage discussion through regular elements such as the 'Culture Corner' and 'Media Mix' sections.   However this signposted discussion rarely leads to any kind of discussion which can be considered inspirational or motivational.   It rarely manages to go beyond the simple asking and answering of the questions in the coursebook.   This is due to the structured nature of so many of the elements in the coursebook, be they the memorization of conversations or the practicing of grammatical structures.   When faced with attempts to create effective free discussion, the students view this as another Q & A exercise, and are content to just answer the written questions without any interest in the answers. Real communication in the classroom comes when the students move away from the coursebook due to boredom and disinterest in the topic studied. Without further research into students' views on these discussion points within the book, it is impossible to say this with absolute certainty, but it does appear that the rigid nature of the coursebook stifles communication rather than encourage it.

5 The Teacher's Manual.

An important element of any coursebook is the Teachers Manual, as it clearly lays out the vision for the coursebook in terms of how it is supposed to be used and why it was designed so. In the case of this coursebook, there is a clear example of the problems a company such as this is beset with. In its desire to create uniform lessons throughout all of its branches, a teacher's manual has been created which carefully guides the teacher through each intricate stage of the lesson, with their hand being held all the way. This is done to such an extent that one four-lesson chapter devised to cover 160 minutes of lesson time would usually have 70 steps for the teacher to follow, an overwhelming amount, which has led to the coursebook being labeled "a no-brainer" by a number of teachers. These numerous stages are not merely a guideline, the phrase teachers manual could easily be replaced with teachers instructions, as the teacher is expected to follow the guidelines to the letter, to help with an easy transition between teachers. As previously mentioned there is a significant lack of trained teachers within the school. This means that this style of step-by-step manual has been perceived as being necessary by those who created it, to help teachers through the lesson. While initially useful, it

does have a demoralizing effect on more experienced teachers who are prevented from

elaborating upon the desired course. Factors such as these, the lack of training, the

tough teaching schedule, without preparation time and the desire for standardization

have all led to the creation of a coursebook which while serving the purpose it was

designed for, namely teaching regulated lessons, fails to take into account teacher

satisfaction and development.

6 Elements of Design

Sheldon's (1988) examination of coursebooks, highlights a number of factors which

were seen as important for any coursebook analysis. This section will briefly touch on

a number of these factors which thus far have not been mentioned in the essay.

Sheldon stressed that layout and graphics are an important element in the design of any

coursebook (Sheldon 1988: 243). This coursebook is colourful, uncluttered and with

ample space for notetaking. Chapters and sections are clearly marked and students can

clearly keep track of their progress through the book. However it is unwieldy, very

large, and very heavy. It comes in a ring binder file, which has created a number of

instances where the wrong pages are brought to class and pages are mislaid.

There is a "cultural bias" (ibid: 244) in the book towards British and American culture, with little mention of any other culture.   It offers a "sanitized" (ibid: 244) view of these societies, with no mention of "social realities (e.g. unemployment, poverty, family breakdowns, racism)" （ibid: 244）.   Including such realities would be of great educational benefit, and possibly of greater interest to students, a great number of whom are alienated by the topics chosen for study.

As mentioned in Section 3.3 the opening conversation in each chapter, is often used to introduce both topic and grammatical structure to be studied in the chapter.   Whilst easing the student into both the topic and structure, the use of this style of contrived, unnatural, and simplified text is a weak point, and has been criticized by among others Little (1997), who sees the alternative use of Authentic Texts (AT) as being positive because they: "draw language learners into the communicative world of the target language community… [and] support the communicative purposes of language teaching". (Little 1997:225) The lack of any AT in the coursebook apart from once in chapter 6 and 12 respectively, has many advantages and disadvantages as has been

pointed out by Richards (2001) and cited in Shortall (2002), but the fact that they can

motivate while allowing for the passing on of cultural information and a link to the real

world (Richards 2001) mean that the benefits of AT's do appear to outweigh the

problems of using them such as the extra burden they place on the teacher and the

possibility that language that is used in the text could be beyond the students ability.

Within the coursebook these contrived texts and recordings made in studios by actors,

are a great opportunity missed to motivate and provide students with vital exposure to

'real' English.

7 Conclusion

During the planning stages of this coursebook, the designers had a distinct advantage

over many textbook designers.   They knew precisely the target audience, the

environment in which it was to be used, the background of the teachers, and the needs

of the school.   It is clear in its production these elements have been considered.   The

coursebook is successful in that it fulfils the needs of the school, it is easy to use, gives

teachers who are inexperienced and lacking in specialised training a feeling of security

as they quickly gain confidence through taking the stereotypical role of the teacher, and

suits the tough schedule of the teachers.

From the students perspective it is incredibly attractive, well made, and while in no means being value for money due to its astronomical price, the entire package of coursebook, audio cd and cd-rom is impressive. The clear goals which the PPP approach gives, means that students can clearly see their progress. At any moment they can look back at what has been studied, and, due to the repetitive nature of the coursebook, review chapters, and level tests, the students feel that they are improving and accomplishing something. The fact that the students always pass these tests means that the sales staff can point to the success of the coursebook and method of teaching, which from a business point of view is of paramount importance. Added to this, the use of such a standard syllabus means that students who have studied before are immediately comfortable in their surroundings. If the students are happy in the coursebook and the school then the coursebook to a certain extent can be considered a success.

Problems with the coursebook arise when you consider the syllabus and the methodology. The coursebook has in no way attempted to break new ground in

coursebook design, it appears to have fallen into "a closed circle... wherein textbooks merely grow from and imitate other textbooks and do not admit the winds of change from research, methodological experimentation, or classroom feedback." (Sheldon 1988: 239). While SLA researchers have made great advances in the understanding of the ways languages are learnt, as Willis states, the gulf between research, and coursebook and classroom is great and rarely crossed. (Willis SLA Handbook: 38)

The coursebook examined here conforms to the norms of ELT because of the market pressures under which it was constructed. It is neither groundbreaking nor imaginative in its design, it fails to take account of learner types, uses a methodology which has been lambasted by a number of authors and merely encourages the memorisation of set phrases and conversations, it has a syllabus which fails to take account of learner needs and how learners learn, and it demotivates students through a topic-based focus that is often too broad or too narrow. However, the fact that it helps to make students and inexperienced teachers feel quickly at ease, and allows the company to flourish means that the points previously mentioned could be necessary evils.

Within this essay, due to constraints of length, I have been unable to consider ways for

improvement, something which is vital to any critique.   Given more time an in-depth

analysis of views of students, teachers, and sales staff within the school would be highly

insightful, and allow for a complete analysis of this coursebook.

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