

## ***Some perspectives on EFL textbooks***

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### **EFL teachers' perspectives on textbooks**

Except where EFL textbooks aren't available or are beyond students' means, most teachers of English use them and seem content to do so. Certainly, for inexperienced teachers and those with many classes to teach it would be hard without them. They help teachers work through the English language bit by bit, and, perhaps more importantly, they provide graded listening and reading material that it would be difficult to gather otherwise.

Different teachers have significantly different views of the textbooks they use, and of textbooks in general, of course. Most teachers (and ELT institutions) seem to see textbooks as almost indispensable. They find some better suited than others to their beliefs about language teaching and learning, of course, and some better than others for their teaching situation, but they can hardly imagine teaching without a textbook. However, some teachers, especially very learner-centred ones, don't see textbooks so positively. They consider international textbooks to be almost always largely unsatisfactory because they're for worldwide consumption and therefore can't possibly be really appropriate for specific students, in specific teaching-learning contexts, in specific countries. Most local textbooks (e.g. those provided by ministries of education) are probably little better because they tend to imitate international textbooks, some being adaptations by agreement with an international publisher.

When learner-centred teachers are obliged to use textbooks, they tend to do so critically and creatively, omitting or adapting a lot of material, and substituting or adding material and activities they consider more appropriate for their students. These teachers have often gathered, evaluated and modified a considerable body of such material over their years of teaching, and some make a point of trying to keep a lot of their material updated and relevant for each new group they teach.

Most of the adaptation and substitution of textbook material by these teachers doesn't affect the grammar covered, which can be more or less as in the textbook, but rather the topics, situations, styles of English, types of text, and the vocabulary that goes with them. Appropriate topics and situations for Latin American students are often not the same as for the French, German, Turkish, Indonesian, Japanese and other students using the same international textbooks. Unlike French and German students, for example, very few Latin American students of English ever visit or live in English-speaking countries or need the colloquial English and everyday topics and situations in many international textbooks. And unlike Indonesian and Japanese students, for example, Latin American students have an enormous amount of cognate vocabulary to facilitate early reading, especially of the formal texts they're most likely to need in higher education and professional work.

Teachers who do little adaptation and supplementation and work almost entirely with the material in their textbooks (probably most teachers) may still use them in very different ways. Teachers who "love" a certain textbook or who have an extremely heavy teaching load may work through the textbook material mostly section by section, page by page: the textbook provides their syllabus, methodology, lesson plans, and often their tests. Other teachers, however, may stand the textbook on its head. This can happen when a teacher is obliged to use a textbook but strongly disagrees with its methodological

approach and the sequence of material reflecting it. For example, teachers who believe in a language-focused approach (PPP – present, practice and get production of target language items and only then include them in skills tasks) may turn a strongly communicative textbook into a language-focused book. For example, if each unit in the book has two pages of genuine communicative skills tasks first, not focused on any specific language items but containing some of the language to be focused on later, followed by some language-focused and other skills work, the dissenting teacher uses the language-focused material first (and probably not using the book's inductive approach) and, after that, goes back to the communicative skills tasks on the previous pages. Of course, the students are now very aware of the target language in the communicative skills tasks and are distracted from communication and worried about making language mistakes. The tasks are no longer genuinely communicative.

Much, much more could be said about teachers' views on textbooks and their use of them, but I'll leave that for you to think about, considering yourself and your colleagues, past and present.

### **ELT institutions' perspectives on textbooks**

Most institutions select textbooks for their courses and require all teachers to use them (again, except where they aren't available or are beyond students' means). The use of the same textbooks by all teachers helps institutions to make all teachers give roughly the same courses (though, as mentioned above, teachers can do very different things with the same textbook, so coordination and class observation are also needed).

Like teachers, institutions can handle textbooks in different ways. Some virtually make the textbooks the courses: their syllabuses, methodology guides, sequence of lesson plans, and tests. Other institutions, however, encourage teacher creativity and learner-centredness, indicating to teachers that the textbook should be the course guide and the main source of materials and activities, but it should be adapted to teachers' specific students' needs and wants, with alternative and additional material and activities where appropriate. Yet other institutions leave the use of the textbook, and, in effect, the "creation of the course" (including the tests) up to each individual teacher. I've known cases where those institutions have had to ask teachers to use the textbook more because students (or their parents) have complained about the cost of buying books that are then used very little, and they may also shift to institutional book-based tests instead of different teachers' tests.

Apart from having all teachers giving roughly the same courses year after year, textbooks can be a crucial element when an institution wants to change its methodology or syllabuses. That was the case in the 1980s when most institutions began to move from audiolingual or structural-situational syllabuses and methodology to notional-functional ones. By 2000 ELT institutions had little choice because almost all the textbooks were, at least nominally, CLT (communicative language teaching)! Then came the PPP (presentation-practice-production, or similar) vs TBL (task-based learning, or similar) choice in so-called CLT textbooks. Even now, many still focus on "new language" at the beginning of each unit or lesson, with language presentation dialogues or texts followed by practice exercises, and put communicative skills work afterwards (often largely to consolidate the "new language"), while others put genuine communicative activities first. Institutions that want to move from language-focused to communication-focused teaching usually start by finding an appropriate communication textbook to replace the language-focused one they've been using.

Much, much more could be said ELT institutions' policies on textbooks and their use of them, but I'll leave that for you to think about, considering the institutions you've worked in or know about.

## **ELT publishers' perspectives on textbooks**

First and foremost, of course, publishers are in business. To make money and survive, they have to sell sufficient books, and to do that, they have to satisfy sufficient customers and keep them satisfied. That means producing textbooks and supplementary components that stand up to teacher scrutiny and to actual use in courses (or that satisfy ministries of education). Apart from that business motivation, most people actually contributing to the production of books for publishing companies (publishing managers, editors, authors, etc.) are seeking professional satisfaction, trying to do their best for the ELT world. Competition from other publishers also pushes them to produce the best textbooks they can.

Publishers see the enormous EFL textbook market in terms of sub-markets, and they publish books (or decide not to publish books) for different ones: textbooks for young children, older children, teenagers and adults, textbooks for public primary schools and public secondary schools, textbooks for ESP areas, like business, medicine and engineering, and so on. Most sub-markets are freely competitive, but state school markets are often controlled, with, according to the country, textbooks under contract to ministries of education or requiring approval from them; if that means captive markets and very low prices, it can affect the quality of the textbooks. Some sub-markets are too small to interest many publishers, e.g. textbooks for ESP areas like business, medicine and engineering.

Publishers also see methodological sub-markets, with, for example, old-fashioned teachers and institutions wanting old-fashioned textbooks, and very progressive ones wanting state-of-the-art textbooks. Some books first published 30 or 40 years ago still sell quite well in the old-fashioned sub-market and new ones on the same lines are still launched from time to time. However, the EFL teachers and centres that tend to get the best results, including good international proficiency test results, generally demand progressive textbooks. Apart from the knowledge, experience and beliefs of those teachers and institutions, reputable modern proficiency tests (Cambridge, TOEFL, Trinity, etc.) may have an influence: they now focus on communicative competence, and test language indirectly through communicative skills tasks, and don't employ old-fashioned language-focused tasks.

One natural division of the international EFL textbook market that's generally ignored by international publishers is geographical areas with distinct linguistic, socio-economic and cultural features (except, that is, where it's demanded, as in parts of the Moslem world). Latin America is one such area, with its speakers of Spanish (a very important international language) and Portuguese, few ever travelling to an English-speaking country, but many needing fairly formal English for higher education studies and professional or skilled work. Clearly, textbooks sold in France, Germany, Turkey, Indonesia, Japan and elsewhere can't be really appropriate for most students in Latin America, but they're all that most publishers offer. After all, why go to the expense of producing textbooks specifically for Latin America (apart from state school books) when they can sell the same ones as in the rest of the world? Fortunately for some lucky Latin American students, their conscientious and capable teachers put in an extra effort and do what publishers rarely do: they adapt international textbooks to their country, their context and, above all, their students.

Much, much more could be said about ELT publishers' provision of textbooks in general, and to the Latin American market in particular, but I'll leave that for you to think about, considering your experience with textbooks, and perhaps your dreams of ideal ones.

## **An ELT author's perspective on textbooks**

That means *me*. The first opportunity I had to co-author a series of textbooks was in 1969, for use in the Anglo Mexican Institute (now The Anglo Mexican Foundation). They were eventually published by Macmillan, as *Active Context English: ACE*, in 1971, and were quite successful in Mexico, Latin America, and as far away as Japan (a weird fact that relates to my comment above about international textbooks sold everywhere – we authors of *ACE* in Mexico knew virtually nothing about ELT in Japan, but the publisher found a market there!). *ACE* gave me my first glimpse of ELT in Latin America outside Mexico, with promotional visits to universities, other institutions of higher education and language centres in Brazil in 1972, from Fortaleza in the north to Curitiba in the south and João Pessoa, Recife, Juiz de Fora, Niteroi and Río de Janeiro in between. It was all very exciting, interesting and satisfying for the young – well, youngish – man I was then!

Since then, I've co-authored 6 more series of textbooks (or 8, counting new editions), 28 books in total (or 36 counting new editions, and not counting workbooks and teachers' guides). They've including two series for Mexican state secondary schools. I've been back to Brazil as an ELT author 5 more times (plus a great stop-over for pleasure) and to 7 other Latin American countries.

*ACE* and the following two series were, naturally, structural-situational books, before the notional-functional or CLT revolution. After that, they were all CLT, and the most recent ones quite progressive CLT. *Skyline/Sky High* (Macmillan, 2001/2006) put communicative skills development before language focus, which itself was strongly inductive (though, no doubt, some teachers reversed all that!). *Make It Real!* (Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo: UAEH, 2017) does the same, but even more so, as well as working on the English language communication situations and types of text Latin America students in higher education are most likely to face. And now I'm an old man, and I see ELT textbook writing (and publication) a bit differently!

My interest in ELT won't stop for some time, if ever (well, you know...), but I won't be writing and profiting from any more textbooks (I don't receive royalties from *Make It Real!*), so I'll be frank. For a start, I firmly believe there's too much ELT in Latin America (and too little good ELT in good conditions that gets most students receiving it really learning English). What I see as the excessive ELT (largely mandated by governments that have little or no understanding of ELT or of realistic and useful goals in national bilingualism) is of poor quality, in poor conditions, not needed by most of the recipients, and not effective. However, it's a market for textbooks. Many if not most, however, are written by inexperienced and not very competent authors or by hacks, and published by companies overwhelmingly interested in profit, from those specific textbooks at least. Who can really blame them? Business opportunities are business opportunities. The best that can be said of most such school textbooks is that they give the poor teachers something to lean on, and a few gifted children may actually learn a little from them.

Above that bottom end of the market for ELT in generally unfavourable conditions, EFL textbooks generally get better and there are more to choose from, and towards the top end, the textbooks are

generally good, in different ways. However, let me repeat what I said above: there should be more textbooks written specifically for Latin America, and for specific sectors within it. Even then, capable and conscientious teachers can make them even better for their specific students by adapting and supplementing them a bit.

Finally, I (and, I believe, many if not most EFL teachers, ELT institutions and ELT publishers) see textbooks for many contexts (or sub-markets) no longer as just printed books. Online platforms can offer things printed books can't. My best publishing manager at Macmillan (if she reads this, she'll know I mean her) thought textbooks would largely have gone from print to screen by now. She was wrong in timing, but I think it can't be very far in the future now. Of course, online ELT materials and resources still need authors, editors, publishers and users (teachers or tutors, I believe, as well as students).

PS: Courses without textbooks can be very effective with teachers that have the time, resources and ability to put good lesson plans and material together. But that's another story, and one that most Latin American teachers, with 30 or more hours a week in the classroom, can only listen to and dream about.