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Coursebook Selection Process and Some of the Most Important Criteria to be Taken into Consideration in Foreign Language Teaching

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Özet

Türkiye’de yabancı dil öğretimi büyük ölçüde ders kitaplarına bağlı olarak sürdürülmekte ve pek çok okulda ders kitapları etkin bir dil öğretiminin tek ögesi olarak kabul edilmektedir. Bir çok özel ve devlet okulunda kitap seçimleri her zaman bilimsel ölçütlerle yapılmadığı için alınan kararlar sonucunda, kullanılan materyaller dil öğretimine yeterli katkıda bulunmamakta ve program hedeflerine ulaşamamaktadır. Ancak son yıllarda bir çok devlet, özel okulları ile üniversitelerde kitap seçimleri ile ilgili olumlu gelişmeler olmakta ders kitabı, materyal seçimi ve değerlendirmede bilimsel yöntem ve teknikler daha fazla kullanılmaktadır. Bu makalede ders kitabı seçimi ve söz konusu süreçteki önemli ölçütler sergilenmektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Ders kitabı seçimi, seçim ölçütleri, öğrenme

Abstract

The English Language teaching practices in Turkey are based mainly on coursebooks and textbooks. In most schools, these books are viewed as the only resources necessary for an effective language-teaching program. The course book selection is usually not done according to any standartized criteria in most state and private schools and therefore, an inadequate selection can result in difficulties in implementing materials and even in the failure of a course. Recently some positive changes concerning this issue have been put into practice and fortunately, there are now more private and state schools and universities beginning to promote the use of scientific methods when evaluating and choosing the materials for their programs. In this article the coursebook selection process and some of the most important criteria to be taken into consideration are described.

Key Words: Coursebook selection, selection criteria, learning.

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The English Language teaching practiced in Turkey has been assuming importance within the last decade. The need for English proficiency is growing rapidly due to an increasing awareness of globalization and also the impact of new information technology. Money, energy, and time are all being invested in an effort to better prepare students in a constantly growing, competitive environment. However several obvious problems still exist within the current educational framework: specifically, the choosing and evaluation of coursebooks continues to be fraught with confusion. Appropriate scientific criteria have yet to be established and in most schools, the coursebook selection process ignores the students' needs. Most private and state schools choose coursebooks based on what publishers offer and make available; in some cases, the donation of a computer becomes more of a determining factor than a suitable procedure would for evaluating and selecting coursebooks. This does not mean that all institutions pay such little regard to the coursebook selection process. There are some universities, and private and state schools where scientific procedures for evaluating and choosing coursebooks are emphasized. The YÖK (Higher Education Board) has designed an innovative new program called "Coursebook Selection for ELT Students" in education departments throughout Turkey.

Turkey is currently facing great changes while the educational medium is taking on a completely new shape. As Turkey draws closer to enter into the European Union, contrasting values, beliefs, and lifestyles inside the country, and with other countries, have become an even greater concern. During such a transitional period, teaching English language has become the most important issue for the Ministry of Education in Turkey. Reviews of the current educational infrastructure regarding the English Language curriculum have shown that serious and complex problems stem from an outdated approach that is still being implemented. There have been some positive changes introduced, such as a higher standards for educational faculties, and newly written teaching materials, but these changes have not had a rapid or dramatic enough effect on the problem up to the present time.

The English Language teaching practices in Turkey are currently based heavily upon on coursebooks which naturally has a negative influence on effective teaching and learning. In most schools, coursebooks are viewed as the only source necessary for an effective language-teaching program. A poor selection in the course books therefore, often results in the unsuccessful implementation of the course. In-house training facilities are very limited, and efficient coursebook analysis and effective adaptation is rarely performed.

The field of language teaching has faced very crucial changes that have had a great effect on methods and approaches. Every year different coursebooks are

chosen to make a course more effective in terms of learning strategies. The truth is that there is no perfect coursebook that meets the needs of all students, teachers, and schools. Thus, teachers should be trained in how to choose and adapt their coursebooks according to their students' needs. Most problems in teaching a foreign language are linked to the coursebook selection process. Once a coursebook is chosen, few efforts are made to evaluate the effectiveness of the book. Subsequently, the need to modify the curriculum is often ignored. The traditional system has done little to encourage the necessary training skills needed for coursebook selection, yet has insisted upon heavy workloads for both students and teachers.

The role and the purpose of the coursebook is still unclear for many teachers because they have traditionally been taught to view coursebooks as the curriculum instead of as a reference to assist in the development of a comprehensive approach. These books are seen as an end product, not a starting point, and few attempts have yet been made to discern how appropriate they are for the students. The students have also had little or no participating role or involvement in the selection process. There has been inadequate collaboration among teachers, administrators, parents, and students. Curricula has not met with the practical needs in the classroom. A wide gap continues to exist between theory and practice. This is most evident in the institutions, language schools, and colleges that focus primarily on teaching English. Within the public school system, teachers are not properly trained on how to choose, adapt, evaluate and use their coursebooks.

Teachers need to be trained in a way that promotes effective teaching techniques so that students may benefit from their own learning experiences. Suggested guidelines on choosing coursebooks should cover all possibilities and problems, and the teachers should understand the solutions emphasized in the guidelines. The function of the coursebooks must not be overemphasized nor de-emphasized, rather they need to be chosen after a detailed analysis by an institution and ongoing evaluation ought to be done during the implementation of the curriculum development process. The selection and implementation process is one of the most important steps in designing a course and is simply not a one-sided process. All those who are involved in learning and teaching need to collaborate and cooperate during the selection.

Each coursebook has its own strengths and weaknesses. Choosing the appropriate course book is one of the most challenging tasks for teachers. However this fact is not an obstacle for many teachers who perceive the coursebooks as a vital and inevitable tool for their course and teaching purposes. "Coursebooks are

perceived by many to be the route map for any ELT program, laying bare its shape, structure, and destination, with progress, program, and even teacher quality being assessed by learners in terms of sequential, unit -by-unit coverage” (Sheldon 1998:237).

Over time, as learner expectations and objectives have changed, the process of finding a suitable coursebook that meets all their requirements has become more difficult. Cunningsworth (1984: 6) states that “No course book will be totally suited to a particular teaching situation. The teacher will have to find his own way of using it and adapting it if necessary. So we should not be looking for the perfect course book which meets all our requirements, but rather for the best possible fit between what the course book offers and what we as teachers and students need.” Instinctively, teachers generally try to find a course book that they believe meets all their requirements. When there are difficulties in the learning process, in most cases, the course book is the first factor to be held responsible.

The heavy reliance on a coursebook in a foreign language classroom is a crucial issue. The fact that the teachers and learners use the coursebook and its supporting materials as their basic aid proves the importance of selecting and evaluating an appropriate coursebook.

Students in Turkey have little chance to use the target language in their daily lives. Thus, coursebooks take on a special role, as they become the most easily available opportunity for students to practice and function in the target language. As Ersoz (1990:2) states, “The Turkish students depend on their teachers and course books to learn English as their schools are basically the only place for exposure to such”, and adds that, “the fact that teaching and practice takes place only in the language classroom puts a tremendous responsibility on the teacher”

Teachers may have different reactions to the same coursebook depending on their background, teaching styles and their student’s needs. Graves (2000:175) states that “What one teacher considers an advantage in a textbook, another teacher may consider a disadvantage.” Edge and Wharton (cited in Tomlinson 2002:299) state that, “New teachers may approach books in the first instance looking for practical guidance, but their interaction with the book also provides an opportunity for them to take on board some of the methodology behind the suggested activities and to apply it in other circumstances. Experienced teachers may recognize a book’s theoretical position more quickly and interact with it more critically.”

Skierso (1991:432) states that “textbooks evoke a variety of emotions in their users. No teacher is entirely satisfied with the text used, yet very few manage to teach without one.” and further adds that, “the importance of the textbook in an

English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) class makes the selection process crucial. Sometimes, it is the responsibility of teachers to select the textbook they will be using in a given class. On the other hand, even in countries and school systems where the responsibility for the adaptation of the textbook lies with the school board or the state, teachers still need to know on a daily basis how to evaluate in order to utilize its assets and compensate for its limitations in applying it to the needs of the students and the objectives of the class.”

Selecting course books involves matching the material with the context in which it will be taught. No coursebook that is designed for a general market will be absolutely ideal for an unspecified group of learners. It would clearly be better to find the best possible resource, which comes closest to meeting the target goals, and then adapting or supplementing when necessary. In some situations, an institution may take it upon itself to develop an in-house coursebook that more closely focuses on the specific goals of the institution. As a result, if successful, the coursebook’s presentation and content are more likely to directly serve the needs of its students.

The coursebook selection process should involve several considerations, and not be based solely upon one point, such as the syllabus objectives. It should also fit the teachers’ background and teaching styles. Providing communicative materials to teachers or students, who are more familiar with traditional methods, approaches and techniques, will not meet the requirements of a course with a communicative syllabus. On the other hand, teachers who have a traditional view of language learning cannot handle a learner-centered approaches.

The Role of Course Books

Course books are generally viewed as a tool in realizing the goals which have already been set regarding learners’ needs, thus they are inevitable components of a course. However their role should not be overemphasized. Cunningsworth (1995:7) states the roles of coursebooks in ELT as;

- a resource for presentation material (spoken/written)
- a source of activities for learner practice and communicative interaction.
- a reference source
- a syllabus
- a resource for self-directed learning or self-access work.
- a support for less experienced teachers.

Thus, a critical approach to a course book is very important. Selected course books should fit the aims, goals, methods and approaches of the language program

otherwise achieving the aims of the program is impossible. The teacher and coursebook relationship is also extremely important.

Course Book Selection

Each year many coursebooks are published around the world. There is intense competition among publishers, and teachers are offered numerous choices and options. Most state school teachers have to choose and make decisions based on what is offered by the publishers. These teachers are not given a chance to produce their own coursebook or perform a broader search for something that is appropriate for their students. There are only a relatively small number of universities with a mandate to produce their own coursebooks because this requires a serious investment of time, energy, and money, as well as an enormous effort on the part of the institution.. In Turkey, for example, there are no extensive strategies planned for the future, there are only temporary solutions currently available.

Educators today face the difficult task of trying to define learner needs. The traditional learning method cannot cope with all the changing demands that society now requires. This would suggest that the implementation of new approaches and techniques are necessary. However, these changes need to be introduced without ignoring the existing techniques and approaches. Unfortunately serious problems exist in the selection process currently adopted by most educational establishments. Teachers are typically kept very busy and have no time to make reliable selections. They have a chance to gather only a minimal impression before being obliged to offer a recommendation.

The Decision

Everyone involved in the learning and teaching process should be allowed to contribute in the decision making phase. Obviously, teachers cannot evaluate course books by themselves according to the above mentioned factors, therefore students who are usually ignored during this phase must also be encouraged to become involved. After all they are the ones who have to learn from the materials.

Checklists

Checklists are highly beneficial at this stage. They are the results of experiences and piloting processes. However, using these checklists directly to suit the educator's own specific and unique needs may not be entirely satisfactory. There are many criteria which may apply to different situations and contexts, therefore teachers should not merely rely upon a ready-made checklist which do not fully take into consideration a school's specific concerns and needs. Necessary changes may need to be made as some checklists may be confusing, too simple, or too complex.

Thus, adaptations of checklists are essential. A detailed needs analysis must be done before using such checklists therefore teachers should be given thorough training before implementing them.

Choosing the best course book

The first step is to determine the needs, objectives and goals of the course but this is not enough. The context in which coursebooks are used should also be analyzed carefully. Objectives and goals should fit the teaching and learning situation of the institute. This period should be a cooperative and collaborative process among all who take responsibility in the teaching and learning context. Choosing a course book is a very crucial issue as once a course book series is chosen it is not always easy to change for the following year. It is a major expense for parents and learners who can often ill afford it. Thus, decisions should take this into consideration as well as other factors such as learners and teachers' characteristics. New materials from course books should also be piloted in classroom situations which is generally neglected in the current teaching context. Before the new academic year begins piloting new materials can give ample feedback on their strengths and weaknesses which may need some adaptations

Coursebook Criteria

There are many important criteria to be taken into consideration when selecting a course book. Some of the most important principles are stated below.

1- Are the subjects and contents of the tasks relevant to your aims?

The subjects and contents of the tasks should fit the objectives and goals of the syllabus. Consequently, the faculty must also maintain a consensus on the overall goals.

2- Do students find the tasks interesting?

The needs and interests of the students definitely need to be taken into account. They should be encouraged to address and discuss their interests while using the language in a communicative way. The tasks should be designed to accomplish the goal of making the lessons interesting.

3- Is the language in the tasks relevant?

The language in the tasks should be carefully scrutinized prior to the exercise in order to ensure that it is concise, clear, and that flow and consistency are maintained.

4-Is there variety in the tasks?

The tasks should be flexible and appeal to different learning styles and strategies, and should not favor one type of learner over another. They must be appropriate for different learning situations and learner needs.

5- Are the tasks authentic?

The tasks should represent characteristics that are authentic to the society in which the target language is used, thus preparing the learner for real life situations. Authenticity should encourage learners to use the language in real life situations through in-class tasks and projects, film analysis, interaction via internet-email, etc

6-Do the tasks provide the student with training?

The tasks should enable learners to employ necessary strategies in developing speaking, reading, writing, and listening skills that will be necessary for them to deal with real life situations. Linguistic competence is not enough to cope with academic life, thus, students must learn the study skills that will be most helpful in their academic lives.

7- Do the texts of the tasks increase the students general knowledge?

They should equip the students with necessary knowledge to enable them better comprehend the world. For example, there should be texts on learning, learning a second language. Learning styles, learning strategies, aims, objectives, culture, use of technology, the Internet etc. These kinds of texts encourage the learner to be aware of their weaknesses and strengths. They will enable the students to become more familiar with the language which they will need to function in a variety of situations.

8-Are the objectives clearly stated for each task?

Clearly stated objectives should be easily accessible as they cannot be realized if the teachers and learners are not aware of them. When students know why and what they are learning it makes activities and tasks more purposeful and meaningful.

9- Are cultural sensitivities taken into consideration?

There is a vital relationship between culture and language. Communication may break down if cultural constraints are not taken into account. Moreover, the coursebook topics and contents should be relevant to the culture of the students. Issues which may inhibit or damage their self-confidence must be avoided and the text, illustrations, and pictures should be culturally suitable.

10- Are the objectives of the course book compatible with the school's language-learning aims?

Each school has a different vision and mission for teaching and learning. A course book that is appropriate for one school may not be appropriate for another as each one differs in their approach towards their goals.

11-What is the school's attitude towards Language teaching?

The context in which language is taught is crucial because it may affect the teaching in either a positive or negative manner. The best materials and the most qualified teachers may fail if the institutional attitude towards teaching is not supportive and encouraging. In some institutions everything is operated in a bureaucratic and hierarchical fashion, where individualism and creativity are not particularly important. In some universities a specific department prepares all supplementary materials, and instructors are not encouraged to create their own materials. On the other hand, some schools offer an in-house training program that helps teachers to develop their own styles and materials, but in the current educational environment, this is seen as luxury.

A language can be rather complex, but there are some basic learning characteristics that are generally considered universal for those learning a new language. Language is, of course, used for communication and is thus propagated by its use in a culture to promote dialogue and understanding (Brown, 1994:5). These are important points to be taken into consideration during the teaching phase. The communicative value of language learning should not be neglected. There are no ready-made solutions or recipes to solve these problems. Any phase of teaching needs devotion, planning, empathy, open-mindedness, new ideas, and creativity. However, course books are not like that

Educator training is crucial to curb the misuse of a coursebook. Teachers should be trained in the steps necessary for evaluation so they can gain a better grasp of how to adapt the book to fit the needs of their particular classroom environment. In most state schools, teachers design and plan their yearly syllabus only around the coursebooks. During the planning phase, a detailed Situation and Needs Analysis should be made. It is this author's belief that only about 50-60% of course book content should be adopted for use in the curriculum. The other parts of the curriculum should be filled with teacher and student-generated exercises, activities, and tasks.

As students are not automatons, but rather individuals with different learning styles and strategies, the educational environment must be flexible and offer a variety of options for the teacher and student to use.

Institutions should encourage and promote professional development and teacher involvement in the selection and adapting of a coursebook and course program. Teachers need to carefully scrutinize and judge the strong points of the book so that each can determine whether or not there is material within the book that can be beneficial. Complacently saying that a course book is good or bad is not enough - the reason why a book, or section within the book, was successful or not should be

understood so that the teacher can incorporate helpful material, and be able to recognize and subsequently disregard unnecessary subject matter. There are more options than a teacher may imagine. Teachers should be encouraged by their respective institutions to attend conventions, visit and browse through bookstores, and read through current catalogues in an effort to keep abreast on what new materials and ideas are available.

Ongoing evaluation of the course books must play a key part in any curriculum. The types of exams that are administered should also exhibit a clear relationship between the goals of the course and the coursebook. In some institutions, communicative books are used yet traditional testing techniques are employed which can result in a mis-matched and confused outcome for the course. In Turkey, students are overwhelmingly examination-result oriented, and concern themselves more with achieving a good mark than gaining a meaningful education. The selected books should help students, to some extent, become proficient in areas to be evaluated but more importantly, they should encourage active participation and growth in the target material.

Finally, Graves(2000:175-176) offers a great deal of insight into the nature of the textbook by saying, "To understand how a textbook is an instrument or a tool, we can compare it to a musical instrument, a piano, for example. The piano provides you with the means for producing music, but it cannot produce music on its own. The music is produced only when you play it. Playing well requires practice and familiarity with the piece. The more skilled you are, the more beautiful the music. Just as a piano does not play music, a textbook does not teach language. Perhaps as teachers we are called on to be not only musicians, but also piano tuners, composers, and conductors."

Summary

In summation, this article maps out some basic principles for choosing a course book. The most important principle is that the course book should be compatible with the institution's aim for the language program. Since each school has different objectives, and even within and between specific departments, there may be radical differences in needs. These differences must be taken into account and the coursebook need to be adapted accordingly. The testing content and procedures must also reflect the adaptations which have been made. The topic and focus of tests should follow the needs of the student, not that of a rigid and inflexible program based solely around a course book.

Once an institution takes on the responsibility of training students with the tools necessary to function in an English environment, it must adopt a positive,

supportive, and encouraging attitude. Openness to change and flexibility in regards to the constantly changing composition of the student body is key. An institution must make the effort to understand their students and actively work towards determining their needs, and then addressing those needs. Only through a positive attitude, which promotes participation from all the parties involved, can a strong and successful program be designed and implemented. In a foreign language-teaching situation, coursebook analysis and selection is essential and such an important issue cannot be neglected.

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