THE TEXTBOOK: BRIDGE OR WALL?[1]

[This article has been quoted more than once in support of the idea that teachers should reject textbooks and produce their own custom-made courses for their students. This is not at all what I believe. I am critical of bad or unsuitable textbooks, and I believe that any textbook needs adaptation and supplementation to make it appropriate for a particular group of students. However, producing full-scale language courses is a complex, demanding and highly-skilled job. Expecting a practising teacher, however accomplished, to do this, is like expecting the first violinist to compose the orchestra's repertoire in his or her spare time.]

Oh, cuckoo! Shall I call thee bird
Or but a wandering voice?
State the alternative preferred.
Give reasons for your choice.
(F H Townsend)

I once watched a lesson whose declared aim was to present and practise the meaning and use of six words. They were not words whose meaning was particularly elusive or context-bound, and left to themselves the students in the class could probably have learnt them in five or ten minutes. Needless to say, the students were not left to themselves; instead, they were required to read a text in which the six new words were embedded. (As we all know, vocabulary should always be contextualised.) The text was not easy, and it naturally slowed the students down somewhat: without the teacher’s help, the time needed to do the careful reading required and learn the new words was probably something of the order of twenty-five minutes. However, the teacher did help, using her well-practised technique for ‘going through’ texts. And so a piece of work that should have occupied ten minutes took fifty. The textbook, originally conceived as a bridge across which information about vocabulary would travel, had turned into a wall, with the teacher and her knowledge on one side and the students on the other.

Of course, the students in the lesson in question did not just learn six words. There were a certain number of side-benefits from the teacher’s decision to use a text as her presentation vehicle. The students got whatever you get out of intensive reading – some more contact with written English, perhaps a bit more vocabulary and grammar, and possibly (just possibly) a slight improvement in their reading skills. And as the teacher did her ‘going through the text’ number, they had practice in listening comprehension. What they did not get, unfortunately, was fifty minutes’ worth of well-focused cost-effective work on anything.

I am not, obviously, questioning the value of text-based teaching. Texts, like garlic, gypsy violins, sparking plugs or anything else, are all right in their place, and indeed it would be very difficult to teach without them. The trouble is that if we are not careful they take over. Instead of using a text, where appropriate, as a vehicle for the presentation and practice of particular language items or skills, it is all too easy to shift one’s focus and to treat the text as a destination, ‘going through’ it as if this were a valuable enterprise by definition, regardless of any possible result. As so often in language teaching, the activity tends to take over from the aim, and we end up *doing things* instead of *teaching things*.

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The very name of our central piece of teaching material – *textbook* – betrays the superstitious reverence that so many educational systems have for texts. Perhaps this is because texts have traditionally functioned as the repository of the wisdom of the past, society's prime means of cultural transmission, and its source of religious instruction. Be that as it may, texts are the classic presentation vehicle for new language, and most textbook lessons still start automatically with a story, dialogue, newspaper article, literary extract or some other text, followed, as day is followed by night, by questions. (I have often wondered why a teaching text always has to have questions with it. And why do teachers ask so many questions anyway? Watch six-year-olds playing schools. The one playing the teacher keeps asking questions, and gets cross because the others don't know the answers. That's what teachers do, isn't it? There is something deeply sinister about this.) It is, of course, possible to present new language without texts in very many interesting ways, and it is possible to use texts constructively without asking any questions at all; but I am not optimistic about progress in this area. Like death and taxes, texts and questions will always be with us.

The danger with ready-made textbooks is that they seem to absolve teachers of responsibility. Instead of participating in the day-to-day decisions that have to be made about what to teach and how to teach it, it is easy to just sit back and operate the system, secure in the knowledge that the wise and virtuous people who produced the textbook knew what was good for us. Unfortunately this is rarely the case. Even with the best teaching materials it is an inefficient approach – no coursebook contains exactly what is required for a particular individual or class. And textbooks are sometimes a very long way indeed from reflecting the needs and interests of one's students.

I have always been interested in the image of the learner that is reflected by the distorting mirror of the textbook. Texts, after all, tell you a lot about what kind of people the writers think their readers are. And educational texts also tell you what the writers – or the system they work in – are prepared to allow the readers to be, say and do. It can be instructive to write down the four or five things one thinks secondary school students are most interested in – the things they talk about among themselves when teachers and parents aren't listening – and then to check how many of these topics are touched on in their textbooks. Do the students get to read and talk about sex, human relationships, fairness, or conflicts with authority, for example – things that most adolescents are passionately interested in – or does the book give an unrelieved diet of safe bland topics like sport, pop music and travel? Are students allowed to tell the truth – can they say whether or not they are interested in the topic of the lesson, or what they think about school – or does the book only leave room for good conformist people to say good conformist things?

Elementary textbooks with storylines are often an extreme case of refusal to deal with reality. All too frequently, the learner – even the adult learner – is treated as a retarded child who will only learn if he/she is constantly entertained by silly jokes, accompanied by those dreadful ELT illustrators' pictures of funny fat men with big noses. (I have nothing against humour, if it is successful – it makes a very important contribution to class dynamics and motivation. But of course in general the best classroom humour comes from the students, not from the book.) Even where fiction-based course material is less deliberately silly, it is often desperately bland. In the language textbooks I grew up with, none of the characters ever got seriously unhappy or worried, felt unfairly treated, was desperately poor or homeless; nobody fell deeply in love, felt homicidally jealous, got badly hurt in a relationship; nobody burst into tears without knowing why or started singing because the sky looked so beautiful; nobody had a serious accident, go an incurable illness or died. (All of that was left for the literature lesson, which had its own highly sophisticated techniques for disinfecting reality.)

A woman I knew who was teaching adults in Denmark with one of those elementary books worked bravely through Lessons 1 to 4 (‘Bill comes to London’, ‘A day on the river’, Bill and Alice go to the cinema’ and ‘Alice gets a new job’). When she reached Lesson 5, however, (‘Tea at Alice’s house’) something snapped, and she got her students to rewrite the episode on the basis that halfway through the tea-party Alice announces, to the consternation of Bill and her parents, that she is pregnant. The students had a wonderful time adapting the language of the episode to the new situation: they dramatised it in groups, performed it for each other and fell about laughing. From then on the class never looked back. They had done exactly what one should always do with unsuitable teaching materials: instead of respecting the textbook as something engraved on tablets of stone, they saw it as a vehicle that wasn’t going where they wanted it to, and simply hijacked it to a more suitable destination.

There are fewer dull courses around these days, and many modern courses contain interesting and motivating material, with good texts, attractive visuals and well-chosen recordings. Paradoxically, however, interesting materials can be dangerous precisely because they are, in one sense, so good. It is important to remember that the textbook must not only be good itself; it must leave room for the learners to be good too. There is something deeply unsatisfactory about the kind of lesson which starts with a fanfare of trumpets, so to speak (as the teacher, the recording or the book does something exciting), and finishes with a flabby deflating sound (as the students do something much less exciting like answering comprehension questions or filling in prepositions). In the race for who is going to be best at English, the students are bound to come last, a long way after the book, the recordings and the teacher. If they also come last, as well, in the race for who is going to be most interesting, they are unlikely ever to develop much confidence or independence. The best lessons are those in which the book may do something interesting, but the students end up by doing something even more interesting, as they use their newly-learnt language to inform, amuse, entertain, persuade or even move each other. And really good textbooks make this possible: instead of erecting walls between teacher and student, student and student, student and language, human beings and the world, they build bridges across which creative movement is possible and even easy. In the end, it is not what the textbook does that matters, in itself – it is what the learners do.