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**The importance of coursebooks for teachers of
English as a foreign language**

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English as a foreign language**

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Finally, I dedicated this paper to J  ssica and Eric.

“Education always implies change, but
foreign language education implies social change”

Claire J. Kramsch

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the importance of coursebooks for teachers of English as a Foreign Language. In order to do this, it evaluates the relevance of adopting a textbook as one recourse among other teaching materials or, alternatively, as the very backbone of the teaching practices in the classroom. A crucial concern of this study is to examine whether teachers' beliefs and the influence of published materials guide the language teaching process. Data were collected through written questionnaires of nine participant teachers. The analysis revealed that coursebooks represent the main language teaching material in the classroom and that the demands of the teachers in relation to these materials are very similar.

KEYWORDS: textbooks, teaching materials, EFL.

CONTENTS

1. Introduction	7
2. Theoretical Background	9
2.1 - Teachers' beliefs and attitudes	9
2.2 - External factors that influence the teacher's decisions	12
2.3 - ELT materials provided by publishing houses	16
3. Research Methodology	22
4. Analysis of Data	25
4.1 - The importance of a coursebook for a teacher	25
4.2 - The features and benefits teachers consider when choosing a coursebook	27
4.3 - The importance teachers think coursebooks have for their students	30
5. Conclusion	31
6. Bibliography	33
7. Appendix 1	35
8. Appendix 2	36

1

INTRODUCTION

As an English teacher I have worked for nearly ten years at language schools and regular schools as well. As an ELT promoter I have worked during the last three years and a half for a foreign publishing house here in Brazil presenting coursebooks for teachers and coordinators. Added to that, while being a promoter, in many occasions I was assigned to host writers and editors from abroad during their stay in Brazil. Consequently, throughout my professional career I could realize that coursebooks always had been an important, if not the most important, teaching material for most EL teachers. Thus, this study is an attempt to detect whether this view holds any truth or not. However, I had no systematic basis for this view. Thus, the present study is an attempt to examine how important teaching materials, more precisely coursebooks, actually are for teachers, by conducting interviews with teachers.

In the beginning of the term English teachers and pedagogical coordinators who work in private schools face the challenge of choosing the more suitable teaching materials for the period. According to Richards (1998) for most teachers the textbook represents the main source of ideas for teaching. Also, there is the belief among teachers that teaching and learning can be successful with textbooks written by specialists. Therefore, the usual attitude of most teachers is to focus their concern mainly on textbooks, dispreferring other resources for language learning such as other printed materials, language laboratory facilities, videos / DVDs, audio cassettes / CDs, television, songs, tours – just to mention a few other recourses. Besides, a book still is the cheapest learning material available and it does not depend for its use on any engine or electrical equipment.

Ur (1999:193) has categorically assessed a coursebook as a necessary resource for teachers:

‘Personally, I very much prefer to use a coursebook. I find that a set framework helps me to regulate and time my program; and, perhaps paradoxically, provides a firm jumping-off point for the creation of imaginative supplementary teaching ideas. [...] It seems that the possession of a coursebook may carry a certain prestige.’

Here, I shall look at three factors that influence the choice of this kind of language teaching materials. First, there is the English Language Teaching approach as a result of the teacher’s beliefs and experience. Second, there are external factors that restrain the teacher’s decision of adopting non-traditional strategies and methods of teaching. And third, there is the huge supply of ELT materials provided by the publishing houses nowadays.

2

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**2.1****Teachers' beliefs and attitudes**

The beliefs and attitudes of teachers concerning language teaching procedures are, beyond any doubt, highly relevant for the criteria they use to decide for or against adopting a certain kind of teaching material. Seeing that most teachers decide for using textbooks, the choice of a certain book also depends on this academic and professional background.

A study conducted by Barnes (1969, 1976) has identified two basic types of teachers. First, the *transmission teacher* needs to maintain a high degree of control over the learners to create the conditions under which the subject matter can be taught. And, second, the *interpretation teacher* prefers to disperse responsibility for learning among learners, where control is maintained by persuasion and appeal to the better judgment of the learners.

Needless to say, hardly any teacher fits exclusively in only one of the categories mentioned above. Probably they alternate between one dominant behavior and the other.

According to Richards (1996:283), teachers basically employ two dimensions of knowledge when they teach:

In summary, two different kinds of knowledge influence teachers' understanding and practice of teaching. One relates to subject matter and curricular issues and how the content of a lesson can be presented in an effective and coherent way. This is the aspect of teaching that has to do with curricular goals, lesson plans, instructional activities, materials, tasks, and teaching techniques. The other kind of knowledge relates to the teacher's personal and subjective philosophy of teaching and the teacher's view of what constitutes good teaching.

This statement confirms that teachers are generally concerned about external issues such as curriculum content but, even so, they always manage – unconsciously or not - to imbue their teaching with their personal range of beliefs about what they judge to be good teaching and how

they can achieve it. Also, the range of all teachers' beliefs and attitudes depends enormously on the way teachers themselves were taught English. Paulo Freire (1996:35) says: "É interessante observar que a minha experiência discente é fundamental para a prática docente que terei amanhã ou que estou tendo agora simultaneamente com aquela".

Besides the affective and cognitive influence teachers were once exposed to as learners, there is a great diversity of different methods and approaches adopted at language courses and used in textbooks that model the teachers' procedures in TEFL.

Consequently, teachers tend to replicate what they believe was successful to them. If we fully study the development of TEFL over the last hundred years, we might make distinctions among four main "methods" that in many ways influenced these professionals, who have spent years of their academic lives preparing themselves to teach English.

According to Cook (2003:31) the *Grammar-Translation Method* goes back to the close of the nineteenth century in the schoolrooms of Europe. There, the way into the new language was always through the students' own first language. Also, complicated rules were mastered and tested by means of translation, and success was measured in terms of accurate use of grammar and vocabulary rather than effective communication. Besides, there was no emphasis on the development of fluent speech.

The *Direct Method*, in its turn, dates from the early years of the twentieth century, a time when new types of learners like immigrants, business people and tourists arrived in the USA. In this method the students' own languages were banished and everything was to be done through the target language. Thus, translation and first-language were abolished.

Still according to Cook (2003:34), *The Natural Approach*, which was developed in the USA, revived the notion from the nineteenth century that an adult learner can repeat the route of proficiency of the native-speaking child. The idea was that learning would take place without

explanation or grading and without correction of errors, but simply by exposure to “meaningful input.”

At last, *The Communicative Approach* or *Communicative Language* was adopted from 1970 on and caused a shift of attention from the language system as an end in itself to the successful use of that system in context. Therefore, there was great emphasis on communication rather than on form.

The development of various theories and research in the field of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, since the beginning of the twentieth century, was used to support some of the methodologies created for TEFL. All this scientific character attributed to the different methods make them seem reliable and efficient, but it makes it harder for teachers – when they have the autonomy for this – to decide on what is more appropriate and the more meaningful approach.

Chomsky in 1966 (cited in Howatt, A.P.R 2004:333) had already advocated the conclusive use of teachers’ commonsense when finding the best way(s) of teaching the different groups of learners: “it is the language teacher himself [sic] who must validate or refute any specific proposal. There is very little in psychology or linguistics that he can accept on faith.”

2.2 External factors that influence the teacher's decisions

Apart from the teacher's style, external features count in the decision for choosing a certain language teaching material. The commonest are the size of the group of learners, the facilities and devices available in the classroom, space, lighting, the acoustics in the room, and temperature. Additionally, other aspects such as the price of the material, the duration of the class, curricular issues, administrative demands and the purpose the course of English is meant to serve, have to be taken in consideration. Concerning this last feature it is relevant to analyze the true objectives of the course, that is, what learners should be expected to attain at the end of it. Furthermore, it is important to consider the learners' age, their social condition and their previous knowledge of the target language. Besides, teachers should also evaluate what kind of English and what aspects of the language to focus on.

Regarding secondary schools, for example, the Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais (PCN's) directions constitute the convergent and unifying philosophy at present. Written in 1988, under the direction of the Minister of Education Paulo Renato Souza, the PCNs, consist of a document elaborated for teachers and specialists in order to revise the *curriculums* that orient the work of educational professionals at schools. This revision aims at preparing the youngsters for the demands of a new market place full of competition and technological and scientific challenges.

Concerning the teaching of a foreign language the documents states (1998:15): ¹

Two theoretical issues underlie the principles for Foreign Language: a sociointeractional view of language and of apprenticeship. The sociointeractional approach of language indicates that, when committing themselves to the discourse, people take into account those they address or those who addressed them during the social construction of meaning. It is determinant in this process the position of people in the institution, in culture and in history. In order for this sociointeractional nature to be possible, the learner uses systemic knowledge, knowledge of the world and about textual organization, besides having to learn how to use them in the social construction of meaning via Foreign Language. Being aware of those kinds of knowledge and their use is essential in for the apprenticeship, since they highlight metacognitive aspects and develop the critical thinking of the learner concerning how language is used in the social world, as expression of faith, values and political projects.

The concept of increasing the learners' systemic knowledge, their knowledge of the world and their knowledge about textual organization – all three with the aim of constructing meaningful social discourse using the target language – is a means of analyzing the discourse practices and, consequently the social relations that constitute human interaction. Through the PCNs this pedagogic practice has become an official recommendation for Brazilian foreign language teachers.

The PCNs philosophy may help to inspire educators to exercise a pedagogy that presents language which is meaningful for learners in terms of meeting their needs and expectations, and, above all, in terms of developing an instrument of expression of the learners' own identity. In order to develop this process, working with genre analysis may provide the tools for this very innovative and rewarding attitude. It might be a more reliable and realistic procedure for educators who intend to broaden the learners' perception of the target language as a means of communication in different domains of use.

According to Swales (1990:58), genres are “a class of communicative events which share some set of communicative purposes.” Moreover, genre analysis is more than recognizing what lexical or grammatical features occur as textual markers of register. Additionally, it provides resources for pragmatic use in managing an interaction, conducting an argument and it basically considers social conventions which influence communication.

There are several genres which are part of the learners' daily life, which can be explored in a genre-based approach, for example letters, songs, recipes, advertisements, poems, articles, conversations, newspapers, manuals and stories.

Any of these genres can be analyzed according to different categories in order to focus on macro-skills such as reading, writing, listening and speaking or specific micro-skills like

skimming and scanning, for example. This approach could also include the analysis of certain aspects of language as structures, functions, vocabulary and register. Also, the perspective of learning based on such instruction would aim to highlight in the text, among many other features, the topic, audience, purpose, setting, patterns of grammar, key-vocabulary items, assumed background knowledge, and so forth.

The point taken here is that coursebooks may provide some of the genres for analysis or give room for teachers to insert, exclude and compare genres from other sources.

Turning to this pedagogical choice of working with genre analysis, we can argue that it causes the reconstruction of the teachers' and the students' roles in the classroom. Paulo Freire, in his *Pedagogia da Autonomia* (1996:47), defending the active role of the students in the process of learning, affirms: ²

Every teaching of contents demands from those who play the role of the learner that from a certain moment on, they also start to admit the *authorship* of the knowledge about the object. The authoritarian teacher, who refuses to listen to the learner turns their back to this creative adventure [...] this is why the teaching of contents, critically developed, involves the total *openness* of the teacher to the genuine attempt of the learner to take in their hands the responsibility of being the agent who holds the knowledge. Additionally, it involves the initiative of the teacher who should encourage that attempt on the part of the learner by helping them in their endeavour.

Through this teaching paradigm learners are co-responsible and much more collaborative for their learning experience. Discussing, reflecting, criticizing the discourses in the target language, using the foreign language as a by-product to draw conclusions and exercise critical thinking, is excellent practice for empowering students.

¹ My translation for: “Duas questões teóricas ancoram os parâmetros de Língua Estrangeira: uma visão sociointeracional da linguagem e da aprendizagem. O enfoque sociointeracional da linguagem indica que, ao se engajarem no discurso, as pessoas consideram aqueles a quem se dirigem ou a quem se dirigiu a elas na construção social do significado. É determinante nesse processo o posicionamento das pessoas na instituição, na cultura e na história. Para que essa natureza sociointeracional seja possível, o aprendiz utiliza conhecimentos sistêmicos, de mundo e sobre organização textual, além de ter de aprender como usá-los na construção social do significado via Língua Estrangeira. A consciência desses conhecimentos e a de seus usos são essenciais na aprendizagem, posto que focaliza aspectos metacognitivos e desenvolve a consciência crítica do aprendiz no que se refere a como a linguagem é usada no mundo social, como reflexo de crenças, valores e projetos políticos.”

² My translation for: “Todo ensino de conteúdos demanda de quem se acha na posição de aprendiz que, a partir de certo momento, vá assumindo a *autoria* também do conhecimento do objeto. O professor autoritário, que recusa escutar os alunos se fecha a esta aventura criadora. [...] é por isso que o ensino dos conteúdos, criticamente realizado, envolve a *abertura* total do professor ou da professora, à tentativa legítima do educando para tomar em suas mãos a responsabilidade de sujeito que conhece. Mais ainda, envolve a iniciativa do professor que deve estimular aquela tentativa no educando, ajudando-o para que a efetive.”

2.3 ELT materials provided by publishing houses

At present there is great influence upon ELT classroom culture from publishing organizations and research institutions. The acronym BANA that stands for Britain, Australia and North America – the countries which supply and receive ELT resources (Canagarajah 1999) – illustrates the fact that there is a profitable industry that has social and political force, which somehow influences teachers' beliefs and attitudes when choosing teaching materials, especially textbooks.

From my observation when meeting teachers at language courses and at schools, many teachers of EFL have tried to redefine their roles as educators in the sense of moving from simple reproducers of the methodology implicit in coursebooks to real constructors of pedagogical proposals that highlight the value of their socio cultural context. Despite this new attitude of ELT professionals, most of them still depend on textbooks to plan and organize their work in the classroom. Usually, teachers plan their lessons according to the syllabus prescribed by the coursebooks and the distribution of time suggested by their writers.

Fortunately, there are professionals that are able to teach with the textbook instead of teaching through it. Therefore, teachers can generate new content from within and from outside the materials by skipping sections, tasks and activities or, conversely, by modifying and adapting these elements to the real purpose of the group and concentrate on interpersonal relationships in the class as well.

Nowadays, it is relatively common to hear in pedagogical seminars and workshops educators arguing against the adoption of coursebooks because of the ideology and political nature they embody. At the same time the search for the “right” coursebook can be frustrating and disappointing because in fact, there will always be some aspect in any book in terms of approach, content and presentation that will be subject to improvement, updating and adaptation.

It is natural that the content of coursebooks changes periodically because it represents the character of knowledge available in a certain time in History. A critical view concerning the social and historical time when a coursebook is produced helps to evaluate how it can assist society at that specific time, and the way it is inspired by the very society it fails to represent.

The alluring appeal of textbooks can be very tricky for teachers. The authorship of well-known writers, a neat and attractive layout, a built-in teacher's handbook with photocopiable extra activities, among other features, can look very teacher-friendly.

The following extract from Cunningsworth (1984:1) reminds us how coursebooks can be deceptive:

Teachers can [...] be assured that coursebooks from reputable publishers will serve them well, if properly selected and used. I used the word serve advisedly because coursebooks are good servants but poor masters.

Based on the perspective mentioned in the excerpt above, the total reliance on the syllabus of a coursebook should be questioned by teachers. If the coursebook is the main teaching material available, educators are supposed to be sensitive to the need of adapting the contents of the book to accommodate the local needs of the students and all aspects of the learning process, such as curriculum, classroom interaction, school regulations and the educational policies.

The gradual process of surrender to the assumptions of a Critical Pedagogy as we know it nowadays has been made over a long period of time in the history of ELT. According to Howatt & Widdowson (2004:233), the emergence from within ELT of an autonomous profession, with a distinctive contribution to language education, dates from the beginning of last century.

At present, based on my own constructed knowledge as an English teacher myself, and as a professional who used to hear directly from the teachers their demands and needs concerning the contents of coursebooks, a conformist language teacher, who entirely relies on the trendy

pedagogy promoted by BANA specialists, is far from being the true picture of these professionals.

Many teachers have started to reject the pedagogy where learning is assumed as a detached cognitive activity and knowledge as preconstructed, as it is conveyed in most coursebooks. Instead, there is the search for a more holistic and collaborative methodology. There is this increasingly more critical attitude concerning the content of textbooks that may portrait stereotypes, convey tendentious economic and political discourses, propagate misleading social ideologies and picture cultural misconceptions as well. According to Canagarajah (1999:14, 15):

Socio-cultural conditions always influence our cognitive activity, mediating how we perceive and interpret the world around us [...] Critical Pedagogy holds that the established methods embody the preferred ways of learning and thinking of the dominant communities – and that this bias can create conflicts for learners from other pedagogical traditions [...] Teachers should therefore attempt to critically interrogate the hidden curricula of their courses, relate learning to the larger socio-political realities, and encourage students to make pedagogical choices that offer sounder alternatives to their living conditions.

The standardization of coursebooks, produced for large and different markets all around the world, shows that it is not commercially viable for international publishers to produce materials according to the local and regional demands. Producing materials that portray the exact profile, language and the predominant cultural features of a certain community is not a profitable venture. This entire concept helps to highlight the idea that language teaching is much more than just the transfer of the knowledge deposited in textbooks. For this reason, many ELT professionals, value as one of the main features of a coursebook, its flexibility for the classroom. Some teachers understand that besides linguistic competence, sociolinguistic and discourse competences should be explored as well.

The business of producing ELT materials is very lucrative, and several interests and large investments are involved in the production of a coursebook, not only for ELT but also for other purposes as we can see through the words of Cabral (1998:100,101): ³

The publishing of a book demands a great amount of work and the involvement of several sectors within its production chain. [...] Planning of the text, editorship, composition, revision, printing, storage, distribution, transportation, display and selling in the bookstores – all this requires tremendous work that entails large investments, whose earnings make it possible to maintain the productive cycle continuously.

The format of most textbooks available at present still resembles, in many ways, those books from the end of the Middle Ages. In the early fourteenth century, the first English teaching materials that appeared during the reign of Henry V - who consolidated English as the normal means of written communication instead of French and Latin - still seems to be the source of inspiration of many writers.

According to the historical studies of Howatt & Widdowson (2003:11, 13) these materials relied mainly on texts and on the dialogue form as a “slice of linguistic life” because the use of dialogues was a long-established tradition in the teaching of spoken Latin in the Middle Ages. In this study the authors cite the *Abbot of Eynsham*, a dialogue for teaching Latin, written in the eleventh century: “The Latin text, which is accompanied by an interlinear translation in Anglo-Saxon, consists of a series of questions and answers relating to topics and activities of everyday rural life, farming, hunting, trading, and so on.”

Clearly those first textbooks were designed to supply the needs of the time and mostly, they typified the way language learning was conceived then. But, the preference for artificial dialogues and the choice of unnatural vocabulary are still characteristics of most textbooks produced at present.

³ My translation for: “A edição de um livro exige muito trabalho e a intervenção de vários setores em sua cadeia produtiva. [...] Elaboração do texto, editoração, composição, revisão, impressão, armazenagem dos estoques,

distribuição, transporte, exposição e venda nas livrarias – tudo isto requer um trabalho fantástico que exige grandes investimentos, cujo retorno possibilita a manutenção ativa e ininterrupta do ciclo produtivo.”

Currently, the attentive work of traditional publishing houses and the launch of serious materials on the market, which truly involves ample research about methods, applied linguistics, cultural contexts and the work of well-known authors, help to perpetuate the preference of teachers for textbooks as their overarching teaching material. This whole process developed by the publishing houses helps to convince teachers that coursebooks are reliable resources and to a certain extent, indispensable materials for teachers.

At the same time, some books seem to give teachers some independence with the material. There are some helpful suggestions for books that certainly are designed for the more critical and investigative teachers of English as a foreign language. The excerpt below in the introduction section of the *New Headway Advanced* teacher's book (2003:5) accounts for this questioning concern of teachers:

New HeadwayAdvanced is, like all similar coursebooks, intended to save you time. At advanced level it can be very difficult, and require a lot of experience, to devise your own syllabus, find all your own material, and make it all cohere. So use the book as you wish. Change the order of activities. Supplement with your own material. Listen to your students' requests. Above all, make sure you control the coursebook. Try not to let it control you. It is a tool for you to use as much and in whatever way you want to.

The way the authors of this book address the teachers, by counseling them to be the ones who have the control over the coursebook, shows some good intention on the part of some authors and editors in order to produce more meaningful and flexible teaching materials. From my experience as an ELT promoter what I could observe is that usually, teachers use their teacher's books mainly to follow instructions for exercises and to reach out for extra materials and reproducible activities. During my coursebook presentations I used to emphasize that it would be important for the teachers to read the pedagogical proposal of the authors of the book.

Some authors would explain that their approach was based on the principles of the Total Physical Response. Others, on Cross-Cultural themes such as citizenship, environment and ethics. Reading about this is not common among teachers because they do not have the habit of reading the introductory pages of the teacher's book rather; they go straight to the suggestions for lesson planning.

The inadequacy of the content of TEFL coursebooks is not a characteristic just of the books produced by foreign publishing houses. The attempts of the local publishing houses, of producing realistic and helpful materials, have not achieved the goal of providing consistent and qualified materials so far. Certainly, an extensive and thorough analysis of some items published recently in Brazil would prove that there is still a long way to go to meet most of the teachers' expectations.

3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to examine the importance of coursebooks for teachers and students of a foreign language, a qualitative method was used in this study. It was qualitative because it was based on non-numerical data, that is to say, linguistic units in written forms that were answers to a brief questionnaire with three open questions (Appendix 1).

The participants in the research were nine teachers from different private schools and language schools as well, chosen at random (because they happened to be available to answer the questionnaire), who teach English youngsters and adults in the city of Rio de Janeiro. One important criterion for them to participate was the condition of adopting a coursebook as the main teaching material. In order to protect the teachers' identities, they are referred to by numbers and the names of the educational institutions where they work are also omitted. Also, the teachers were given numbers according to the alphabetic order of their first names.

The questionnaire consisted of three discursive questions to enable teachers to write freely. Differently from multiple choice questions, the participants did not have a limited number of options to choose from. This way, teachers were not led to express any particular opinion because the questions were meant to be as impartial as possible.

In question number one: "What's the importance of a coursebook for you as a teacher?" the teacher could express the degree of importance from "none" to "very important". Teachers were expected to explain why a coursebook is important for them or why it is not important at all, without being influenced by any element in the question. The secondary question "in what aspects does it help you?" was introduced in the question because since they use coursebooks, although in some cases they might use it because it is assumed that the coursebook may be

helpful for them in some way. The teachers use coursebooks although they might use them out of obligation.

Question number two: “What features / benefits do you consider when choosing a coursebook?” allowed any answer to appear. The choice “features / benefits” implies that every feature might entail certain benefit. If not, what is the reason for that feature to appear in the book? Here again, the question allowed open answers. Another factor was that the teachers were from different places of work. With these two factors in mind, that is, the open answers and the various work locations, any pattern that emerged would probably be a reliable sign of common perceptions.

In question number three: “What’s the importance of a coursebook for your students?” as in question number 1, teachers could express any degree of importance within a scale from “none” to “very important”. This question was supposed to consider the view of the teachers based on their own experience and on their beliefs as teachers. It should be mentioned here that in order to thoroughly investigate the importance of coursebooks for students, a mirror image of the present research is required to hear views and opinions of these same students.

The answers were analyzed by means of a semantic grouping of lexical items. Through the semantic analysis of the main words chosen by teachers to express their opinions, the repeated vocabulary was arranged in groups. These main words or key-elements include nouns (*guide*), adjectives (*useful*), verbs (*facilitates*), noun-phrases (*lots of pictures*) and small chunks of language (*a way of studying for tests and exams*).

In another respect, this method was quantitative because the analysis of the data was based on the summing of the repeated key-elements in all the answers. For example, by totaling six occurrences of the noun *guide* and its variant *guideline* within the nine questionnaires, the

conclusion could be drawn that most teachers a coursebook functions as a set of instructions about the best way to teach.

4

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Through the analysis of the written answers from the nine teachers of English who responded to the questionnaires, it was possible to draw a very indicative and representative picture of the way teachers interact with coursebooks. This section presents a summary of the answers, with authentic sentences, including mistakes, and they are all transcribed in Appendix 2.

4.1 The importance of a coursebook for a teacher

Concerning question number one, about the importance of coursebooks for them as teachers, all the participants, in a very analogous way, regarded them as an important resource.

Two different teachers (T2 and T4) used the noun phrase *very important* to evaluate the relevance of a coursebook for them. The use of the noun *guideline* (T1), the noun phrase *best guide for a teacher* (T9) and the verb *guides* (T2), along with the expressions *gives me a line of work* (T3), *outlines the course* (T5) and *suggests the order of the subject* (T8), may indicate the use of the coursebook as a means to help them to keep on track and keep focused on the course plan throughout the term.

The next series of statements mentioned by the teachers: *almost impossible to prepare or select a good material for each class* and (...) *already prepared* (T4); *facilitates a teacher's work* (T5); *makes the teacher's work easier* (T5) and *no teacher (...) has time to prepare so much material* (T7) are very meaningful to this piece of work. All the sentences above along with the key-words *apoio* (T6) and *useful* (T8 and T9) might signal the crucial need for a teaching resource that saves time for teachers who would otherwise spend extra and non-paid time to prepare their own materials. Added to this were other participants' choice of words with the verb *provide*, for example, mentioned by T7 and T8, and also the adjective *useful* cited by T8 and T9.

Two references to the importance of a credible publishing house as institutions that validate and make a coursebook a reliable material, were made by T7 (*extensive research behind it*) and T9 (*well-known press*), which might indicate the co-responsibility they expect from the writers and editors in such a time-consuming job. These statements might signify that besides the convenience of having readily available material, teachers also expect these resources to be produced by experts.

4.2 The features and benefits teachers consider when choosing a coursebook

Regarding this item of the questionnaire “What features / benefits do you consider when choosing a coursebook?” a wide range of attributes was mentioned. Noticeably, the most recurrent features cited were the visual appeal of the books, appropriate contents and supply of extra activities and exercises.

References to the visual presentation occurred among five different participants. Although the main characteristic of coursebooks is to present different kinds of written texts and statements, the visual components seem to be very alluring. The analysis of the data about this feature showed that T2 considers whether the coursebook *has lots of pictures*. T3 evaluates the *lay-out* and whether *it is attractive visually*. T6 points out the features *beleza* and *colorido atrativo para o aluno*. T7 mentions *visually attractive* and T8 highlights *visual devices* and *not to be overcoloured*.

These answers carry the idea that paralinguistic components like headings, pictures, illustrations and diagrams are devices that may facilitate the process of absorbing information when they accompany written texts. Based on the teachers’ criteria, visual elements seem to be of great importance when evaluating a coursebook. This is in accordance with Mirzoeff (2002:25), who claims that “In today’s world meanings circulate visually, in addition to orally and textually.”

According to the **Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary**, the noun *contents* can be defined as “the different sections that are contained in a book”. From the answers collected, it was noticed that, when considering a coursebook for adoption, teachers do a general reading of the book. When they have a prepared course plan to cover, they check whether the book addresses such subjects. Therefore, teachers expect the textbook to provide the syllabus they need. The participants in this study expressed their concern in relation to the contents of a coursebook

through words and expressions like: *plan of the book* and *approach* (T1), *skills are clearly shown* (T2) and *syllabus which help students “think”* (T3). T6 refers to *atendimento aos conteúdos*. In this case it seems that “conteúdos” stands for subjects to be covered according to the course plan. T2 takes into account the *contents* and the *plan of the book*, besides the *approach* which is *another really important point*. T3 values *a syllabus which helps students “think”* and which *does not give closed answers*. Analyzing further, T2 considers when *the skills are clearly shown*. This means that the teacher expects the students to clearly notice the kind of skill they are practicing: reading, listening, writing or speaking. Also, T5 gives a compliment about *exercises to practice all 4 skills*, along with T9, who mentions *cover all skills*, which might show a preference for a skills-based approach. At last, T6 mentions *atendimento aos conteúdos*, which seems to be a reference to the subjects that are officially required to be covered.

Two teachers make reference to methodology: T7 expects a coursebook to be *committed to my methodological beliefs* and have *relevant issues of identity and culture*. Through these sentences T7 seems to be concerned about a good teaching performance through a methodology. Additionally, he considers cross-cultural issues as part of the curriculum: *relevant issues of identity and culture*. T9 is also concerned with methodology: *a solid way of learning (methodology)*.

T5 and T7 expect to find local cultural references to serve as background for teaching the foreign language. T5 refers to *units contextualized with student’s reality* and T7 mentions *appropriate to students’ realities*.

A commonplace among teachers is that a coursebook is expected to be a helpful and useful instrument of work providing prepared materials. This consensus among teachers did not surprise me. In fact, it just confirmed the impressions I collected during the time I worked with teachers, who in general were always seeking extra exercises, ready made materials, plenty of alternative

activities and fresh tests. There are several statements that support this idea. T1, for example, says that having *appendix parts* is important in a book. Expressing the same view, T4 values *extra materials* and *handouts photocopiable*, while T5 cites *extra-curriculum activities* as a feature to be considered when choosing a coursebook. *Hundreds of exercises, review exercises, tests* and *a large resource pack for teachers*, were all important benefits expected to be part of a coursebook, mentioned by T9. This demand for resourceful coursebooks is typical of teachers who do not have time to design their own material.

4.3 The importance teachers think coursebooks have for their students

In relation to question three “What’s the importance of a coursebook for your students?” from the analysis of the data collected, there is a consensus among the teachers that coursebooks serve as reference for students when they need to check the contents they have learned. T1 said that *my students use the coursebook as a guideline*; T4 mentions: *a guide at home* and T9 considers the coursebook the *main guide for beginners*. It seems that according to the teachers a book functions as practical resource for study and as a real support for students when they are studying by themselves at home. In accordance with this idea T1 mentioned that the coursebook is important for students *making notes that are relevant for them*. T2 considers the book *a resource to study* while T4 thinks it *gets easier to review the main subjects studied in class*. T5 refers to *a way of studying for tests and exams* and to *organize themselves* [students] *when studying is concerned*. T7 considers that a coursebook is important because *students know what they are supposed to learn and to study*. All these opinions reveal that teachers consider a coursebook an important source for students to develop techniques and strategies for management of study. Also, according to T8, a book is meant to help raise students’ awareness about knowledge: *start learning before the lesson* and helps them when *preparing themselves for next classes*.

Another finding was the key-words *apoio* (T6) and *porto seguro* (T7) used in comparison to a coursebook. Likewise key-sentences such as: *students know what they are supposed to learn and to study* (T7) and *a reference to study for tests [...] at home* (T9) might indicate the importance teachers give to the students’ needs when choosing a coursebook. Teachers expect their students to find in the coursebook a source of references to topics assigned to study. It should provide explanation, exercises and review for the learners.

5

CONCLUSION

The paper has examined coursebooks as being the commonest kind of ELT material adopted, and their widespread use makes them objects of great interest among professionals and scholars within the pedagogic field.

This paper focused on some of the variables that influence teachers and educators when evaluating a certain textbook. In the results of the research carried out with EL teachers, the expected view that books are considered important resources for teachers proved to be true among this particular group of participants.

This finding is significant, considering that many times coursebooks are the subject of negative criticism in the educational environment. However, they still appear to be the main guidance for lesson planning and the main source of teaching ideas, at least for these nine participant teachers.

In this study the findings were consisting with the fact that teachers expect a coursebook to have texts, written and oral activities and cultural references to the target and the source language. Above all, it appears that a coursebook should be a resource of ready materials that helps teachers in the time-consuming task of preparing lessons.

However, as coursebooks are unlikely to fulfill all the particular demands of different teachers and learners, the wisest attitude for teachers of EL might be to use coursebooks as one resource among many others to promote language learning.

In this sense such materials would be just a means to an end. Thus, the teacher would be free to change tasks and exercises; rephrase instructions; adapt the assignments in terms of their lengths of time, purpose and how they should be performed; deconstruct and reinterpret the texts along with the students.

Finally, based on the knowledge I have concerning what teachers mostly expect from coursebooks, I understand that textbooks should not be static, or rejected. Instead, such useful materials – because they can be really useful – should be alterable to suit the learners' and teachers' needs and choices.

6

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APPENDIX 1 – Questionnaire for teachers about the importance of coursebooks for teachers and students of a foreign language.

- 1) What's the importance of a coursebook for you as a teacher (in what aspects does it help you)?
- 2) What features / benefits do you consider when choosing a coursebook?
- 3) What's the importance of a coursebook for your students?

Name:

Educational Institution:

Teaching grade / level:

APPENDIX 2 – Summary of the answers to the questionnaire about the importance of coursebooks for teachers and students of a foreign language.

TEACHER	QUESTION 1	QUESTION 2	QUESTION 3
<p>1</p> <p>From basic to advanced level in a English school</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • helps me to have a guideline of the course. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • contents; • plan of the book; • publisher; • the approach is another really important point; • appendix parts; • some help for students to have a self-study. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • my students use the coursebook as a guideline; • making notes that are relevant for them.
<p>2</p> <p>Public high school</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • very important; • it guides 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have lots of pictures; • the skills are clearly shown. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • good; • resource to study; • very important.
<p>3</p> <p>Private elementary and high school</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • helps me ... gives me a line of work; • not intended to be the only source for the students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lay-out; • attractive visually; • syllabus which help students “think”; • does not give closed answers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • one more tool in their development;
<p>4</p> <p>Private high school</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • very important; • almost impossible to prepare or select a good material for each class; • audio-visual already prepared, exercises, extra exercises 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • extra materials; • handouts photocopiable. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a guide at home; • gets easier to review the main subject studied in class

<p>5</p> <p>Private elementary and high school</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • outlines the course; • facilitates a teacher's work and lesson planning; • in terms of exercise and reading makes the teacher's work easier; • other resources should be used; • should practice all 4 skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exercises to practice all 4 skills; • updated; • have interesting material; • units contextualized with student's reality; • extra-curriculum activities; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • way of studying for tests and exams; • homework; • organize themselves when studying is concerned;
<p>6</p> <p>Private elementary and high school</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • apoio com textos e gravuras; • exercícios 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • beleza; • colorido atrativo para o aluno; • praticidade; • atendimento aos conteúdos. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • apoio ao conteúdo dado pelo professor.
<p>7</p> <p>Higher education and English course</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • providing teachers with material within the reach of their hands; • no teacher ... has time to prepare so much material for so many different lessons; • extensive research behind it; • interesting (and sometimes realistic) material. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • committed to my methodological beliefs; • appropriate to students' realities; • relevant issues of identity and culture; • comprehensive; • covering most part of the syllabus of the course; • friendly; • clear in its objectives and tasks; • visually attractive; motivate students; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sense of achievement; • students know what they are supposed to learn and to study; • a "porto seguro" (<i>sic</i>); • the "spine" of their [the teachers'] teaching is in it.

<p>8</p> <p>Trainee in English course</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • useful; • provide exercises and other learning devices; • suggests the order of the subjects; • helps students to remember the last lesson; • students can practice more the past lessons and take a look on the next ones. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • visual devices; • not to be overcoloured; • exercises and dialogues; • carefully elaborated. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • facilitates the mnemonic process; • discuss what they see in the book; why the language is the way it is; • start learning before the lesson; • preparing themselves for next classes.
<p>9</p> <p>Teaches and coordinates all levels in a English course</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • important; • best guide for a teacher; • useful; • helpful; • support what you intend to teach; • students need books for self-study; • they [students] feel more confident; • well-known press 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a solid way of learning (methodology); • cover all skills; • well-organized; • hundreds of exercises; • review exercises; • tests; • a large resource pack for teachers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • most important tool; • not the only one [tool]; • main guide for beginners; • must be 100% reliable; • a reference to study for tests or ... at home.