From Course Book to Source Book: Maintaining Teacher Autonomy

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Introduction
Teaching is a delicate balancing act between conformity and creativity. On the one hand, teachers have to respond flexibly to different individuals, changing circumstances and the many daily challenges that are inherent in teaching a subject as personal and complex as language. On the other hand, teachers are expected to meet predefined objectives, teach to the test, and follow a given curriculum. One obvious manifestation of these constraints is the set course book. It prescribes content, sequencing, gradation, activities and assessment, limiting teachers’ choices and freedom in the classroom. In this article, we look at ways in which teachers can be creative in how they use a particular course book to best meet their students’ needs.

Teacher autonomy: Working with constraints
Teachers are subject to a range of constraints in terms of what and how they are expected to teach. These constraints include

- clarification (i.e., focusing on clarifying ideas)
- international tests such as IELTS and TOEFL
- the national curriculum
- national exams
- the institutional curriculum
- institutional tests
- performance objectives
- set textbooks, and so on

Each level can influence the level below it. For example, a national curriculum may specify an end-of-year examination that all students must sit for. An institutional test will have an impact on the textbook that is used in class. These are all examples of overt and explicit constraints; they are public, usually specific, and teachers are expected to know about them. However, teachers are also subject to covert and implicit constraints. These include
expectations of what learners are supposed to learn, what constitutes ‘good’ teaching, and topics and skills that should be covered, or avoided. These expectations can be difficult to recognise, especially for beginning teachers or teachers working overseas. I remember gradually coming to understand that my colleagues in one particular country were initially a little unhappy with me teaching my classes entirely in L2, something that was not the norm.

Once they have passed the initial stage of endorsing a textbook which they can follow to the letter, good teachers are sensitive to these constraints and are adept at accommodating them. The best teachers, in addition, are able to adopt them flexibly, meeting the expectations while still retaining their own independence and their ability to teach creatively. This ability to balance realism with idealism is one aspect of teacher autonomy. The term teacher autonomy has received considerable attention in recent years as describing the ability of teachers to control their own professional life. In one of the earliest publications on the subject, McGrath (2000) argues that this includes teachers’ ability to self-direct their own professional development, to reflect on their teaching, and to find opportunities for self-improvement. The other aspect of teacher autonomy is teachers’ freedom from control by others. Clearly, all teachers inevitably are subject to some degree of control, but teacher autonomy refers to their ability to deal with this control in different ways. McGrath, for example, distinguishes between macro and micro constraints. The former include decisions made by people or institutions external to the teaching context, over which teachers often have little or no control. Micro constraints, on the other hand, operate within the teaching context and teachers often do have varying degrees of control over them. Autonomous teachers are aware of these constraints and the broader context they work in (Lamb & Reinders, 2008), and this situational awareness allows teachers to make informed decisions about their own practice, while acknowledging constraints on that practice (McGrath, Sinclair, & Lamb, 2000). McGrath operationalises this as the ability to “exercise independent judgement in order to establish a principled strategy which may involve compromise and negotiation as well as determined autonomous action” (ibid. p.102).

There is very little information on how teachers do this in practice, and indeed on how they (are supported to) develop this skill. A study by Reinders & Balcikanli (2011) of a range of popular teacher education materials showed that very little explicit attention is given to autonomy in them. Teacher education programmes often discuss the topic of learner
autonomy, but give little guidance on dealing with the various practical constraints on teaching (Reinders 2010). It seems that mostly teachers are expected to develop this ability over time, with experience. This means that “…teachers need to understand the constraints on their practice but, rather than feeling disempowered, they need to empower themselves by finding the spaces and opportunities for manoeuvre” (Lamb 2000, p.127). The focus of this article is to look at one such way in which teachers can find ‘spaces and opportunities,’ namely, by adapting a set textbook to match their convictions about what is best in a particular situation. For a broader discussion of the role of the teacher in his or her own development, we refer the reader to Borg (2003).

The course book

McGrath (2002, p.8) gives different metaphors teachers use to describe textbooks. These include:

- recipe
- springboard
- straightjacket
- supermarket
- holy book
- compass
- survival kit
- crutch

Clearly, these combine both positive and negative views, and it is likely that most teachers have had several of these views over time, perhaps even pertaining to the same book; what may be a straightjacket one day, may be a survival kit when a colleague calls in sick and you are asked to take over their class within the hour. The focus in this article is on moving from a view of the course book as a crutch (dependency), holy book (rigid adoption), or straightjacket (external imposition), to one of a springboard (support) or compass (guidance).

There is, of course, a range of ways in which course books are used in schools. Teachers may be required to
There are different reasons for a school to decide on a position on this continuum. A more prescriptive approach is sometimes taken for one or more of the following reasons:

- It is required (e.g. by the Ministry of Education).
- It ensures consistency: All teachers can be expected to cover the same materials in the same way.
- It ensures fair assessment.
- It supports inexperienced teachers.
- It is a form of teacher development.
- It is what learners expect/prefer.
- It is considered the best option: Either the materials are considered to be of very good quality or there is no time, budget or expertise available to develop alternatives.

Of course, it would be naïve to think that there is not also a major financial interest on the part of the publishers to push for the use of textbooks. Pressure to conform or to use the latest materials have a considerable influence on the decision to adopt certain textbooks. (Already in 1988, Sheldon estimated that there were 28 major publishers offering a staggering 1,623 ESL textbooks.)

All of these reasons have potential drawbacks. In particular, they can result in limiting teachers’ creativity and their ability to make their own choices about what is best for their learners. The use of textbooks, especially at the more prescriptive end of the continuum shown above, can result in a very limited, mechanistic view of education, in which there is no room for the unknown, for the individual and highly personal contributions that all learners and teachers make towards creating the unique learning environment that characterises the best classrooms.

There is also a political element to the critique of highly structured approaches. In discussing a rigid focus on specifying and measuring educational outcomes, Auerbach (1995, p.34)
states that this “serves as a mechanism of social control, disempowering both students and teachers. Its underlying assumption is that learners should assimilate into pre-existing structures and practices without questioning the power structures inherent within them.”

Below, I will suggest some ways, both from the literature and from my own experience, in which teachers can manage these challenges and make the most of the materials they have to work with, especially in situations where the materials are set and have to be followed closely.

**Using the course book creatively**

Just because a course book is required does not mean individual teachers do not have the opportunity to bring their own personality and teaching style to it. “Experienced teachers do not tend to follow the script of a course book inflexibly. They add, delete and change tasks at the planning stage, and they reshape their plans during the lesson in response to the interaction that takes place” (Edge & Wharton 1998, p.300).

To do this, firstly and obviously, it is important to identify those aspects of the book that are in some way lacking in content, quality or quantity. This also entails recognising aspects that are suitable and that will not need any form of adjustment. The purpose of this reflection is to be as specific as possible about the improvements deemed necessary. For example, perhaps there is not enough coverage of conversational skills, or perhaps the included video materials are not engaging enough. Perhaps the learners are not given enough opportunity to reflect, or are not encouraged to work together enough.

Broadly, there are two approaches teachers can take; 1) changing the materials in some way (changing the ‘what’), 2) changing the way the materials are used (changing the ‘how’). Below, I discuss some common concerns and ways of dealing with them.

**Changing the materials**

There are many possible reasons for wanting to adapt classroom materials. These include a lack of correspondence between the book’s language level and that of the learners, insufficient coverage, a topic selection or coverage that is not of interest to the students, or a lack of opportunities to allow learners to make decisions about their learning (Allwright, 1981), to name just a few. In situations like this, there are several options open to teachers.
Addition
If the coverage of the materials is insufficient, teachers can use quantitative or qualitative addition. The former involves extending the content (for example, by adding vocabulary not covered in the textbook), while the latter means expanding the content (for example, by covering stress and rhythm, in addition to minimal pairs). Addition is usually relatively easy; as long as learners can handle the additional content, few administrators would object to more content being covered. Addition can also be in the form of additional practice; for example, new vocabulary could be further practised through the use of graded readers at the appropriate level.

Modification
It is possible that the linguistic content in the textbook is adequate, but its presentation is not. In this case, teachers have two choices. They can either rewrite the content (for example, to make a unit in the book more interesting by using real-life examples and texts rather than those provided in the unit), or restructure it by introducing the content to learners in class in a different way from how it is presented in the textbook. For example, the teacher may decide to change the inductive presentation of a new grammar point to a deductive exercise. As with ‘addition,’ modification is a fairly low-impact decision as it will allow the teacher to still cover all of the content.

Simplification
Simplification can be in terms of content or explanation. Some textbooks are better than others at explaining new aspects of the language and may benefit from alternative examples and models. Others are simply too difficult for learners to grasp at their developmental level. Simplifying explanations is low-impact, but simplifying content can be tricky if learners are expected to cover language at a certain level (and perhaps are examined accordingly). It is still possible to do this, however, by moving from a linear to a spiral syllabus (see below).

Deletion
Although it may be hard to delete entire units if the content is, for example, covered in a national test, it may be possible to delete exercises or activities that do not suit students’ needs. It may also be possible to delete one part of the textbook and add another, still covering the same language content.
Re-ordering
Re-ordering the content can work if, for example, learners’ knowledge of a particular aspect of the language is good enough to decide to move one unit of the book to a later date to be used as a follow-up practice.

Changing classroom practice
In addition to changing the materials, a great deal of flexibility can be achieved by changing the way the materials are used. It is not uncommon for materials to be quite adequate in terms of content, presentation and practice but to fall short in other areas. Below we discuss some common concerns teachers voice and ways of dealing with them.

Giving more attention to the development of learner autonomy
Many materials do not actively encourage learners to make decisions about their own learning (Reinders & Balcikanli, 2011) or to become aware of their own role in the learning process. With the growing interest in learner autonomy (Benson, 2011), many teachers are understandably eager to help learners develop the skills to be able to direct their own learning. The use of a required textbook in some ways limits opportunities to give learners responsibility for their learning as most decisions about what to learn, or when and how, have already been made for them. But this does not mean that learners cannot reflect on their learning. Teachers can, for example, ask learners to discuss the textbook and its coverage, objectives, and methods and to suggest how they would have preferred to learn the content differently. In particular, by explicitly discussing the textbook’s objectives and asking learners to reflect on these in relation to their own goals for learning the language, learners will be encouraged to consider their own beliefs, likes and dislikes. For more suggestions relating to classroom practice for fostering learner autonomy, we refer the reader to Benson & Voller (1997).

Giving learners choices
Related to the above is the importance of giving learners choices in their learning. Even with a set text, a certain degree of choice can be given to learners, for example, in terms of

- the order in which content is covered (‘Would you like to listen to the story, or would you prefer to read the newspaper article?’)
- how to cover content (‘Would you like to read this story or listen to it?’)
what to do with the content (‘Would you like to complete the exercises in the book or interview each other?’)
what to do next (‘would you like to practise this in class, or complete the exercises at home so we can move on to the next topic?’)

Helping learners develop strategies
Many textbooks only pay lip service to the development of learners’ ability to use strategies. However, it is quite easy for teachers to model strategy use in class and encourage learners to develop and practise their own strategies. Cotterall & Reinders (2004) offer a practical guide to use of strategies in class.

Catering to diverse learners
The textbook may presuppose a homogeneous group of students but the reality is often quite different. Learners from different backgrounds and with different experiences, interests, levels and needs are likely to be in the same class. One way of dealing with this is to offer different activities to learners. This can be at the level of individual students’ roles in completing tasks, for example by asking one learner to be the scribe (e.g. for a learner who is not communicatively confident) and another, the spokesperson. Another form of differentiation is through grouping learners by needs and giving them different ways of interacting with the textbook content. For example, less proficient learners may be asked to read a text and summarise it, while more advanced learners may be asked to write a critique.

Another form of individualisation is through remedial practice. While still covering the textbook content, this involves giving further practice to those students who need it, for example, through self-access learning.

Changing the syllabus design
There are several different types of syllabuses, and not all of these are equally restrictive in terms of teachers’ choices of content and timing. The linear format covers topics in a set order, of increasing complexity and, where it needs to be followed strictly, leaves the least amount of room for teachers to make changes. The model called ‘revision units’ is similar, except that it rehearses content at later stages to ensure learners remember what was covered. A spiral syllabus or cyclical syllabus covers the same topic multiple times but at increasing
levels of complexity. This allows teachers to have learners of different proficiency levels work with the same content but at different levels of complexity. This is also a helpful approach when the course book is too difficult for the learners; it is possible to adjust the content but ensure it is returned to later. A matrix syllabus covers language content through a range of topics or in a range of settings. Usually a matrix syllabus gives teachers a fair amount of choice in terms of selecting the most suitable topics for their learners. A field approach provides a range of resources that cover all content, which can be learned in any order. Finally, a modular approach is similar to field approach in that learners (or teachers) can choose the order in which modules are covered as each module is independent of the others.

Encouraging out-of-class learning

Just because a textbook only includes certain activities does not mean teachers cannot encourage additional or alternative activities for learners to complete outside of class. One example that is becoming increasingly popular is the use of digital games (Reinders, 2012), and another is the use of mobile technologies (Pegrum, forthcoming) to encourage learners to use the language in their own time. Activities that are included in the textbook can often easily be adapted for use outside the classroom. For example, a task that requires students to interview each other can be changed to have students interview native speakers. Many ‘social’ technologies such as blogs, social networks and wikis can be harnessed to encourage learners to reflect on classroom work, exchange views and comment on each other’s ideas.

Adding activities

Adding one’s own activities is one of the easiest ways to put one’s own mark on the course book. Even in situations where all of the content has to be covered in a particular order, teachers can be creative in the ways they ask their learners to interact with the content. A simple gap-fill exercise in the textbook can become a timed game, a suggestion to ‘talk to your neighbour’ can become a class debate.

Changing the assessment

Especially in cases where the textbook prepares learners for a required exam or test, it may be difficult to avoid practising the types of questions learners will be asked. However, that does not mean it is not (also) possible to acknowledge learners’ reflections, choices, strategies and
out-of-class learning by giving them the opportunity to show their improvement in this area. A further alternative is to ask learners to assess themselves or their peers. It is possible to still use the exam questions students will receive, but at least students are encouraged to develop the ability to critically reflect on their own and others’ learning.

**Implementing change**

It is important to emphasise that none of the suggestions above need to be implemented in discretion. In most cases it is most useful to be open and transparent about one’s plans, and to communicate the need for any changes to colleagues, management and students, as well as the actual adaptations that will be carried out. By initiating an open discussion, a teacher is most likely to receive acceptance and, possibly, longer-term improvements to the programme, either through the selection of a more appropriate textbook, through a loosening of the requirements on teachers, or through a re-evaluation of the curriculum.

Another important element of success is the extent to which teachers communicate their intentions and classroom practices to colleagues. It is important to talk to learners and listen to them, and discuss what experiences they have had in using the resources available. They may have faced similar challenges and found alternative solutions. If not, by sharing their insights, teachers may be able to work together and perhaps even combine their efforts in adapting resources, or inventing new activities for the students.

Finally, it is important to remember that most change takes time to be successfully implemented. Attempts at finding space for manoeuvring within a set curriculum may not work out as one had anticipated, at least not immediately. It is best to be selective in the areas while trying to improve, build on success over time, and of course, to share successes with colleagues.

The above suggestions will hopefully help teachers to find opportunities for creativity even in situations that seem to demand rigorous conformity. In this way teachers will be able to move from a rigid adoption of a course book, to a flexible interpretation of a source book.

**References**


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