

CHOOSING A NEW EFL COURSE*

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Choosing a new EFL course (by which I mean a textbook or a series of textbooks, or basic books to teach English) is a difficult task. It is a bit like buying a new suit. When you go shopping for a new suit, there are a number of criteria which you will apply before finally handing over your money and going back home with your new suit under your arm, probably feeling happy and relieved, as well as a bit anxious to find out if others think you have made a good buy. You will look at colour, style, quality of the material, type of cloth, price, and you will be concerned if it is modern or oldfashioned, makes you look young or old, thin or fat, elegant or shabby, etc. You may visit various shops, compare prices and try on different sizes to find out what suits you best.

Buying a new EFL course also involves looking at a lot of different things. It is obviously a much more serious business than buying a new suit, if only because your final choice will not only affect you, but a number of students as well.

It seems a bit surprising then, to say the least, that very often teachers appear to find it far easier to change to a new course than to buy a new suit or dress.

In this article I will try to look at the problem of choosing a new EFL course by questioning a few common assumptions and giving some suggestions for a possible procedure.

SOME COMMON REASONS FOR WANTING A NEW COURSE

- You have attended a seminar or demonstration about a new course. You have heard terms like cognitive - functional - notional - group work - communicative - cyclical - spiral - role play, etc., etc.

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Back at your school your bad conscience takes over and you decide that the material you are using at present is no good, and consequently you buy the new material without properly studying its aims, objectives and content in relation to your students' need and learning situation.

- You are vaguely dissatisfied with the course you are using, and visit your local bookstore to see what else is available. The EFL specialist of the store shows you a bewildering variety of materials, one more dazzling and ultra-modern than the next, and due to frustration and lack of time you choose the course that is "the most popular" at the moment. It may not be the one that is most suitable for you.
- One or more of your colleagues has attended an in-service course, or has returned from a year's study in the USA or Great Britain. They bring with them new insights and ideas and as a result new material is immediately adopted, before the real needs and interests of your students have been taken into consideration, and perhaps before the whole teaching team is convinced of the advantages of the new approach.
- Other schools in the area have adopted more recent courses. Before deciding to follow their example it might be useful to find out why these other schools have changed, and what the concrete results with these new materials are.
- Parents pressure you into adopting a certain type of material, for reasons that are not always very scientific or methodologically sound, e.g.
 - "the method must not use the students' native language at all"
 - "the other book has more pictures, or pictures in colour"
 - "the other book is more expensive, and therefore better"
 - "the other book is cheaper"
 - "the other book has filmstrips and is therefore more modern"
 - "this is a British book and I want my children to learn American English" etc., etc.

In many cases it may be dangerous to accept the parents' criticism or suggestions without comment, and it is probably useful to explain the reasons for your choice of textbook, and your way of teaching, in simple terms. This can be done e.g. by means of simple brochure handed to parents or pupils at the start of classes.

- The course you are using does not produce the desired results. Before analysing carefully why it is unsatisfactory, you decide to use another course. It may well be that the lack of success has nothing at all to do with the quality of the course (perhaps it is used in the wrong way,

or it is unsuitable for this type or level of institution or student). In this case it is likely that the new course will be just as unsatisfactory as the previous one.

- You have been using the same course for a number of years and feel you need a change. Obviously, after having taught the same material many times, you (as a teacher) lose interest, you get bored in doing and saying the same things over and over again.

This may indeed be a good reason for changing because if the teacher is not interested in the content and procedure of the lesson, this lack of interest is likely to be transferred to the students. However, there are three points worth remembering:

1.- If the course has produced good results over a long period of time, it may be dangerous to change before you are quite sure that the replacement is as good as the course it is replacing.

2.- Moreover, although all the material is "old hat" to you, it is all quite new to the students, who are enjoying it for the first time.

3.- Many teachers who have taught the same material several times begin to vary it, to use it in a flexible way. They see the weak and the strong points, add extra exercises where they are needed and leave out superfluous ones, invent their own presentation and games, bring in magazine pictures, songs, etc., where appropriate, etc., etc. All this additional material, which may be in the teacher's head or in a separate file, is constantly growing and changing, and may make material which is otherwise monotonous and dull, interesting and varied. Instead of changing courses because you have got bored with them, and running the risk of adopting something which, although newer, may be inferior or no better, it might be more profitable for a group of teachers using the same material to get together, exchange ideas, exercises, games, songs, pictures, etc., and in this way create a pool of varied and stimulating new options to enrich your teaching.

COURSE SELECTION: CRITERIA AND PROCEDURE

All the above-mentioned situations may well provide valid reasons for initiating a change of course book. In themselves, however, they are not sufficiently reliable to base a decision on. In the second part of this article I give an example of a basic list of criteria, followed by a possible procedure for selecting a new course.

The check list does not by any means pretend to be an exhaustive list of questions, suitable for each and every situation. However, I feel it

does ask a number of important questions grouped under convenient headings, and I hope it will enable teachers to pinpoint major strengths and weaknesses in different materials before having had the opportunity to use these materials. If it helps some teachers to avoid a costly mistake, I feel its purpose has been fulfilled.

It is of course possible to use a checklist along the lines suggested in order to evaluate course materials currently in use (e.g. in order to find the answers to the questions contained in steps 1, 2 and 3 of the suggested procedure at the end). This might help to make explicit the major shortcomings of the material in use. However, in such a case I feel we could add a number of questions that relate specifically to the students' experience, results, reactions and interest as regards the course they have used or are using. It would for example be very useful and possibly enlightening to have the students fill in a carefully prepared questionnaire. Unfortunately, this sort of feedback is impossible to obtain when we are faced with the necessity of choosing from a number of courses, none of which we have ever used in the classroom. Trying out new material in one or two pilot classes, before deciding on wholesale adoption, can be extremely helpful, since it gives you the chance to see the new material in action.

The suggested system of giving plus or minus points to each question or cluster of questions (often a point refers not to a single question, but to a whole area of course design or methodology) is an attempt to quantify (albeit in a rather rudimentary way) the evaluation and facilitate its discussion section by section.

Certain areas carry more emphasis than others, and to a large extent this has been deliberate. Obviously this is a matter of personal choice and experience, and in that sense fairly arbitrary. For example, Teacher's guidance has been given a great deal of emphasis, not only in section 8 but also in questions such as 1.7, 3.3, 5.16. On the other hand, only one question relates to pronunciation/intonation work (5.16), an area which many teachers may well consider very important.

CRITERIA FOR COURSE SELECTION: SUGGESTIONS FOR A CHECKLIST

Course:

Teacher:

Date:

Key:

+ = point in favour

- = point against

+ -

1. COMPONENTS AND COST

Total:

- 1.1. Are there too many parts for the students for each year or stage (e.g. workbook(s), students' book(s), readers, etc.) and does this make the course very expensive for the students?
- 1.2. If in your school the students' books are passed on to the next "generation", do many parts have to be bought again each year?
- 1.3. Are there too many additional materials, which may be expensive (filmstrips, tapes, etc.)?
- 1.4. Do the tapes/cassettes include a lot of material you will never use?
- 1.5. If the additional aids are optional, is it easy to do without them, and does the course remain interesting in this case?
- 1.6. How does the price for the student compare to your present course, or to other courses available?
- 1.7. What is the teacher's book like? (expensive, detailed, handy, difficult, useless).

	+	-
Total:		
1.1.		
1.2.		
1.3.		
1.4.		
1.5.		
1.6.		
1.7.		
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Total:		
2.1.		
2.2.		

2. LAYOUT AND DESIGN

Total:

- 2.1. Is the size of the book O.K.?
- 2.2. Is the layout of the material (including different types of exercises, presentation, etc.) clear or confusing?

- 2.3. Are the illustrations functional (i.e. do they have a function in the teaching process) or are they just "decorative"?
- 2.4. Will the illustrations appeal to your students?

	+	-
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3. SELECTION AND GRADING

Total:

- 3.1. On what basis is the material for each unit or lesson selected, situationally, structurally, or functionally? Does this suit your students, or syllabus?
- 3.2. Is the introduction of new grammar, vocabulary, functions too fast, too slow, all right, erratic, chaotic, etc.?
- 3.3. Does the book (or teacher's guide) give you a clear breakdown of selection of grammar, vocabulary, etc., lesson-by-lesson or unit-by-unit?
- 3.4. Is there any system of re-cycling?
- 3.5. Is there any difference drawn between receptive and productive language, i.e. is all the language introduced supposed to be learned actively, or are there specific activities (listening, reading exercises) which make use of language that has to be understood, but not necessarily produced?

4. FITTING

Total:

- 4.1. Will it take you a year, a semester, a trimester, two years to cover the material in the book, and is this acceptable?
- 4.2. Does the course cover all your requirements (in terms of syllabus/examination)?
- 4.3. If it covers less than your requirements, how much will you have to add and how much will this cost in terms of time and money?
- 4.4. If it covers more than your requirements, how much will you have to leave out? Is it possible to leave that much out, or does it make the book unteachable? Is the book still worth buying if you have to leave so much out?
- 4.5. Will you have to change a lot in the course to make it fit your syllabus/students' requirements? How much time and effort will this demand of you/your teachers?

	+	-

5. PRESENTATION AND PRACTICE

Total:

- 5.1. Is the way the new material is presented suitable/ varied/monotonous/stimulating/thorough?
- 5.2. Presentation can be done in the form of dialogues, readings, pictures, songs, etc. Is all the new material presented properly, in a context? Does the known introduce the new?
- 5.3. Are the dialogues, readings, etc. long? Short? (As a rule of thumb: short ones are better, certainly for beginners)

- 5.16. Are there exercises on pronunciation, intonation, stress, rhythm? How are they, and how are they explained in the book/teacher's notes?

6. EVALUATION AND REVISION

Total:

- 6.1. Is there consolidation/revision work (e.g. in the form of free (communicative) practice, revision lessons, consolidation units, etc.)? (See also selection and grading).
- 6.2. Are there tests in the book, if so, are they good, frequent enough, is this what you want?
- 6.3. Are there separate tests in the form of booklets or loose sheets, and is this handy/economical (e.g. can they be re-used)?
- 6.4. Is there an easy way of marking, e.g. by means of standard student answer sheets and marking overlay?
- 6.5. Will these tests help you to evaluate the students' progress in relation to a school exam or other official exam? (see also: Fitting).
- 6.6. In case you do not want any tests at all, is it clear that the tests for the course are optional?

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7. CONTENT

Total:

- 7.1. Is the content suitable for your students in terms of age, social and cultural background, previous schooling, nationality, etc.?
E.g.: A family story-line may be suitable for children but not for adults. A continuous story may be suitable for all ages, but not for very long (e.g. not more than one or two semesters). Some kind of theme, context, story is usually helpful, unless your students are sophisticated adults at a fairly high intellectual level.
- 7.2. What about the cultural bias? Very strong in terms of setting, nationality, class, etc.? Is this suitable?
- 7.3. Are the situations easily transferable to your own students' experience and environment, i.e. are they of a fairly universal type?
- 7.4. Is there a range of people of different nationalities and/or backgrounds in the course? Do you like this?
- 7.5. In terms of the language and topics used, is the approach relevant/sympathetic/trivial/useful/meaningful/serious/dull/lighthearted/etc.? Do you like this?

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8. TEACHER'S GUIDANCE

Total:

- 8.1. Is there a teacher's book? If not, why not? (e.g. is there a very detailed introduction for the teacher in the book itself?)
- 8.2. Is the teacher's book expensive? Worth the money?

- 9.4. Can the publishing house offer any extra material that can enhance the flexibility of the course, if required?

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SUGGESTED PROCEDURE

1. Change to a new course only when or if the old one is no longer satisfactory.
2. Find out why the old course is no longer satisfactory. Make up a list of points or reasons.
3. The whole team discusses the advisability of changing to a new course.
4. Consult recent works on methodology, journals, publishers' literature.
5. Visit colleagues in other schools (especially if you are a member of an English Teachers' Association this should be fairly easy to arrange).
6. Invite publishers' representatives, consultants, or authors to give you seminars or demonstrations about the most likely candidates for adoptions.
7. Consult experts, e.g. at the British Council, local Universities or Teacher Training Institutes.
8. Check the most interesting courses against the checklist (each teacher individually).
9. Discuss the results (the whole team), compare them with other courses and the course you are currently using.
10. Discuss any remaining queries/doubts/uncertainties with the publisher's consultant, your expert, colleagues who are using the material in question.

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