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**Why are English Language Teaching
materials the way they are?**

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Chapter 1 | Introduction

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1.1 The purpose of the present study

For those involved in English Language Teaching (ELT), the commercially produced 'main coursebook' is, by now, a familiar object. Among the wide range of teaching materials now available, these types of texts claim to provide for what are assumed to be all the necessary classroom work in a general language course, offering work in each of the 'four skills', grammar, usage and so on. They are most frequently elaborately designed, full colour works, supplemented by various components (such as teachers' guides, workbooks, tests, cassettes and so on), often at a number of different levels of ability in English.

Promoted with the full resources of modern technology, the most 'successful' (in commercial terms) of these texts, often achieve adoptions on a world-wide basis. It is thus not uncommon to find the same books in use in schools as far afield as those in Mexico and Turkey, Sweden and Australia - testimony to the power of modern-day communications and modern-day corporate enterprise to reach into the furthest corners of the globe. In a relatively short space of time, the authors of such texts may thus become international figures. The fictional characters they create, the content of their reading and listening passages, the

language tasks they devise, even the details of their otherwise unknown home towns, may become the object of classroom work all over the world.

Behind the production of such texts, stands a publishing industry the scale of which is indeed massive. As we shall see later, even if a new set of main course materials is only modestly successful (in commercial terms), the students' book will almost certainly achieve sales exceeding 100,000 copies a year, and may go on to reach final sales well in excess of a million, easily outstripping some of the more publicly proclaimed best sellers in paperback fiction. As a development in the capacity of the publishing houses to expand and service the market for English language teaching materials, the sales of such titles now render almost insignificant by comparison the sales of their predecessors of previous decades.

Whilst the sales of the newer coursebooks have continued to expand, however, so too have their claims on the structuring of class time. As we shall see later in Chapters 2 and 3, the modern day main coursebook is a very complex phenomenon. From the early days of textbooks that contained mainly readings, perhaps with some questions and sentences to translate, to be supplemented by the explanations and directions of the teacher, the contemporary main coursebook undertakes to offer complete 'packages' for language learning and teaching. Teachers' guides, students' books, workbooks, tests, cassettes, videos, and other ancillary components facilitated by modern technology, are all integrated into a 'system' which sets out, often in minute detail, the work to be done by teachers and learners. With the onset of the 1990s, materials are thus now taking on an increasingly significant role in the structuring of classroom time, claiming to provide not only the basis for the content for classroom work but also the manner in which teachers and learners are to interact. In the

process, and through the mass sales of the best sellers, a uniformity in classroom work is proposed, with the prospect (if not the actuality) of similar lessons unfolding in distant parts of the world.¹

And yet, while the best-selling ELT texts have quietly gone about exporting the views of language learning held by authors and publishers, the language teaching professions have remained virtually silent on what it is that these texts actually contain. Given the widespread use of published materials, it is remarkable that, of the many variables involved in language teaching and learning, the design of commercially produced materials is probably one of the least explored. Thus, whilst reviews of individual textbooks and proposals for new task types abound in the literature, systematic accounts of the nature of published materials are, to my knowledge, relatively few on the ground, and still fewer are investigations into the various factors which may be involved in materials production.²

At stake is not simply our perhaps unwitting purchase of content and ways of working. There is, by now, a considerable amount of literature on the various aspects of the 'hidden curriculum' showing how meanings, values and attitudes may all be learnt through the non-apparent nature of school work (see, inter alia, Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Apple, 1979,1985; Gordon, 1984; Auerbach and

¹I do not wish, by this, to overstate the influence of materials on the nature of what goes on in classrooms. Clearly, reinterpretation of tasks and texts does take place by teachers and learners and there will be many who will step outside what the materials offer. However, as my argument will show later (in particular in Chapter 7), the potential of reinterpretation and the likelihood of 'extra-materials' activity is, at best, not supported and, at worst, severely constrained by present-day materials and the situations in which their use is adopted.

²Some examples of analyses which attempt a systematic investigation of ELT materials, from various viewpoints, are Porreca's (1984) analysis of sexism in materials, Auerbach and Burgess's (1985) account of the hidden curriculum in "survival English" materials, and Littlejohn and Windeatt's (1989) analyses of the cultural values and views of knowledge, language learning, and role relations which may be contained in materials.

Burgess, 1985). The organization and content of all educational practices, as Freire (1972:23) and others note, contain within them the particular 'philosophies of man' and the particular views of society, learning, teaching and knowledge which will have been instrumental in shaping their nature. In the process of their use, as I will argue later, educational practices may thus reconfirm these views, making each of us agents for social reproduction. With the developing complexity of the materials we use, their deeper involvement in the detailed construction of teaching and learning procedures and the manner in which we interact with each other, it is thus vital that we undertake careful consideration of what it is that we take into our classrooms. Without wishing to sound too dramatic, we need, simply, to look inside the Trojan horse³.

It is, then, from this stand-point that the present thesis departs. Its overall aim is to investigate the nature of main course language teaching materials and uncover the various factors which contribute to their shaping. The thesis, therefore, ultimately seeks to address a basic question of explanation: *Why are English language teaching materials the way they are?* As a reaction to the widening use and developing complexity of multinational language teaching materials, we may view the overall intention as part of a general aim of empowering teachers, learners, educational administrators and, indeed, materials writers and publishers, to take more control over the materials with which they are involved. At the implementation stage of classroom use, determining as precisely as possible what it is that we are buying when we choose to adopt a particular coursebook, should aid us in deciding on the necessity for any further courses of action - perhaps, as I have argued elsewhere, either rejecting the materials or making the materials themselves a

³'Trojan horse' is perhaps a misleading metaphor. I do not wish to suggest a conspiracy in the design of main coursebooks, but simply something which is brought into classrooms, the use of which may imply more than is immediately apparent.

critical object (see Littlejohn and Windeatt, 1989:174-5). At the design stage, too, a greater understanding of materials and the forces which they embody should enable the realisation of alternatives and the general direction in which innovation may need to proceed. Consciousness of the inherent nature of materials and consciousness of the forces which shape this nature are, I would suggest, vital ingredients in the expression of the materials-related needs and demands of those involved in language teaching and learning.

It is important to note, however, that the present thesis does not attempt to address the implementation stage of materials. My concern here is with the materials themselves, with the content and ways of working which they propose, *not* with what may actually happen in particular classrooms. Analysing and explaining the forces which shape the design of materials, it must be recognised, is quite a different matter from analysing and explaining the forces which shape 'materials-in-action'. Precisely what happens in classrooms and what outcomes occur when materials are brought into use will depend upon numerous further factors, not least of which is the reinterpretation of materials and tasks by both teachers and learners.⁴ The present thesis, therefore, is principally concerned with the analysis and explanation of what Breen (1987, 1989) describes as *tasks-as-workplans*, those predesigned tasks which are offered to teachers and learners as a 'frame' for learning opportunities, distinct from *tasks-in-process*, the point at which teachers and learners bring their own personal redefinitions into the context of a particular classroom setting.

1.2 Selection of data

⁴I would refer the reader here to some preliminary discussions by Nunan (1989) and Kumaravadivelu (1991) and to the doctoral work currently underway at Lancaster by Eunice Torres.

As the above discussion will have made clear, my concern in this thesis is with the nature of commercially produced main course materials and the factors which influence their shaping. By 'main course materials' I mean those materials which are intended to form the central or 'core' element (in terms of materials) in a general English language course. They most typically come (as noted earlier) as a package or set, comprising numerous elements including items such as a student's book, a teacher's book, a workbook, cassettes, tests and so on, usually at three or more levels of ability in English. They are to be distinguished, therefore, from the wide range of 'supplementary' materials which are available in relation to specific aspects of English language learning, such as particular varieties of English, reference information, 'skills development' materials in reading, writing, speaking and listening, graded readers and so on.

To provide a consistent and concrete reference point for discussion, I have chosen to base my investigation on an analysis of a number of current course-books. The particular titles with which I will work are all aimed at pupils in the middle-school age range of 9 to 13 years old, although they may, in practice, be used with both older and younger learners. I have chosen to work with this particular category of materials for a number of reasons. Firstly, from a personal point of view, it is the age range with which, prior to starting my research, I was most recently professionally involved, mainly as a trainer of teachers for primary and lower secondary schools in the Middle East. Secondly, and more importantly, however, it is precisely within the 9-13 age range that most learners have their initial contact with English. The nature of their initial experience of classroom language learning may thus be important in shaping their views of what language learning involves. Thirdly, and more directly relevant to materials themselves, it is, in my experience, precisely

within the upper primary and lower secondary levels where one finds the greatest reliance on the use of course materials. Many teachers at this level lack experience and training and, understandably, turn to published materials for support and guidance. It is also, I believe, at the primary and secondary levels that ministries of education tend to exercise the greatest control over the selection of materials and their use, often specifying the precise units to be done week by week. For these reasons, therefore, I felt that an investigation into materials destined for use in upper primary and lower secondary schools was of most immediate concern.

As an initial step in the collection of data, I contacted 45 authors who had published coursebooks for pupils between 9 and 13. Of these, only ten eventually replied, and of those ten only five agreed to meet with me to discuss their materials. It is perhaps understandable why so few authors were willing to discuss their work, given the pressures of deadlines which are often upon them and the sometimes caustic criticism directed towards teaching materials, but the cooperation of authors was vital if I was to take account of the major factors in materials design. The five authors who replied thus determined which coursebooks I was to treat as the central data for my research. It is therefore important that we set in context the course-books which form the basis of this thesis. Table 1.1 lists the 'top ten' (in terms of numbers of titles) United Kingdom ELT publishers. As the table shows, at the time I began my research, only five of the 'top ten' then published main course materials specifically for pupils in the 9-13 age range and, of those five, three are represented in the data. (One publisher is responsible for three of the books analysed, two further publishers are responsible for one book each of those analysed.⁵) The course-books analysed in this thesis thus most certainly come

⁵ Since 1988, three further publishers in the 'top ten' (Nelson, Heinemann and Cambridge) have published or are about to publish a course which covers the 9-13 age range. The remaining two

from the 'mainstream' of upper primary/lower secondary ELT publishing. Over the years since their publication, each of the books has achieved widespread international sales and at the time of writing, are still actively promoted by the publishers. Two of the books, in particular, have become major commercial successes, with adaptations made for various local markets.

publisher	approx. no. of titles	main course for 9-13	represented in data
1 Longman	950	x	x
2 Oxford University Press	225	x	x
3 Macmillan/MEP	195		x
4 Cambridge University Press	175		
5 Heinemann	175	x	
6 Prentice-Hall International	145		
7 Nelson	105		
8 Edward Arnold	85		
9 Cassell	65		
10 Collins	60	x	x

Table 1.1: 'Top ten' UK ELT publishers and upper primary/lower secondary materials. Source: TESOL Newsletter 23/2, 1988 and examination of catalogues.

Whilst it is clear from Table 1.1 that the five coursebooks come from the mainstream of the larger ELT publishers, I do not wish to claim, in the pages which follow, any greater level of generalisability for the findings which I will present. I am concerned here with an in-depth analysis and explanation of only five titles and am thus in no position to make substantiated statements about other texts which may be available for the 9-13 age range or for learners whose level of English is other than that assumed by the materials I examine here. That said, my own personal view, based on my experience as a teacher, author and researcher, is that the features identified in my analysis (presented in Chapter 3) are reproduced consistently across materials aimed at both younger and older learners, particularly those learners whose abilities in English lie within the lower levels identified by publishers ('beginners', 'elementary', and

publishers (Edward Arnold and Cassell) have both been absorbed into larger publishing conglomerates.

'intermediate', covering approximately the first 3 years or 300 hours of English). This, in my view, would include titles which have only recently appeared.

In order to preserve the anonymity of the authors who agreed to take part in the research, I have, in the discussions which follow, labelled the books A to E and avoided their direct identification with particular publishers. Appendix I, containing the analysed extracts from each of the books has, additionally, been bound separately from this main volume as it would be relatively easy for anyone involved in English language teaching to identify the texts (and thus the authors) in question.

1.3 Outline of the thesis

In the pages which follow, I attempt to chart the process which has, for me, characterised the experience of research into the nature and shaping of teaching materials. It has, more than anything else, been a process of discovery, one in which further layers of meanings and influence in the materials became clear as I moved forward in my investigation. At the very outset, however, I recognised that no single line of explanation would suffice in accounting for the factors which bear upon the design of materials. Teaching materials, as I have already suggested, are very complex objects, embodying the efforts of numerous individuals in different ways for different purposes. Any account of materials needs, therefore, to be a multi-faceted one, viewing their creation from a number of different perspectives in an effort to identify the varying sources of influence. In my approach to the explanation of the materials discussed in this thesis, I have thus chosen to adopt a number of different 'windows' on the process of creation, tracing into the materials the impact of various factors, from the 'top-down' influence of Applied Linguistic thought, to the wider

societal context in which ELT materials production takes place. As the outline below shows, however, I see each of these windows as offering essentially complementary, rather than competing, perspectives, each revealing further insights into the formation of the materials. Figure 1.1 summarises the outline of the thesis.

<i>Why are ELT materials the way they are?</i> Outline of the thesis	
Chapter 1	Introduction Explains the purpose of the investigation and gives an outline of the thesis. Sets out the two steps involved in the study.
First step: <i>How are ELT materials?</i>	
Chapter 2	Towards a descriptive model of ELT materials. Reviews existing descriptive models and sets out a synthesis of two new models: - a model for the <i>product</i> of analysis and description; - a model for the <i>process</i> of analysis and description.
Chapter 3	Applying the model Applies the model for the product and process of analysis and description to 5 main coursebooks and presents a synthesized description.
Second step: <i>Why are they like that?</i> Four main avenues for explanation:	
Chapter 4	ELT materials as the application of Applied Linguistic thought Presents a review of Applied Linguistic thought in relation to materials design from the early 1970s to the mid 1980s; relates this to the nature of the materials as set out in Chapter 3.
Chapter 5	ELT materials as representing the personal perceptions of authors Outlines an approach to analyzing authors' perceptions based on phenomenology and presents data obtained from repertory grids and interviews; relates the findings to the nature of the analyzed materials.
Chapter 6	ELT materials as a publishing product Outlines an approach to analyzing publishing processes based on organization theory and presents a documentary account of the stages involved in ELT textbook publishing; relates this to the nature of the analyzed materials.
Chapter 7	ELT materials as a social product Outlines an approach to analyzing the impact of macro-sociological forces based on critical theory and presents a review of investigations into the form of cultural products; relates this to the nature of the analyzed materials.
Chapter 8	Conclusion Summarises the thesis and discusses the prospects for innovation.

Figure 1.1 Outline of the thesis

An enquiry into a phenomenon as complex as teaching materials requires as its first step a clear definition of the nature of what is to be explained. My enquiry begins, therefore, with an investigation in **Chapters 2 and 3** of the object of analysis, the selected materials themselves. Recognising that any descriptive framework will, of its nature, offer only a partial account of the materials, **Chapter 2** grounds the descriptive framework which I adopt in what the literature of English language teaching views as significant aspects of classroom work. These, I suggest, may be seen in terms of two general categories: *aspects of design*, which relate to the underlying principles of approach in the materials and *aspects of realisation*, which relate to how the materials become realised in their published form. In reviewing the descriptive frameworks offered by other writers, I suggest that they generally involve a mixture of levels of inference, confusing description with deduction. This makes it difficult to separate what is explicit in the materials from the researcher's assumptions about using the materials and the wider implications which this may have for, for example, classroom roles and approaches to learning.

The framework that is offered in the Chapter 2, therefore, suggests three levels in the process of description, representing three levels of inference through which the researcher must pass. This begins with a statement of 'what is there', explicitly, in the materials (such as the number of pages, provision of indices, and so on), moves on to a description of 'what is required of users' (that is, the demands which the materials appear to place on teachers and learners), before finally considering 'what is implied' by the use of the materials for the wider context of classroom learning (such as teacher-learner roles and approaches to learning). The central element in the description of materials, it is suggested,

and one which enables the movement from the second to the third level of description, is an analysis of the learning tasks contained in the materials. A definition of 'task' and a theoretical basis for task analysis is therefore provided. The chapter concludes with a model which relates the data gathered at the three levels of the process of description to the two categories of *design* and *realisation*.

The next chapter, **Chapter 3**, applies the three levels of the process of description to the five sets of materials which form the central data for the thesis. For the purposes of the second level of description, an extract from the student's book of each course is subdivided into tasks and, in conjunction with the relevant teacher's notes, is subjected to a detailed analysis. In total, over 600 tasks are analysed in this way. Taken together with the data gathered in relation to their explicit nature and a consideration of the implications of their use, the chapter then summarises the key features of the materials under the two categories of *design* and *realisation*. These summaries are then taken as the object for explanation in the chapters which follow.

In **Chapter 4**, the first of my explanatory chapters, the 'window' which I adopt is the influence of applied linguistic thought in shaping the nature of the materials. As the predominant basis for the analysis of language teaching procedures and for proposals for new task types, the influence of ideas in Applied Linguistics may be thought to have a significant role in shaping the nature of teaching materials. Working, therefore, from a historical account of the ideas current in the period leading up to the publication of the materials, and recognising that ideas in Applied Linguistics are principally concerned with the underlying principles and approach in language teaching, I set out the implications which Applied Linguistic thought would have for the design

aspects of materials. These are then related to the description of materials as established in Chapter 3, in order to identify the extent to which the materials may be accounted for in terms of the influence of Applied Linguistics. The chapter shows, however, that only a relatively weak link can be established between Applied Linguistic discussion and the nature of the materials, suggesting that a more fruitful line of explanation may lie elsewhere.

In the next chapter, **Chapter 5**, my attention moves to the more immediate processes of creation which lie behind teaching materials, in particular to the authors themselves. In designing materials for users whom they will, in all probability, never meet, authors, I suggest, are required to draw upon generalised images or typifications of teachers, learners and language learning. These typifications, I argue, may have significant implications for the nature of the materials which authors produce and thus form a basis for their explanation. To this end, each of the five authors whose materials are considered in this thesis was asked to complete a personal construct repertory grid and interviewed. Drawing upon a phenomenological framework for a conceptualization of the relationship between typifications and social action, the data gathered from the interviews and repertory grids is analysed in the chapter in order to identify the nature of their views of teachers, learners and classroom language learning. These are then related to the nature of the materials as set out in Chapter 3. The chapter concludes that a significant part of the materials may be accounted for in terms of the typifications which authors adopt, particularly in relation to an assumed need for teachers to feel a sense of personal security and for learners to be controlled in the classroom.

Whilst the investigation of authors' perceptions proves to be a very fruitful avenue for explanation, there remain, however, certain features of the materials

which are unaccounted for, particularly in relation to their aspects of realisation (i.e. how the materials are realised in their published form). Recognising that authors do not work alone in the production of main-course materials, the next chapter, **Chapter 6**, thus turns to the role of the publishing house in shaping the nature of the materials. I suggest that, in order to recognise the complex task of coordinating the production of teaching materials, publishing houses need to be viewed as *organizations* with an *organizational output*. The approach taken in the chapter, therefore, begins with a review of the insights offered by organization theory, particularly in respect of the manner in which premises for action within organizations are determined.

Drawing on data gained through conversations with authors, editors and other publishing personnel, supported by a number of relevant documents and my own experiences as an author, the chapter then provides an overview of the context for ELT publishing and a composite documentary account of the processes of publication. I suggest that, in the publication of main course materials, the publishers' need to minimise the financial risks involved leads to the establishment of premises for materials writing which emphasise the replication of the design characteristics of existing market leaders. In relating this analysis to the five sets of materials discussed in the thesis, I am thus able to account for their design characteristics in terms of the authors' acceptance of the premises for publication and the publishers' experience of what they know will sell. Authors, I suggest, need to be viewed as *agents* for the publisher, commissioned by the publisher on the basis of their known abilities to adhere to previously established premises for materials writing. Several of the aspects of the materials which fall under the category of *realisation*, I suggest, are also directly accountable in terms of the goals of the publishing house.

Taken together, the combined analyses of authors' perceptions and the priorities of publishing houses provide considerable insight into the various factors shaping the nature of the materials. They leave unanswered, however, questions as to why the particular design and realisation characteristics are selected for inclusion in the materials and why such materials attain apparently widespread acceptance, evidenced by the sales which they achieve. Clearly, main-course teaching materials as a publication type would not persist in their present form were there not a wider basis for their acceptance and their demand. The basis for this, I suggest in **Chapter 7**, lies beyond the immediate circumstances of creation in the wider social context in which materials production, publishing and consumption take place. An understanding of the relationship between the overall context and the materials, I argue, requires a coherent macro-sociological framework which enables cultural objects (such as textbooks) to be seen in terms of the manner in which they incorporate representations of the wider society.

As currently the most developed macro-sociological perspective on the emergence of cultural forms, I draw upon critical theory to trace into the materials the impact of long term trends in the social structure and established patterns in social organization. The chapter shows, I believe, how a convincing case can be made for the explanation of the materials in terms of their overall social location, particularly in respect of the socio-economic processes of deskilling and commodification. The argument pursued, however, is not that the relationship between teaching materials and the wider society is one of direct correspondence or reflection, but rather one in which established 'common sense' meanings and established social practices are mediated by the particular individuals engaged in materials production. The chapter recognises,

therefore, that a basis for change and innovation in materials design may exist with the conscious adoption of alternative metaphors for learning and teaching.

The final chapter in the thesis, **Chapter 8**, returns to the initial question, *Why are ELT materials the way they are?*, and draws together the insights gained through the previous chapters. It suggests how the explanations offered in the previous chapters can be viewed as together providing a coherent explanation to the nature of the materials but notes the failure to account for the materials through the impact of Applied Linguistics. The chapter then sets out some personal remarks in relation to materials analysis and evaluation and suggests a future role for the model elaborated in the thesis. Some indications for possible innovation in teaching materials are also offered.

The thesis concludes with four appendices. **[NOTE: The appendices are not available in the online version]** **Appendix I** contains the full analyses of the extracts from the coursebooks (bound separately, as noted earlier). **Appendix II** contains statistical grids relating to the analyses of tasks in Chapter 3. **Appendix III** contains the personal construct repertory grids referred to in Chapter 5 and **Appendix IV** contains documents to support the account of publishing practices in Chapter 6.

1.4 A biographical note

Before turning further into the thesis itself, it may be useful at this point if I make explicit my own involvement with teaching materials. In common with many teachers, I have used commercially published materials at various levels of learner English and with students of various age ranges, including those in upper primary/lower secondary schools. As I have already mentioned, I have additionally been involved in the training of teachers for primary and secondary

schools and, in the Middle East in particular, been engaged in in-service training to accompany the introduction of a new coursebook. Concurrently with my work as a teacher and teacher trainer, I have also been closely involved in materials production, particularly as an author, consultant and reader for major publishing houses. To date, I have authored or co-authored five titles for commercial publishers and have thus gained insights into the processes of publication from very close quarters. As we shall see later in Chapter 6, I have been able to draw on this experience to illuminate the processes of publication and the concerns of publishers which bear upon the form of teaching materials.