



# Language Teaching Materials and the (Very) Big Picture

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## Abstract

Discussions in language teaching have most commonly emphasised applied linguistic or educational arguments to explain innovation in teaching materials. This article, however, focuses on the very much bigger picture. Drawing on ideas from social theory, the article takes a wide perspective, and suggests that the evolution of language teaching practices is, in fact, intimately related to the socio-historical context. Taking the development of English language teaching materials as an example, the article first offers a brief social history of the West from the 1950s onwards, and shows how ideas for materials were clearly influenced by changes in the *zeitgeist* of the time. The article then offers a more detailed analysis of contemporary developments in English language teaching materials and argues that the link to social context has shifted from being one of ‘influence’ to one of ‘imperative.’ The article aims to show how the phenomena of McDonaldisation and Neo-liberalism are clearly shaping present-day ELT materials design. The article concludes with a discussion of the significance of this, and argues that language teaching professionals need to be more cognizant of external influences.

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## 1 Introduction

The purpose of this article is to retrace the development of materials for language teaching, but from a somewhat unusual perspective. My aim here is not to set out the evolution of thought and practice in materials design, but rather to show how this has always been intimately connected to the wider social and historical context in which it occurs – that is, to look at the very big picture surrounding materials production. Littlejohn (2013) sets out an argument for the seeing the evolution of language teaching itself within the ongoing historical context, and this article elaborates upon those ideas by showing how the development of materials has to some extent similarly been a reflex action to social developments which occur far, far beyond the classroom. For the purposes of my argument, I will be focussing on the case of developments in English language teaching (ELT), although I would expect scholars of the teaching of other languages to be able to identify similar influences in their own field. The view I will take is that, apart from their pedagogic value, materials are *cultural* artefacts, no less rooted in a particular time and culture than any other instance of human activity, and, as such, are shaped by the context in which they occur. This matters, and matters deeply, because as I bring the review up to date, I will argue that materials development has most recently begun to respond to detailed imperatives from outside English language teaching, voiced with a much stronger demand for compliance than has hitherto been the case. These, I will argue, now directly influence precisely what is proposed to happen in ELT classrooms.

It is important to note, as I have just done, that materials are *propositions* for action in the classroom, what Breen (1987) has called ‘workplans,’ quite distinct from what may actually unfold

in the classroom once the materials are brought into use and reinterpreted by teachers and learners. Thus, although materials are aimed at use *inside* a classroom, they will always bear the hallmarks of the conditions of their production *outside* the classroom. This is particularly the case with materials which are produced in a commercial context, where the need to maximise sales, satisfy shareholders, and achieve corporate goals may have a direct impact on the design of materials, quite distinct from their pedagogic intent. The frequently recognised gap between advances in applied linguistic thinking and the nature of commercially produced materials is continuing evidence of this (for a detailed discussion of this, see Littlejohn, 1992, p. 190). Yet, it is not only commercial materials which respond to influences from outside the classroom: *all* materials do. Materials writers are individuals who live in a particular social context, in a particular era in history, and, while explicit organisational pressures may or may not be present, there will be perspectives, attitudes, values, concepts, social and political relations – call them what you will – which will be current in the wider society of that time. Classrooms, for which materials writers write, will always be symbiotic with that wider society, and the extent to which materials are ‘successful’ will be the extent to which they achieve the acceptance of teachers and learners as something natural and workable in that social context, at that point in history. An enterprise such as the design of materials, involving, as it does, the planning of interaction between teachers and learners in essentially relations of decision-making and culturally ascribed authority, and around something as central to our being as language, cannot avoid reproducing or reacting to these same phenomena in the wider society, I would argue.

The notion that human action is socially and temporally located is not, of course, a new one. Marx’s formulation of the relationship between historical context and forms of thought and action is well known:

Upon different forms of property, upon the social conditions of existences, rises an entire superstructure of distinct and peculiarly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought and views of life. The entire class creates and forms them out of its material foundation and out of the corresponding social relations. The single individual, who derives them through tradition and upbringing, may imagine that they form the real motives and starting point of his activity. (Marx, 1969, p. 421)

Whilst this classical Marxist view is now widely seen as too mechanical and crude in nature to be able to capture subtleties of human consciousness and action, the historical, social conditions of thought have continued to occupy numerous theorists. Neo-Marxist analyses, for example, have offered significant refinements of Marx’s original conceptualisation, and now see ‘ideology’ as something woven into our day-to-day practices, into our ‘lived experience’ such that we are all jointly engaged in sustaining social relations of power and particular ways of doing things as ‘common sense’ and ‘natural’ (see e.g. the considerable volume of work produced by writers such as Gramsci, Giroux, Bourdieu, and Foucault). Ruling elites, in this way of thinking, are thus engaged in a struggle for hegemony, a struggle to maintain *their* class-based views as natural and common sense, something which they endeavour to accomplish through institutions of socialisation such as the church, the media, the law, advertising, and, most importantly for my discussion here, schools. Noted researchers such as Bowles and Gintis (1976, 2011), whose landmark text firmly established the notion of a ‘correspondence principle’ between the internal organization of schools and the organization of a capitalist workforce, and Michael Apple (2004, 2013), who has demonstrated how ideology is encoded within the practices of schooling and texts, have extended these neo-Marxist analyses to the contexts of mainstream schooling.

Interesting though such ideas are, my aim in this article is not, however, to examine the theoretical perspectives on how social conditions are related to forms of human activity. At this point, I just wish to establish the basic proposition I mentioned at the outset: that we can view the production of language teaching materials as no less a cultural practice than any other human activity, socially and temporally located. Viewed as such, we can therefore investigate the nature of materials by reference *back* to the wider circumstances of their production. This will position materials as something ‘of their time,’ not only in terms of contemporary views of language teaching, but

also in terms of contemporary views manifested across a wide range of social phenomena. Materials production, in this view, can be seen as potentially resonating in tune with social forces far beyond language teaching itself, and far beyond the immediate discussions of language teaching professionals, even though, to borrow Marx's words, materials writers may imagine that such discussions form the real motives and starting point of their activity. In this connection, I share ideas set out by a number of other writers in applied linguistics who have pursued a 'critical' view on language teaching practices, arguing that language teaching has both a political and an ideological significance. Notable in this regard are the works of Dendronis (1992), Pennycook (2001), Block and Cameron (2002), Edge (2006), Phillipson (2009), and most pertinent to my arguments here, Gray (2010), and Block, Gray and Holborrow (2012).

To begin this 'reference back' to the wider social conditions of production, I want to first offer a brief historical review of the changing nature of ELT materials, set in the context of other social phenomena. My argument in this initial part of the review will be that the relationship between these other social phenomena and the nature of materials was essentially one of inspiration. In the later part of the article, I will argue in common with Gray (2012) that this situation has changed considerably in recent years, and that the precise nature of materials design now responds in a much more direct way to imperatives from far beyond the confines of language teaching thought.

## 2 ELT materials: the 1950s to the 1980s

Any history is necessarily partial and subjective. As will become clear to the reader, this is equally true of the account I offer here. *Partial*, because my focus will be limited, as I have said, to developments within ELT materials, and, in particular, to those emanating from Britain and North America. This seems to me a reasonable focus as it is widely recognised that Britain and North America are the sources of much innovation in ELT methodology, even if this is hotly contested (see e.g. Holliday, 1994) for a discussion of the influence of 'BANA' countries). *Subjective*, because I am conscious that I have been highly selective in what I will cite as important moments in social change, and equally selective in my identification of examples from teaching materials. My intention here is not to offer a data-based survey, but to advance a perspective for analysis, at this point simply illustrated by relevant samples of materials, as a possible precursor for a larger scale investigation.

For convenience, I will provide an overview as though history is neatly divided into decades, as historians are apt to do, recognising that most of the social events and materials I cite evolved over much longer periods of time. As a starting point in my review, I will begin with the 1950s, a period reflecting not only the recovery from the traumatic events of World War II (1939–45), but, by all accounts, the birth of modern-day language teaching.

### 2.1 *The 1950s/60s and the Cold War*

At the end of World War II, a very different balance of geopolitics emerged from that which preceded it. Germany now defeated, and the victorious allies divided on ideological grounds, it seemed, as Churchill so memorably described it in 1946, as though an 'iron curtain' had descended across Europe, with Britain, the United States, and other capitalist economies to the West, and Russia and the communist economies to the East (Churchill, 1974). The ensuing tensions produced the 'Cold War,' so called because, although open hostilities never broke out, they were rarely far from the surface, and constantly in the rhetoric of politicians.

It is perhaps odd to think that modern-day language teaching owes its origins to this 'iron curtain,' but one particular event in this period effectively changed the history of language teaching for all time. In October 1957, the USSR launched *Sputnik*, the world's first artificial satellite, opening up what came to be known as the Space Race, as Russia and the United States entered into open competition to achieve control. In a relatively short period of time, Russia went on to next launch a dog into space (the ill-fated Laika, who, we have since learned, probably perished on take-off), closely followed by the first manned space journey, with Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin. The

impact of these events in the United States was huge and provoked a major crisis of confidence, as it seemed that the USSR had swept ahead with a major scientific, political, and propaganda coup. As Von Braun, a NASA spokesman at the time said, “to keep up, the US must run like hell!” (The Huntsville Times, 1961)

The immediate reaction of the United States was to seek explanations and identify a course of action to remedy the situation. A major failing was identified in the ability of American scientists to keep up with technological developments in other parts of the world, and so foreign language teaching came to take on a particular priority. The 1958 National Defense (Foreign Language) Act was swiftly ushered in, providing massive funds for the development of language programmes. In an era dominated by technical advances (such as the space race), the technical, ‘scientific’ approach of mim-mem exercises, language laboratories, pattern-practice drills and atomised samples of language – often repeated to exhaustion – provided just the kind of focused, efficient methodology required by the zeitgeist. One of the foremost proponents of this was Robert Lado, whose influence in this time was immense. Figure 1 gives an example of the kind of language learning exercises then in vogue, from Lado and Fries’ “English Pattern Practice” (1958; interestingly, still in print today).

Practice 10.		
Classwork: The teacher pronounces the sentences and words at the left. Substitute the words into the previous sentence.		
Homework: Read the sentences and words on the left. Substitute the words into the previous sentence.		
1	difficult	Is the course difficult?
	easy	Is the course easy?
	good	Is the course good?
	interesting	Is the course interesting?
2	course	Is the course difficult?
	word	Is the word difficult?
	lesson	Is the lesson difficult?
	class	Is the class difficult?
	practice	Is the practice difficult?

**Fig. 1. An example of a pattern practice exercise (Lado & Fries, 1958, p. 7).**

At a time when behaviourism was very much the dominant force in psychology and learning theory, it is perhaps not surprising that most of the extra funds from the 1958 Act went directly into these behaviourist inspired methodologies, but the nett effect is that behaviourism in one form or another has been firmly cemented into language teaching materials, with its persistence right up to the present day, as the continuing use of drills, substitution tables and such like, demonstrates.

## 2.2 *The late 1960s to the late 1970s*

It is interesting to speculate what the shape of present-day language teaching materials might have become had the USSR launched the Sputnik a decade later, when the sociocultural climate was markedly different. For many Western governments, the late 1960s was marked by a seismic shift in relations with their populations, evidenced by turbulence and rebellion, with major demonstrations and occupations taking place in France, Italy, the UK, the USA and elsewhere. Culturally, the era was marked by a shift towards *alternative* ways of doing things – a word frequently found in the titles of many publications of the time. ‘Flower power,’ ‘the love generation,’ ‘dropping out,’ ‘do your own thing’ and DIY (Do It Yourself) were all key concepts of the time.

With the rejection of mainstream, established ways of doing things and the desire for alternatives very much in the air, it did not take long for innovations in language teaching to similarly react to this. The period from the late 1960s onwards is characterised by the emergence of numer-

ous ‘fringe,’ humanistic methodologies, which, although rarely implemented, were much talked about and cited. A well-known book from this time was Stevick’s (1976) “Memory, Meaning and Method,” which featured methodologies such as Gattegno’s *Silent Way* (Gattegno, 1972) and Lozanov’s *Suggestopaedia* (Lozanov, 1978). Also well-known from this time is Moskowitz’s “Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Class” (1978), which offered a blending of language aims with humanistic aims. Figure 2 presents an example of this in an exercise from a section entitled “Discovering Myself.” From today’s perspective, where language teaching is much more instrumental in nature, it seems rather quirky to ask students how they relate to a geometric shape and how they see themselves in it. In 1978, however, this apparently seemed a reasonable thing to do, in some quarters at least.

THE SHAPE I'M IN

**Purposes:**


- Affective
  - To encourage students to think introspectively
  - To learn about oneself by association
  - To note how identical symbols evoke different responses in people
- Linguistic
  - To practice the vocabulary of shapes
  - To practice the vocabulary which relates to describing shapes
  - To practice the use of adjectives

**Levels:** All levels

**Size of groups:** About six

**Procedures:**

Announce to the students that they are going to find out some things about themselves by making a choice from a number of shapes. Tell them that upon seeing the shapes they should quickly decide which one they like best. Then reveal the shapes on an overhead projector or on the blackboard. All of the shapes should be seen at the same time. If they are on the blackboard, have them already drawn and covered by a screen or map, which you pull up to reveal them. As they view the figures, remind them to decide which one appeals to them most. The shapes "are a triangle, a circle, a square", a hexagon, and a zigzag line. They should be about the same size and depicted like this:



Ask the students to draw on a slip of paper the one that they like best. Then in groups of six, each student should relate to the figure he has chosen by telling how he sees himself in it:

"I like the hexagon best. I am like a hexagon because I am neat and orderly and I have many interesting sides to me. I am well-balanced. I am also different. There are not many hexagons in the world."

**Fig. 2. A humanistic language practice exercise (Moscowitz, 1978, pp. 62–63).**

But it was not only in respect of humanistic approaches that the urge towards an alternative was found. The notion of ‘doing your own thing’ and DIY quickly found echoes in another major development in language pedagogy in this time – self-access work, featuring self-study materials and teacherless language learning, often carried out in ex-language laboratories now stripped of their hutch-like partitions, so that pairs of learners could work on the same material. Interestingly, we also saw the origins of another example of the rejection of mainstream, establishment methodologies in a new perspective on language acquisition theory: Krashen’s *Input Hypothesis*. Like the hippies and the humanistic thinkers of the time, Krashen aimed to take language teaching back to a more natural, simpler life, where learners would produce language when they were “ready,” free of

the “extensive use of conscious grammatical rules” and “tedious drill” (Krashen, 1981, pp. 6–7), largely aiming to recreate the conditions of our linguistic infancy.

### 2.3 *The 1970s to the mid 1980s*

While the period from the late 1960s had witnessed a shift towards a stronger sense of community in the West, with groups pursuing alternative ways of doing things, the 1970s appeared to take this one step further. The process of *embourgeoisement* (Goldthorpe, 1963, 1987), in which the increasingly affluent working class populations of the developed economies were said to be taking on the individualist mindset of the middle classes, had firmly taken root. This shift away from collectivist goals and the prevalence of a concern for individualism, prompted the journalist and social critic, Tom Wolfe (1976) to term the 1970s the ‘Me Decade.’ This became particularly evident as sub-groupings began to voice their separate identities. It is in this period, for example, that we saw the further, marked development of feminism (the so-called ‘Second Wave’), a struggle for the recognition of the status of different cultures and minorities, and the eventual development of multiculturalism as an explicit policy in many Western countries (Inglis, 1995). This was coupled with a move towards increased democratisation, with the lowering of the voting age from 21 to 18 in many countries, and an apparent ‘flattening’ of the social structure.

Such a shift in attitude, away from the community based sentiments of the late 1960s, soon filtered through to language teaching. While Moskowitz was previously able to speculate on ways of ‘caring and sharing,’ the tenor of the argument was very different from the late 1970s onwards, which was more overtly concerned with individuals’ linguistic wants and needs. Thus, we see in this period the development of exhaustive tools for the specification of an individual’s particular needs through models such as those proposed by Munby (1981) and the continued development of ‘Special Purposes’ as a distinct branch of syllabus design. Figure 3 is an early example of such special purposes materials, now, of course, a staple part of language teaching publishing.

#### EXERCISE D

##### *Definitions of groups of organisms and of anatomical structures*

Complete these definitions and then write them into your notebook.

1. Autotrophs are organisms which ...
2. Osmotrophs are heterotrophs which ...
3. Photosynthesis is the process in which ...
4. Phagotrophic nutrition is the process in which ...
5. Chlorophyll ... which enables a plant to use light energy.
6. Protozoans are ...
7. Flagellates are protozoans which ...
8. A ciliate is a ...
9. A chloroplast is a structure ... a coloured pigment called ...
10. A cilium is ... which projects from the surface of a cell.
11. ... in certain protozoans which removes water from the cell and discharges it to the exterior

**Fig. 3. An early example of English for special purposes materials (Pearson, 1978, p. 17)**

Also of particular note during this ‘me decade’ was the recognition that learners have their own unique ways of approaching language study, that is, their own styles and strategies. Naiman et al.’s landmark “The Good Language Learner” study (1978) seemed to take up the decade’s sentiment in showing how language learning was a person-centred activity, thereby kick-starting a major new strand of materials development: learner training. A well-known example of this is Ellis and Sinclair’s “Learning to Learn English,” eventually published in 1989, although previously widely known through conferences and workshops. A natural evolution of this line of thinking, however, in which learners themselves were to take control of their own learning, resulted in a movement which actually questioned the role of externally designed materials, that is the development of

approaches towards negotiated curricula (For a broader historical perspective, see Allwright, 1981; Breen & Candlin, 1987; Breen & Littlejohn, 2000).

**1.2 What sort of language learner are you?**

Try the following quiz. Tick (✓) your answers to the questions.

	<i>Usually</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>(Almost) never</i>	<i>Don't know</i>
1. Did/do you get good results in grammar tests?				
2. Do you have a good memory for new words?				
3. Do you hate making mistakes?				
4. In class, do you get irritated if mistakes				

Fig. 4. Extract from Ellis and Sinclair's "Learning to Learn English" (1989, p. 6)

More generally, and perhaps much more significantly, however, social moves towards greater democratisation and a more popular (in the sense of 'of the people') recognition of cultures, gave birth to an entire rethink of what English language teaching should be about: the Communicative Language Teaching movement. As a clear break from the top-down regime of grammar rules and specifications of rights and wrongs in language form, CLT championed not the way language *should* be but rather how ordinary people *use* it. Users mattered, not rules. Thus, functions and notions replaced grammar areas, and many a published ELT course reappeared with a light dusting off to give it a new face, as grammar headings (such as *The verb 'to be'*) were replaced with functional ones (such as *Talking about existence*). Original ELT functional-notional courses, echoing this 'democratisation of language' first began appearing in the mid to late 1970s, with Johnson and Morrow's "Approaches" being a well-known example. The example in Figure 5 gives a good idea of how these courses were organised, with the actual content of the exercise giving a clear picture of what 1970s ELT was in Britain – often somewhat sarcastically referred to as EAP: 'English for Au Pairs.'



**Practise inviting in these situations:**

- i) You haven't seen your boyfriend/girlfriend for at least a day! Maybe he/she can have lunch with you tomorrow.
- ii) Your landlady took you out last week. Maybe you should ask her out once. There's an Agatha Christie play on at the theatre on Friday.
- iii) Jon's having a party this Saturday. A new French girl has just arrived in your class. Maybe she will come with you.
- iv) You want to go to the cinema on Monday evening, but you have no one to go with. Ask a classmate.
- v) You and your friends are leaving England next week, and you are all having a dinner party together. You want to invite your teacher.

**Fig. 5. An example of ELT functionally-based materials (Johnson & Morrow, 1979, p. 23)**

### **3 New imperatives on materials design: the mid 1980s onwards**

Whilst it is possible, with some hindsight, to see traces of wider social changes in the shifts in materials development in language teaching, I think it is quite clear from the brief résumé that I have offered so far that the link is a somewhat tenuous one. Echoes can be found, that much is clear, but the relationship I would argue is one of inspiration, and rather sporadic, rather than a direct cause-effect. It seems that ELT materials reflected the *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times, as some language teaching professionals sought to implement shifts in social attitudes into the design of classroom work. My argument in the following section, however, is that, in recent years, external influences have become much more directive, increasingly leading to the implementation of a more centralised and standardised view of what language teaching should be about. The variety and exuberance of experimental and new approaches through the 1970s–1990s has now been superseded by a sameness throughout commercial publishing. Within the logic of publishing itself, it is not difficult to find an explanation for this. Certainly, as the number of publishing houses has fallen (as imprints are bought up by larger, multinational corporations), the competition has intensified between an ever smaller number of very large publishers who are able to pour immense resources into developing their products. The stakes have thus risen considerably, as millions of dollars are now routinely invested in the development of a new multilevel course, with all its ancillary components (see Littlejohn, 2011, pp. 179–180, for an analysis of this). With the cost of failure so large, convergence around a ‘safe,’ proven publishing formula is therefore the most likely outcome.

Yet, while we can explain *why* convergence has happened, we need to look elsewhere if we want to investigate the origins of the precise nature of this ‘safe’ formula for present-day commercial publishing. That is, we need to return to a question I first asked a number of years ago (Littlejohn, 1992): *Why are ELT materials the way they are?* To answer this, I want to focus on two major concepts in the analysis of contemporary post-industrial society, and advance the proposition that the nature of contemporary language teaching materials is intimately related to these concepts and to the direct influence of social context in a way hitherto unknown. The concepts I will discuss are McDonaldization and Neo-Liberalism.



### 3.1 *McDonaldization*

Much cited in critical accounts of society and in the analysis of packaged ‘experiences’, the concept of McDonaldization owes its origins to the work of Ritzer (1993, 2012). Frequent, updated new editions of his well-known text “The McDonaldization of Society” regularly appear – at the time of writing, a special ‘20<sup>th</sup> anniversary’ 7<sup>th</sup> edition has just been published – as Ritzer and other social theorists identify further evidence of McDonaldization, and some of its antitheses. In a nutshell, the argument is as follows. McDonald’s, the well-known hamburger chain, is characterised by an absolute emphasis on efficiency and total predictability. To achieve this, McDonald’s insists on a number of strict policies including fixed, deskilled work routines for its employees and fixed language scripts for interactions with their customers, to generate a totally predictable, globally standardised McDonald’s experience for those customers. Ritzer argues that for all involved the outcome is a dehumanising, standardised environment, in which workers and customers are effectively ‘caged.’ The significance of this for Ritzer, however, is not as a criticism of McDonald’s, but rather that the phenomena of ‘McDonaldization’ is increasingly ‘colonising’ other areas of social life, where standardised products and standardised routines of interaction have now become the norm. Thus, Ritzer talks about ‘McCinema,’ ‘McUniversity,’ ‘McNews,’ and ‘McTV.’ For Ritzer, society itself is becoming ‘caged’ as we are locked evermore into scripted, predictable, homogenised environments of consumption.

The relevance of Ritzer’s analysis to English language teaching has been demonstrated by a number of writers. Block (2004) discusses how English has functioned as the medium to enable processes such as those Ritzer and others have identified to happen. More directly, Gray and Block (2012), in a provocative paper, discusses how far a process of McDonaldization is evident in the standardisation of teacher training such as the Cambridge CELTA courses and UK PGCE course, where, for example, teacher reflection has seemingly been reduced to routinized exercises – scripts, lacking face validity. The question which I would like to examine more deeply here, however, is one I raised some years ago (Littlejohn, 2001): are we now witnessing the impact of McDonaldization on the design of language teaching materials?

As I have already suggested, there is certainly considerable evidence that we are moving towards increasingly standardised materials, and that this appears to be happening in a number of ways. One of the most obvious examples of this is the way in which materials are now routinely packaged into ‘chunks’ of two-page workplans, standardised into ostensible ‘50 minute lessons’, such that the teacher concerned can teach from a two-page spread. These spreads are often tied together into larger entities, often known as ‘units,’ ‘modules,’ ‘blocks,’ ‘themes’ or such like, which have a recurring structure, ensuring predictability across the materials as a whole. Thus, ‘warm up’ activities may be routinely followed by some reading, which may be followed by grammar work, which may give way to written practice, before ending with some ‘freer work’ (the traditional PPP model, still being the norm). The precise nature of this sequence is not the concern here; rather, it is the fact that there *is* a fixed sequence, repeated across units, a proposed standardised ‘packaging’ of the classroom time. Figure 5 gives an example of this, fairly typical of many ‘main courses’ now on offer. Here, we see a fixed sequence of two-page ‘lessons,’ offering a predictable sequence of language presentation, grammar practice, vocabulary, reading, speaking and writing activities, interspersed with review exercises.

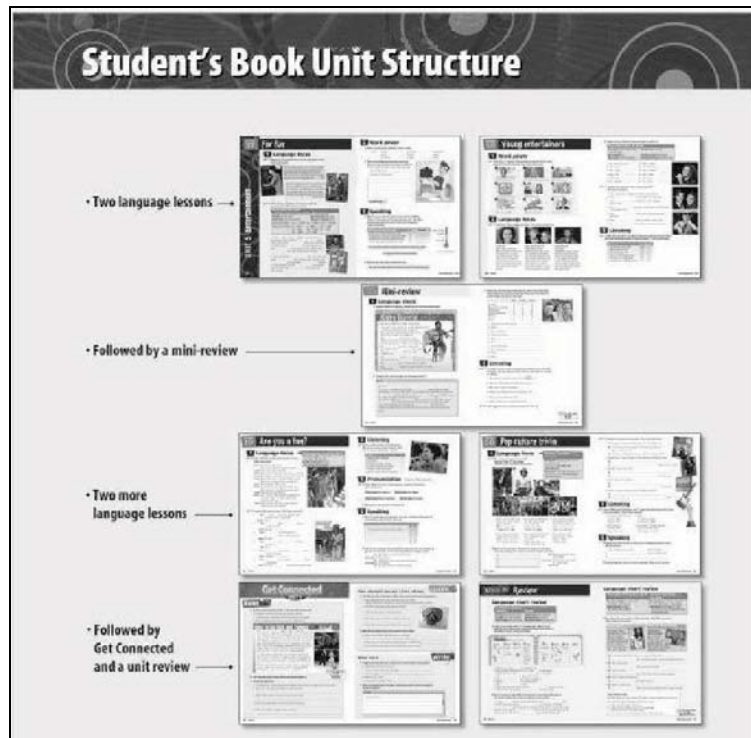


Fig. 5. Promotional material for “Connect,” 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Looking into the typical sequence of work, however, we can see that this predictability also extends to what precisely teachers and learners are to do together. Figure 6 shows the rubrics from a sequence of material, and is illustrative of the kind of classroom activities commonly included in much published materials.

- 1** You're going to read about an inventor. Which of these facts do you think are about the inventor of:
  - karaoke?      • the iPod?
- 2** Work in A/B pairs. A, read the article below and B, read the article on p119 to check your ideas.
- 3 a** A, complete the summary of this article; B, complete the summary on p119.
 

**b** Tell each other about your articles. How are the two men similar or different?
- 4** Look at the sentences from the articles. Match 1–3 with topics a–c.
- 5** Complete the questions with verbs from the **highlighted** expressions in 4 in the correct form.
- 6** Ask and answer the questions together.

Fig. 6. Example rubrics (taken from Rea, Clementson, Tilbury, & Hendra, 2010, p. 22)

What is notable here is the manner in which the materials aim to provide not only a guide to *how* the teachers and learners are to interact, but, further, precisely *what* they are to say to each other. Each of the steps 1–6 in Figure 6 uses content supplied by the materials themselves (an article, a summary outline, sentences to match, questions to complete with provided verbs, and so on). One can well imagine that, were teachers and learners to follow the materials as directed, precisely

the same interactions would occur wherever and whoever they were – standardised, routinized plans for classroom work, globally prescribed. The notion of a McDonaldised script is difficult to resist here. While the PPP framework which underlies these materials is scarcely a recent innovation, the significance of this detailed scripting lies in the extent to which it is now frequently integrated into much larger curriculum packages – the familiar ‘course packages’ – which aim to provide virtually all the resources that teachers and learners will need – activity books, readers, DVDs, computer-based exercises, teacher training materials, extra web resources, and so on, supplanting the slender books of exercises of previous years (Littlejohn, 2011).

It would also be possible to extend the analysis with further detail from the nature of the teachers’ manuals. Many experienced teachers shun these – and it is not hard to see why. Most frequently, they now offer a blow-by-blow set of instructions, often setting out the precise words the teachers are to use, answers to all the (closed) questions posed in the student’s book, and further, ‘extra’ ideas which the teachers can use should the prescribed plan not be sufficient. Once again, it difficult to resist another concept from Ritzer’s analysis: the deskilled operative, enacting a centrally determined script. That materials of this kind appear to achieve widespread commercial success is indicative that they neatly reflect a larger social phenomenon, which many teachers and learners apparently feel increasingly happy to replicate: the McDonaldised world.

### 3.2 *Neo-liberalism*

Ritzer’s analysis appears to offer a detailed framework which we can apply to an analysis of what contemporary materials propose for classroom work. The concept of *neo-liberalism*, however, relates to a much broader analysis of the social context in which language teaching takes place, that of the nature of society as a whole. The concept of neo-liberalism has its origins in the work of classical economists such as Adam Smith and his famous text from 1776, “The Wealth of Nations.” Today, however, it is most closely associated with the dismantling of state intervention, particularly in the stripping back of welfare programmes, state subsidies, state control of industries, and so on. Politically, neo-liberalist policies have been associated with leaders such as President Reagan (USA), Prime Minister Thatcher (UK), President Pinochet (Chile) and many others, particularly those dependent on US business interests. As a defining characteristic of our time, neo-liberalist policies have had wide ranging consequences in stimulating both economic growth and increasing divisions between rich and poor. For the purposes of my argument here, however, I want to concentrate on the central plank of neo-liberalism: the primacy of ‘the market.’ In neo-liberalist thinking, the market is arbiter of all – it regulates supply and matches it to demand, it sets prices and supposedly regulates efficient distribution.

It is not my purpose here to engage in a critique of neo-liberalist thinking but simply to argue that we can see the direct impact that neo-liberalism has had, and continues to have, on the precise nature of language teaching materials. Gray (2012), for example, offers an interesting account of how ‘celebrity’ now permeates much UK published materials (a marked change, he notes, from materials produced in the 1970s and earlier), as an indication of how neo-liberalist ideologies can underpin the selection of content. Here, however, I want to look beyond the internal nature of the materials themselves to examine the overall provision of ELT materials.

For the market to function as the determiner of all, neo-liberalism requires the commodification of interactions, whether they involve a physical product or an intangible service. The key to the ‘successful’ function of the market is atomisation - the subdivision and specification of goods and services, such that ‘added value’ can be determined through *monetisation* – that is, that a detailed breakdown of interactions and products is given a monetary value, which can be accounted for, traded, accumulated or invested. Thus, we have seen over recent years the increasing commodification and monetisation of all manner of otherwise intangible things. Education has been at the forefront of this process – through such devices as the league tables amongst schools and universities, ostensibly showing the ‘value’ and ‘extra value’ a ‘provider’ (read school/university) can offer its ‘customers’ or ‘consumers’ (read ‘students’), with its ‘premium products’ (read ‘widely recognised diplomas’) offering a ‘market advantage’ (read ‘jobs, contracts, networks’).

It is not difficult to see how these forces are now clearly present in language teaching, and thus directly impact language teaching materials. One of the most obvious areas where the commodification of language knowledge is showing extensive development is in the area of language certification. Over the past twenty years or so, the number of different language certificates on offer has expanded phenomenally. Taking, for instance, the popular Cambridge University English as a second language examinations as an example, we have gone from a small number of examinations in 1970s, mainly for adults, and which you could count on one hand, to an enormous range of exams covering all age ranges from preschool up, with ever more detailed ‘levels’ across numerous different ‘special purposes,’ in many different formats. The global appeal of these examinations is staggering, covering virtually every continent except Antarctica. We may question whether we really need internationally determined examinations for six to ten year olds (such as Cambridge Young Learners) covering finely specified levels in what is still fairly basic competence, but there seems to be no shortage of an appetite in parents to globally consume these examinations, and for schools and examination bodies to offer them.

It does not take much insight to realise that the widespread provision of standardised examinations poses a significant influence on what gets into teaching materials, as materials are required to offer at least pre-examination experience. Thus, as close inspection of any major commercially produced materials will show, ‘exam-type’ exercises are frequently found, marketed as preparing students for the option of taking a standardised, global exam. Backwash is thus a considerable risk here.

While the proliferation of language examinations may constitute a good example of how neo-liberalism and the market is shaping language teaching materials, a much more significant development from within the language teaching profession itself has certainly aided the forces of standardisation and centralisation. Motivated by a desire to specify aspects of language competence to an increasing level of (probably mythical) detail, the “Common European Framework” (CEF; Council of Europe, 2001) provides precisely the kind of atomisation that the neo-liberalist logic requires. With its systematic description of levels from ‘basic’ to ‘proficient’ (A1, A2, B1, B2 etc.), the CEF has encouraged the development of countless ‘language products’ all matched to the various levels, all embracing the ‘added value’ that CEF compatibility offers. Thus, we see most new language courses now carry CEF-compatible branding. There is a virtual flood of new components associated with the CEF – student portfolios, tests, practice tests, teacher training modules and so on. Despite its name, the CEF is not restricted to Europe – its spread is now global, as an increasing number of school systems worldwide have linked their course provisions to it.

While not doubting the good intentions of those directly involved with the CEF, there is something here which is deeply worrying. It seems likely that, although the CEF claims to be only a specification of levels of ability, it will have a direct impact on both the *how* and *what* of language teaching. An atomised description of language levels is likely to lead to an atomised methodology for teaching, so that it can be matched and ticked off. Atomised methodologies will be matched by atomised materials. Thus, the very real danger we are facing is that centrally determined decisions, far removed from the teachers and learners concerned, will attempt to impose a uniformity on what happens in classrooms. The tendency towards McDonaldization and the deskilling of teachers will be reinforced, the caged society confirmed.

#### 4 Conclusion

In the first half of this article, my argument was that, prior to the 1980s, the influence of the wider social context on the design of English language teaching materials has generally been one of inspiration. That is, the *zeitgeist* provided the intellectual backdrop which generated new imaginings in language teaching – most notably seen in the experimental ideas of the late 1960s and 1970s. From the 1980s onwards, however, I believe that there has been significant shift towards a standardisation of materials design, particularly evident from the way in which materials are increasingly aimed at scripting the interaction of teachers and learners. As I have noted above, this has taken on an even more pervasive character as many published ELT courses now aim to struc-

ture in detail almost every moment of classroom and non-classroom learning time through a plethora of additional components such as DVDs, online exercises, video, mobile device applications, as well as the more ‘traditional’ components such as workbooks, grammar practice books, and so on.

The significance of this lies, I think, in Ritzer’s own original analysis – that is, that what is being constructed here is a ‘cage.’ One of most worrying aspects of standardisation and centralisation is that by setting out what needs to be done, what should *not* be done is simultaneously dictated. In a world where teachers and learners are encouraged to work towards centrally determined levels, backed by centrally determined international examinations, and where employers and parents come to view progress in terms of these levels and examinations, anything that does not fall within this scheme instantly can be seen as wasteful of time and effort, and irrelevant. Thus, the notion of an alternative is rendered unnecessary, and, with it, the possibilities of experimentation, innovation, and a rethinking of what language teaching may be.

In 1989, Francis Fukuyama, in a now well-known article, suggested that with the spread of liberalism on a global scale,

[w]hat we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. (1989, p. 4)

Whether or not, he was correct in his analysis (and there appear to be few who would agree with him), for Fukuyama, this is something which should be applauded. As I have argued in this article, my own view is that any drift towards a “universal homogenous state” (as Fukuyama termed it), is something that should worry us deeply. But what can we do? It is perhaps ironic that some of the clearest signs of resistance to neo-liberalist agenda of standardisation and globalisation have themselves been manifested globally – most notably in the Occupy movements, which have appeared in very diverse parts of the world (The Guardian, 2011). With no clear, easily specified goals, Occupy is characterised by a shift in attitude, a suspicion and deep distrust of the intentions of large corporations. My own view is that this is precisely where we need to start in language teaching, by resisting the manner in which uniformity is being imposed, and by wrestling back curriculum decisions into the hands of those directly involved – teachers and learners. For materials designers, this means not being complicit in a scripting of classroom events. It means designing tasks which are open-ended and which have the potential of producing unique outcomes each time they are used. It means developing teacher guides which encourage and support experimenting, rather than providing the familiar blow-by-blow instructions. Above all, it means imagining language learning and language teaching as something not locked into neat, prescriptivist listings of packaged levels and competences.

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