11 | Using coursebooks

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Options for coursebook use

When teachers open a page in their **coursebook**, they have to decide whether or not they should use the lesson on that page with their class. Is the language at the right level? Is the topic/content suitable for the students? Are there the right kind of activities in the book? Is the sequencing of the lesson logical?

With a good coursebook, there is a strong possibility that the language, content and sequencing in the book will be appropriate, and that the topics and treatment of the different language skills will be attractive. As a result the teacher will want to go ahead and use what is in the book. If, however, teachers have the time or inclination to amend parts of a coursebook (because the texts or activities don't seem appropriate for a particular group of students or a particular lesson, or because they want to tailor the material to match their own particular style), they have to decide what to do next.

There are four alternatives to consider if we decide that part of a coursebook is not appropriate. Firstly, we might simply decide to omit the lesson. That solves the problem of inappropriacy and allows us and our students to get on with something else.

There's nothing wrong with omitting lessons from coursebooks. Teachers do it all the time, developing a kind of 'pick and choose' approach to what's in front of them. However, if they omit too many pages, the students may begin to wonder why they are using the book in the first place, especially if they have bought it themselves.

Another alternative is to replace the coursebook lesson with one of our own. This has obvious advantages: our own material probably interests us more than the coursebook and it may well be more appropriate for our students. If we cover the same language or topic, the students can still use the book to revise that particular language/vocabulary. But as with omitting pages, if too much of the coursebook is replaced, both students and teacher may wonder if it is worth bothering with it at all.

The third option is to add to what is in the book. If the lesson is rather boring, too controlled, or if it gives no chance for students to use what they are learning in a personal kind of way, the teacher may want to add activities and exercises which extend the students' *engagement* with the language or topic. We are using the coursebook's strengths but marrying them with our own skills and perceptions of the class in front of us.

The final option is for teachers to adapt what is in the book. If a reading text is dealt with in a boring or uncreative way, if an invitation sequence is too predictable or teachers simply want to deal with the material in their own way, they can adapt the lesson by rewriting parts of it, replacing some of the activities (but not all), reordering activities or reducing the number of activities in the sequence.

Using coursebooks creatively is one of the teacher's premier skills. The way in which we get students to look at reading texts, do exercises or solve puzzles in the book is extremely important. At what point, for example, do we actually get the students to open the book? If they do so before we give our instructions, they often don't concentrate on what we have to say. Should the books always be on the students' desks, or should they be kept in a drawer or in the students' bags until they are needed? Furthermore, as we have said, many teachers do not go through the book line by line. Instead they use the parts that are most appropriate for their class, and make suitable changes to other material so that it is exactly right for their students.

Adding, adapting and replacing

In the following three examples, we are going to show how coursebook material can be used differently by teachers. However, it is not being suggested that any of these coursebook extracts have anything wrong with them. Our examples are designed only to show that there are always other ways of doing things even when the original material is perfectly good.

Example 1: adapting and adding (elementary)

In the following example, students are working with a coursebook called *New Cutting Edge Elementary* by Sarah Cunningham and Peter Moor. They have just read a text called 'Amazing facts about the natural world' which includes such statistics as the fact that we share our birthdays with about 18 million other people in the world, we eat about 8 kilos of dirt in our lifetimes, donkeys kill more people than plane crashes do, elephants can't jump, the Arctic Tern does a 22,000-mile trip to the Antarctic every year, etc. After discussing the text they make sentences with 'can' and 'can't' about these facts, e.g. 'Elephants can't jump', 'Pigs can't look at the sky', 'Kangaroos can't walk backwards', etc.

They now look at the following page (see page 148) which shifts the focus towards various question words (how long, how fast, etc), and not only includes a grammar description and a practice activity where students have to choose the right question word or phrase, but also a short quiz referring back to the 'amazing facts' text they have read (the unit continues with more question practice designed for pairwork).

There is absolutely nothing wrong with the page we are illustrating. On the contrary, it is bright and well conceived. But for whatever reason, we may decide to adapt what the authors have suggested, even adding more material of our own. We could, for example, adapt the quiz by having individual students each choose an animal (perhaps after looking up information in an encyclopedia or on the Internet). They don't tell their classmates which animal they have chosen. The class then tries to find out which animals different individuals have chosen by asking questions such as 'How fast can you run?', 'How big are you?', 'Which countries do you live in?', 'How far do you travel?', 'Is there anything you can't do?'

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Language focus 2
Question words

1 a Work in pairs. How many questions in the Animal quiz can you answer without looking back at the text?

b Look back at the text and check your answers.

2 Circle the question word in each question.

Grammar

1 There are many two-word questions with *how*, *what* and *which*. Match the question words to the answers.

a How far ...?	Los Angeles.
b How tall ...?	Every day.
c How often ...?	Lions.
d How long ...?	Ten metres.
e How fast ...?	Forty kilometres an hour.
f Which city ...?	Ten kilometres.
g Which animals ...?	Rock and pop.
h What kinds of music ...?	Three hours.

2 Do you remember? Choose the correct alternative.
We use:
• *How many* with countable / uncountable nouns.
• *How much* with countable / uncountable nouns.

3 We use *what* when there are a large number of possible answers.
What is the population of China?

We use *which* when there are only a few possible answers.
Which continent has no active volcanoes?

▶ Read Language summary B on page 157.

Practice

1 Choose the correct question word.

a Which / What do kangaroos eat?
b How much / How many water do people need to drink every day?
c What / Which do you like best, dogs or cats?
d How much / How many pets have you got?
e How much / How long do elephants usually live?
f How far / How often do you need to feed a baby?
g How fast / How long does the average person walk?
h How far / How many can you swim?
i How long / How often do you go swimming?
j Which / What is your dog's name?
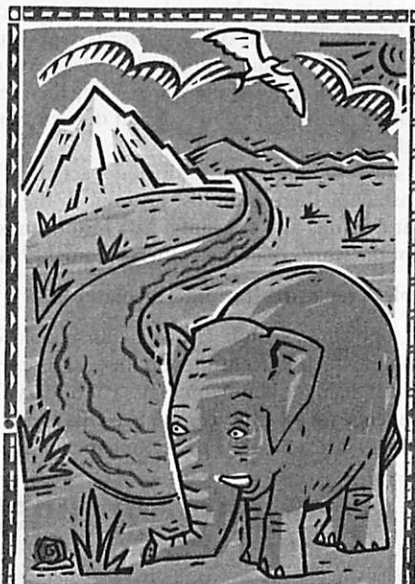
Animal quiz

1 How much dirt does the average person eat during their life?

2 What kind of animals can't jump?

3 Which continent has no active volcanoes?

4 How fast does the earth rotate?

5 How many ants are there in the world?

6 How long can snails sleep?

7 How do guide dogs know when to cross the road?

8 How far do Arctic Terns fly every year?

9 What is the present population of the world?

Alternatively, we might decide to get the students to look back at the text and write their own questions, and then divide the class into two teams. They fire their questions at the opposing team who have to give as many correct answers as possible within a time limit.

Another adaptation, which will appeal to those students who respond well to kinaesthetic stimuli (see page 16), is to write questions and answers on different pieces of paper. Students take a question card or an answer card and have to 'mill around' finding the student who has the answer to their question, or vice versa.

We could also adapt the quiz by turning it into the kind of 'interview' which can be found in many magazines. In this case, however, students are not interviewing a celebrity, but one of the animals from the text (elephants, kangaroos, ants, etc). Students write interview questions and send them to other students, who answer as if they were the animal they have chosen; they can answer as seriously, comically or facetiously as they want. They can write their questions on a piece of paper, leaving space for the answers, and then 'send' them to the student (animal) they wish to interview, they can use photocopies of blank 'email windows' to simulate a typical email exchange, or they can, of course, send their questions via email if this is available.

None of the activities suggested here are better than the ones in the coursebook; they are simply different. Indeed, these activities may not appeal to some teachers at all, which is exactly the point. It is up to individual teachers and their students to decide how and when to use different sections of a coursebook.

Example 2: adding (intermediate)

Most coursebooks have word lists, sometimes at the back of the book, sometimes at the end of a unit or a section. These are usually ignored, except by some students who often write inaccurate translations of the words. Teachers seldom touch them. Yet here is a chance to add to what the coursebook provides in enjoyable and useful ways.

The following word list occurs after three lessons of intermediate material.

admire	exciting	law	protection
attendance	experience	leader	record
attractive	factor	lovely	rugged
bad	fair-haired	lover	scenic
beautiful	fair-skinned	magnificent	sick
boring	fantastic	Melanin	skin cancer
cute	fascinating	memorable	song
dangerous	flight attendant	motorway	striking
dark-haired	freckles	moving	stunning
dark-skinned	gang	newscaster	sunburnt
die	good-looking	picturesque	suntanned
doctor	handsome	pig	trust
dramatic	impressive	place	ultraviolet
elegant	interesting	pretty	unmemorable
event	killer	professor	victim

There are a number of things that we can do with such an apparently static piece of text. They fall into three categories: personal engagement, word formation and word games.

Personal engagement: the teacher can ask students to discuss questions like 'Which words have a positive meaning for you?' and 'Which words have a negative meaning for you?' (Notice that we are asking them about their own personal reaction to these words.)

The teacher can ask students to list their five favourite words from the list – words that appeal to them because of their meaning, sound, spelling, etc. They then have to explain to the class why they have chosen those particular words. We can go further and ask students which five words they would most like to take to a desert island, and why. This demands that they think a bit laterally, but they might decide to take 'protection', for example, because of the sun or 'beautiful' because beautiful islands are better than ugly ones! We can ask students to predict which words will be most useful for them in the future. We can even hold a word auction where students have to bid for the words they most want to buy.

The teacher can ask whether any of the words look or sound like words in their language and whether they mean the same. This is especially useful for Romance languages.

We can ask students which words they find easy to pronounce and which they find difficult. The moment we ask them questions like this, we are, in a sense, saying that these words belong not to the teacher or the book, but to the students themselves.

Word formation: we can ask a number of questions about how the words (in any list) are constructed. Students can be asked to make a list of words which are stressed on the first, second or third syllables. They can be asked how many of the adjectives can be changed into verbs and/or what endings the verbs would need if they were changed into adjectives. They can be asked to identify compound words (made up from two words – e.g. 'dark-skinned', 'skin cancer', 'suntanned') and say how they are formed.

There are many other possible activities here: students can make contrary meanings by adding 'un-' or 'in-'; for example, give adjectives a comparative form, decide which of the verbs are 'regular' and what sound their past tense endings make, etc. In each case, using a word list reminds students of some of the rules governing words and their grammar.

Word games: there is almost no limit to the games we can play with a collection of words from the wordlist. We can ask students to make tabloid headlines from the list (e.g. 'Attractive doctor in dramatic motorway experience!'). The word list can be used for 'expansion', too, by giving the students a sentence like 'The man kissed the woman' and asking them to expand it using as many words from the list as they can (together with any necessary grammar words). Can anyone make a longer sentence than 'The attractive fair-haired man with dramatic but elegant suntanned freckles kissed the fascinating pretty flight attendant in front of the dangerous woman on the motorway?'

The words can be written on cards which are then put into a hat. When a student pulls one of the cards out of the hat, they have to make up a good sentence on the spot with the word on the card. Students can write correct and incorrect definitions for the different words. Opposing teams then have to guess which are the correct definitions and which are false. We can ask students to design word bingo cards with some of the words. They then read out sentences, omitting a word and other students have to cross off the word on their cards which they think will go in the gap.

Some modern coursebooks include activities like this, but many do not. In such circumstances, there is almost no limit to the kinds of activity we can add to the list to make it dynamic and engaging. As a result, students have a good chance of remembering more of the words than they otherwise might have done.

Example 3: replacing (pre-intermediate)

In the following example (from a coursebook for teenagers), a reading text is part of a longer unit which concentrates on the past simple and includes biographical information, a functional dialogue about apologies ('I'm sorry I'm late') and listening and activity pages. Students are asked to complete a chart with information about the dates 1870, 1883, 1886, 1890, 1892 and 1893 by reading the following text:

He photographed the world!

Go into the TV room and switch on the TV. Suddenly you are no more: you are in another country thousands of miles away. Television has made the world a smaller place.

One hundred and fifty years ago it was different. There were no planes and people did not travel to different countries. His name was Burton Holmes and he was born in 1870 in Chicago, Illinois.

In 1883, Holmes bought his first camera and when he was sixteen he travelled to Europe with his grandmother. He took photographs and he loved it. Four years later, Holmes came back to the US with his pictures.

In 1892 Holmes went to Japan and one year later he started to give lectures with slides. He talked about the countries he had visited (in Europe and Asia) and showed slides. Many people came to see and hear. Most of his slides were in black and white, but Japanese artists had coloured some of them and they were very beautiful. Four years later he showed his first moving pictures.

Burton Holmes continued his lectures into the 1950s. He was famous all over the US as a great traveller, the man who photographed the world.

The coursebook then encourages the students to ask as many questions about Burton Holmes as possible.

There are a number of options for using this text. We could try to make it more engaging by having students work in pairs where one of them plays the role of Burton Holmes and the other is an interviewer. We could blank out words in the text, or cut the text up into paragraphs which students have to rearrange. Students could search the Internet for further information about Burton Holmes (although at their level this might prove difficult), or we could do a search ourselves and come up with more facts about the man.

But it is equally possible that we do not want to use this text because we do not think it has sufficient potential for interesting our students. We will need to replace it, then, with an appropriate text (or activities) that fits in with the coursebook unit. We could, for example, bring in some of our own photographs and then show students a text (photocopied, or on an OHT) which describes one of them. The students have to decide which one it is. We can ask students to bring in a photo of their own, for which they will have prepared a narrative (where it was taken, what happened, etc). We could show students famous 'event' pictures and ask them to say what they think is happening before giving them an oral or written description. Perhaps we could ask them to judge a competition for the best photograph from a set of four or five (for a full description of this activity see page 124), though this will be fairly demanding at this level.

Of course, it may be that we don't want to deal with the topic of photography. We could instead look for any biographical text or information that we think students will be interested in – a singer or other celebrity, or someone famous from the students' own culture – and offer material about that person.

There is almost no limit to the ways in which we can replace coursebook excerpts. However, as we have said above, we will need to decide how much and how often we wish to replace in this way.

Reasons for (and against) coursebook use

Some teachers have a very poor opinion of coursebooks. They say they are boring, stifling (for both teacher and students) and often inappropriate for the class in front of them. Such people would prefer to rely on their own ideas, snippets from reference books, pages from magazines, ideas from the students themselves and a variety of other sources.

Other teachers feel much more positive about coursebooks. For them, coursebooks provide good teaching material which is often attractively presented. The coursebook has been carefully researched and has a consistent grammar syllabus as well as providing appropriate vocabulary exposure and practice, together with pronunciation work and writing tasks. Good coursebooks have a range of reading and listening material and workbooks, for example, to back them up (to say nothing of Internet tie-ins and other extras). It takes less time to prepare a good coursebook lesson than to start from the beginning each time and prepare brand new material; however ideal such freshness might be, many teachers simply do not have the time to prepare and plan as much as they would like to. Most coursebooks have an accompanying **teacher's guide** to help teachers with procedure and give them extra ideas. And students often feel extremely positive about coursebooks, too. For them, the coursebook is reassuring. It allows them to look forward and back, giving them a chance to prepare for what's coming and review what they have done.

However, there is the ever-present danger that both teacher and students will get locked into the book, using its content as the only material which is taken into the classroom, and always teaching and learning only in the way the book suggests. In such circumstances, the book may become like a millstone around the necks of all concerned, endangering the *engagement* which a student-centred classroom might otherwise create. As a result, some teachers take the decision to do without coursebooks altogether, a decision which may well be of benefit to their students if, and only if, they have the experience and time to provide a consistent programme of work on their own, and if they have a bank of materials to back up their 'no-coursebook' decision.

Even teachers who are enthusiastic coursebook users, however, need to see them as **proposals for action**, rather than instructions for action. In other words, we can look at the possibilities the coursebook offers us and then decide between the options for coursebook use which we discussed at the beginning of this chapter. If teachers and students approach coursebooks in that light, and use them according to the criteria we suggested above, they will have a much more beneficial effect than if they are followed slavishly. However good a coursebook is, it only really comes to life when it is used by students and teachers, and it is they, not the book, who should determine exactly how and when the material is used.

Choosing coursebooks

At many stages during their careers, teachers have to decide what books to use. How should they do this, and on what basis will they be able to say that one book is better or more appropriate than another?

The first thing we need to do is **analyse** the books under consideration to see how they compare with each other. Probably the best way of doing this is to select areas that interest us (e.g. layout and design, methodology, topics, etc), write short descriptions of how our ideal coursebook would deal with such areas, and then use these descriptions to see whether the books we are looking at match up to them. Alternatively, we can turn our descriptions into questions, as in the checklist on page 154. It is important to note here that when teachers make their own questions, they may not be the same as those shown here. The questions will always depend on the specific priorities of those who are asking them. This checklist is, therefore, just an example of some possible questions.

Once we have analysed the competing merits of different materials, and chosen the one or ones that most interest us, it will be important to **pilot** it – or parts of it – with a class so that we can assess its strengths and weaknesses.

Before making our final choice, we will want to consult colleagues, and indeed anyone who has an opinion about the book(s) in question. We need to be aware, of course, of their differing teaching situations or competing publisher, author or methodology loyalties, but it is always worth listening to what other people have to say.

Lastly, it is always a good idea to let our students have a look at the two or three books we are considering and ask their opinion on what looks best to them. They may not make our decision for us, but their opinion can help us come to a final decision.

Possible areas for consideration	Possible questions for coursebook analysis
Price and availability	How much does the coursebook cost? Will students have to buy any extra material (workbook, etc)? Are all the components (coursebook, workbook, teacher's guide, audio, etc) available? What about other levels? Is this good value for money? How much does the whole package (with all the components) cost?
Add-ons and extras	Apart from a workbook, what other extras are offered with the course? Are there Internet sites with extra material (exercises, texts, etc), or with 'meeting places' for users? What else does the publisher offer to support the course? What value should we place on the extras that are available?
Layout and design	Is the book attractive? Is its design appropriate for (a) the students, and (b) the teacher? Does the design of the book make it easy to follow?
Instructions	Are the instructions clear and unambiguous? Are they written in language that the students will understand? Can the coursebook be used by students working on their own, or is a teacher necessary to show them how to use it?
Methodology	What kind of teaching and learning does the coursebook promote? Is there a good balance between *study* and *activation*? How do the authors appear to think that people learn languages and do we agree with them?
Syllabus	Is the syllabus appropriate for our students? Does it cover the language areas (grammar, vocabulary, functions, pronunciation, etc) that we would expect? Do we and our students like the sequencing of language and topics, etc? Does the coursebook build in a feeling of progress?
Language skills	Does the coursebook have the appropriate balance of skills? Is the skills work really designed to promote the skills (e.g. writing-for-writing, not writing-for-learning)? Are there possibilities for both *study* and *activation* in the skills areas? Are the skills activities likely to *engage* students?
Topics	Does the book contain a variety of topics? On balance, are the topics appropriate for the kind of students who will be using the coursebook? Are the topics likely to *engage* the students?
Cultural appropriacy	Is the material appropriate for the cultural situation that the students are in? Do the texts contain culturally insensitive material? Are the activities appropriate for the learning culture? Is the coursebook unprejudiced in the way it deals with different customs, ethnicities, races and sexes?
Teacher's guide	Does the coursebook have an accompanying teacher's guide? Is it easy to use? Does it explain things clearly? Does it offer alternatives to the coursebook activities? Does it have all the answers that teachers and students need? Does it provide differentiated activities for fast and slow learners?

Descriptions into questions: a possible coursebook analysis checklist

Conclusions | *In this chapter we have:*

- looked at four different options – omit, replace, add and adapt – for coursebook use when, for some reason, the teacher decides that (the lesson in) the coursebook is not appropriate for the class.

- said that creative coursebook use is one of a teacher's main skills.

- looked at examples of adding, adapting and replacing coursebook material.

- discussed the criticisms often levelled at coursebooks: that they are boring, inappropriate and lacking in variety, for example. But we have said that their advantages (clarity, solid progression, attractiveness) often outweigh these disadvantages, and that it is precisely because of some of their perceived defects that teachers need to use them creatively – provided they realise that coursebooks are proposals for action rather than obligatory instruction manuals.

- suggested that teachers should make decisions about which coursebook to use based on analysis, piloting, consultation and the gathering of opinions from students and colleagues – and that one way of doing this is to prepare a checklist of questions.