

Doing It by the Book: Training Student Teachers at the Faculty of Letters, the University of Porto (FLUP) to Evaluate English Language Teaching (ELT) Materials

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Abstract | Understanding what the use of a coursebook implies is at the heart of any consideration of how ELT instruction in Portugal operates and, as such, should also be central to any pre-service teacher education. Since the curricular reorganization prompted by the ‘Bologna Process’, the Faculty of Letters, the University of Porto (FLUP) has included within its ‘Masters in English and other Foreign Language Teaching’ course (*Mestrado em Ensino de Inglês e de Alemão / Francês / Espanhol no 3.º ciclo do Ensino Básico e no Ensino Secundário*) an optional, one semester subject called the “Production of Didactic Materials”. This talk will demonstrate and discuss how, in this case, training student teachers to develop a criteria based framework for evaluating FL teaching materials, and applying that same framework, can be considered a way of re-focusing the traditionally, largely theoretical, lecture-based training courses typical of the Portuguese paradigm.

Key words | English coursebooks, materials evaluation, criteria based approach, teacher training

Various authors claim a very wide range of items fall under the heading of 'ELT materials'; for example, Tomlinson ("Introduction" 2) refers to "anything which is used by teachers or learners to facilitate learning a language", including items such as videos (traditional and YouTube), emails, product packaging and grammar books. However, for the purposes of this discussion, 'ELT materials' are here taken to mean Portuguese-produced coursebooks. Understanding what the use of a coursebook implies is at the heart of any consideration of how ELT instruction operates and, as such, should also be central to any pre-service teacher education. Indeed, research has shown that less experienced teachers rely more heavily on the coursebook as a core curricular guide than experienced teachers who tend to be more selective and make more use of their own materials (Tsui). Throughout Portugal, there are very few mainstream ELT classrooms in the state system that function without a coursebook being present. In this light, and according to UNESCO, the coursebook is "the core learning medium composed of text and/or images designed to bring about a specific set of learning outcomes; traditionally a printed and bound book including illustrations and instructions to facilitating sequences of learning activities".

In Portugal, different schools adopt a particular ELT coursebook from a list of Ministry of Education 'approved' titles for each level of instruction according to their own criteria. The approval process is characterized by a high degree of centralization, perhaps a reflection of what the prevailing view of the 'function' of education is: "[t]extbooks also typically reflect society's values and aspirations of a nation. These are the visible, tangible and practical manifestation of the curriculum, designed to teach students what the governmental authorities believe must be taught" (Mahmood 159). Thus, there is a top-down implementation of an 'educational policy' which places coursebooks in a crucial position in the teaching-learning process, mitigating what is permissible or legitimate in the classroom (Ghosn); but, consideration also needs to be given to a more socio-political perspective on coursebooks: "[a]s part of the curriculum, they participate in no less than the organised knowledge system of society. . . . They help set the canons of truthfulness and, as such, also create a major reference point for what knowledge, culture, belief, and morality

really are” (Apple 182). It still remains true nowadays, in the age of the Internet, that coursebooks, with their authorised, official status, have a centrality and symbolic value that goes beyond whatever their educational merit may, or may not, be.

Coursebooks are important **artifacts** in the educational landscape, a key element in determining learning outcomes in combination with other factors, such as the **participants** (learners and teachers), the **processes** (the actions or activities that occur within the learning-teaching space) and the **structures** (institutions, curricula, power-holders); working together this non-exclusive list of factors shapes what has been called “the classroom ecology” (Guerrattaz and Johnston 782), an approach which stresses the interrelatedness of classroom life. Pre-service teachers need to understand the role of ELT materials in the context of providing opportunities or affordances for learning to take place. Since there is little research available to describe how teachers use ELT materials in their actual classrooms (Harwood), perhaps the most utilitarian approach in the context of pre-service teacher education is therefore to rely more on the extensive body of work related to materials development, design and evaluation to ‘equip’ our novice teachers with the wherewithal to make informed judgements about the locally produced commercial materials that dominate the Portuguese educational context.

The commercialization of coursebooks in Portugal has become central to the business activities of several local publishing houses. Marketing exercises take place regularly all around the country, in various different contexts: for example, at teacher association conferences and at special promotional events, often in the guise of ‘teacher development’ sessions and ‘workshops’. This is a prime opportunity to get the latest publications directly into the hands of teachers, very often literally by giving away ‘inspection copies’. The costs of such activities combined with the expense of actually producing a full-colour learners’ coursebook with its sophisticated design and layout (along with all the ‘accessories’ that make up the ‘package’, especially the teacher’s book and the digital resources) may in fact mean that publishers are less able to invest in the pedagogical quality of the ‘product’: “[p]ublishers who spend money on elaborate advertisement of their textbooks, and for training teachers how to use them, sell; those who do not spend, do

not sell, no matter what the quality of the textbook is” (Dendrinós 34). Unofficial estimates put the size of the Portuguese school book market at 10 million copies or 100 million euros (ORE report 2011) or 56 million euros in 2004 according to one report by the Portuguese publishers’ association APEL (2005).

It is essential that early career teachers are well-informed as to how coursebooks can and should be evaluated if they are to participate in the selection process that occurs in schools all over the country every Spring. In response to this need, since the curricular reorganization prompted by the ‘Bologna Process’, the Faculty of Letters, the University of Porto (FLUP) has included within its ‘Masters in English and other Foreign Language Teaching’ course (*Mestrado em Ensino de Inglês e de Alemão / Francês / Espanhol no 3.º ciclo do Ensino Básico e no Ensino Secundário*) (MEIBS) the optional one semester subject known as ‘The Production of Didactic Materials for ELT’ (or PMDI). One of the main objectives of this curricular unit is to guide student teachers towards an awareness of the need to develop a criteria based framework for evaluating ELT materials. The student teachers are given the opportunity to apply the same framework that they have generated, a procedure which can also be considered a way of re-focusing the largely theoretical, lecture-based training courses typical of the Portuguese university paradigm. Each student teachers brings a knowledge base (personal, local, practical and usable) and a unique set of second language learning experiences to the PMDI course which can be sourced as a way to contribute to a more meaningful, interactive learning experience (situated and negotiated) than a more traditional transmission model allows (Mann).

The MEIBS course was conceived in 2008/2009 as a post-Bologna-style two-year Masters’ in Teacher Education, focusing on the training of student teachers in two foreign languages. The first year consists basically of theoretical input at FLUP and the second year consists largely of teaching practice placement in local schools, under FLUP supervision. The PMDI course is only two hours per week, for one semester, giving a total of approximately 30 contact hours, for three ECTS. The basic aims of the PMDI course are:

- to discuss the features and functions of coursebooks
- to establish criteria to evaluate coursebooks and carry out a critical evaluation
- to analyse the role and characteristics of supplementary materials
- to produce supplementary materials for a designated 'skeleton' lesson plan

Of these basic aims, the discussion here will focus on the first two. Here it should be stated that the PMDI course is founded on the belief that all teaching is local, that the student teachers need usable content knowledge, appropriate to the Portuguese context and is not based on "the assumption that it is necessary to provide teachers with discrete amounts of disciplinary knowledge, usually in the form of general theories and methods that are assumed to be applicable to any teaching context" (Johnson and Freeman 55).

The main purpose of the first half of PMDI course is, thus, to help the student teachers develop a 'critical eye' in relation to Portuguese-produced ELT coursebooks. They need to realise that the contents, structure and format of the coursebooks they will be required to use are all impacted by the need of publishers to generate high sales and to produce profit. Furthermore, they need to recognize that teachers are targeted by publishers who try to produce coursebooks which require as little as possible preparation time, learners are likewise targeted by basing materials on the experiences of a locally identifiable peer group and both are targeted with exercises that are easily achievable with definite 'right' answers (with a low level of intellectual challenge). While this description may not fit all published materials on all occasions, it is certainly true with respect to recently published 'packages' in which teachers receive along with their teachers' book (complete with key), a whole range of pre-prepared tests, extra activity suggestions, lesson plans, web-links, multimedia resources, supplementary worksheets and so on; in addition, coursebooks are swamped with as much 'youth culture' content as possible (supposedly to connect with the learners' interests and 'motivate' them), verbal and visual texts featuring celebrities abound with a special predominance for so-called 'listening comprehension' tasks related to 'pop' songs (as was pointed out more than twenty years ago, see Dendrinis 35).

So, where to start? At FLUP, we begin by considering what the role of coursebooks in the teaching-learning process is. Initially, this consists largely of lecturer-led input based on readings of authors such as Sheldon; Cunningsworth (*Evaluating and Selecting EFL Teaching Material and Choosing your Coursebook*); Ellis; and Nunan. The emphasis then shifts and the student teachers are asked to consider what coursebooks actually contain/offer their users; this brainstorm-style activity is conducted in pairs or small groups making reference to a random selection of recently published local titles. This activity in 2014/2015 produced the following list of coursebook contents:

Comprehension exercises	Self-assessment tasks
Reading texts	Skills development
Grammar exercises	Lead-in activities
Vocabulary work	Listening texts and tasks
Pronunciation activities	Writing tasks
Explanations	Reference sections
Illustrations	Supplementary worksheets
Additional materials	Cultural content
Follow-up activities	Multimedia materials
Progress tests	Dictionary work
Test preparation work	Project work
Appendices (glossary)	

This is entirely student teacher-generated content and is open to discussion within the group, with additional comments and explanations being provided according to individual needs and understanding. An atmosphere of 'critical co-operation' is established from the outset of the course through this brainstorming and the subsequent task: trying to organize these different elements under headings (into categories). Participation is viewed as vital to this process of teacher

learning, the student teachers working through common ‘problems’ in pursuit of a shared goal, moving towards creating what has become known as a “community of practice” (Lave and Wenger 15): learning emerges through social interaction in this ‘teacher education’ classroom, just as it does in the ELT classroom.

The ultimate objective of these PMDI classes is to get the student teachers to produce their checklist. While recognising that using a checklist is not the only, or necessarily, the most effective way to evaluate a coursebook, at this level of pre-service teacher training, it offers a structured and practical foundation to ELT materials evaluation (see Tomlinson, “Materials evaluation”, and Mukundan and Ahour, for extensive criticism and alternatives to the checklist approach). In this case, the student teachers themselves generate the categories they want to use in their checklists (one per pair/small group) and discuss how the components listed in the previous brainstorm can ‘fit’ into the categories. A key belief here is that through this type of collaborative, co-operative work, the student teachers will facilitate their awareness and enhance the plausibility of their conclusions (Prabhu). The categories suggested in 2014/2015 were:

1. Physical characteristics
2. Language work (grammar and vocabulary)
3. Cultural content
4. Skills development
5. Methodology
6. Supplementary materials

These categories also help to highlight the fact that coursebooks contain much more than just ‘language work (grammar and vocabulary)’ so being a language teacher means much more than dealing with grammar and vocabulary.

Before embarking on a more detailed development of the criteria that could fall into each category, some further input for the student teachers was deemed appropriate. Eight general

principles of coursebook evaluation are outlined at the website of the Best European Learning Materials Award (www.belma-award.eu), under the auspices of the European Educational Publishers Group (EEPG). This award has been in existence since 2009 and is organised by the Frankfurt Book Fair in conjunction with the International Association for Research on Textbooks and Educational Media (IARTEM). The principles listed are: Relevance (learner-centredness, appropriateness), Transparency (clarity with respect to aims, achievement, presentation and rationale), Reliability (internal coherence, methodological and factual integrity) Attractiveness, (user-friendliness, interactivity, variety and sensitivity), Flexibility (individualization and adaptability), Generativeness (transferability, integration and cognitive development), Participation (personal interest and partnership) and Socialization (social skills and intercultural awareness). The ideas implicit in these more theoretical categories and sub-categories are explained and discussed by means of a PowerPoint presentation (subsequently made available to the student teachers as a pdf document). Particular emphasis is placed on connecting these ideas with the existing categories of the student teachers' embryonic checklists. This input serves to both bolster the construction of the checklists and provides a useful foundation for their final written evaluation (discussed below).


The next step is to get the student teachers to generate more detailed criteria/questions to include in their checklists. Over the space of two or three classes, each category is discussed; the different pairs/groups provide suggestions with the general aim of recognizing perhaps five or six critical elements per category. All their ideas are recorded on the whiteboard and are commented on by the lecturer. Gradually the student teachers collaborate, co-operate and construct their own versions of how the ideas under discussion should be included in their checklists; ultimately these classes result in several different checklists being produced, each of which 'belongs' to a pair/small group of student teachers. These checklists then have to be applied to a real coursebook. An example of a student-generated checklist from 2014/2015 is included at Appendix 1 below. While the checklist included below represents the best example produced by the year group, it is also true to say that it is not 'perfect'; for instance, there is no reference to

the use of educational technologies, perhaps because the existence of this kind of support in Portuguese ELT classrooms is far from uniform.

The application of these checklists occurs in two distinctly different ways. Firstly, the student teachers select a recent, Portuguese-produced ELT coursebook from the 'stock' made available by the lecturer. Interestingly, several chose to apply their checklists to a coursebook that they themselves used at school (or that they recognise from a sibling's use). This represents an important moment in the abrupt shift from being a 'learner' to being a 'teacher'; this change in identity is often hard to achieve among a young, pre-service cohort; relating this need to a challenge/activity to reflect on something concrete, like a coursebook, can be beneficial (Singh and Richards). The results of the checklists having been applied are then compared in a follow-up class with the discussion being guided by a general 'strengths and weaknesses' comparison of different coursebooks in order to provide additional points of reference other than their own checklist and their interpretation of it. (i.e. something student teacher A may see as being positive, may be interpreted differently by student teacher B). This discussion serves as a kind of 'failsafe mechanism' allowing the student teachers to reshape their own knowledge, values and beliefs prior to embarking on the next, evaluated phase.

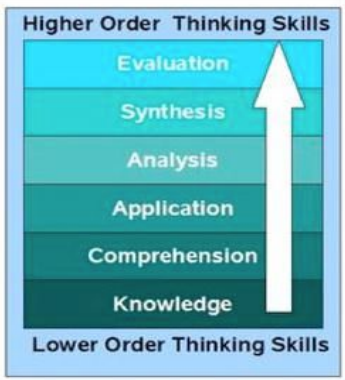
Secondly, the student teachers are asked to reformulate the results from their checklists and to produce a fully-referenced essay (10-15 pages). Detailed instructions are provided as a kind of 'stylesheet' and student teachers are encouraged to support their analysis through reference to the extensive bibliography which is provided for them online. The PMDI course has its own 'library' of electronic resources (articles, pdf documents, chapters, PowerPoints, etc.) that have been gathered over the years since 2008 and are made available via the FLUP 'intranet' for students enrolled on the course. These reference materials are organised according to categories which usually broadly correspond to the initial categories of the checklists that the student teachers generate. Thus, they are expected to **produce** data since they have to **apply** their own checklists, **reformulate** these data into academic style prose in order to **create** a kind of criteria-based review, to **evaluate** a Portuguese-produced ELT coursebook.

The words in bold in the paragraph above illustrate the philosophy behind the FLUP approach (or our ‘PMDI course culture’) which is very much based on Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy (see Anderson and Krathwohl).



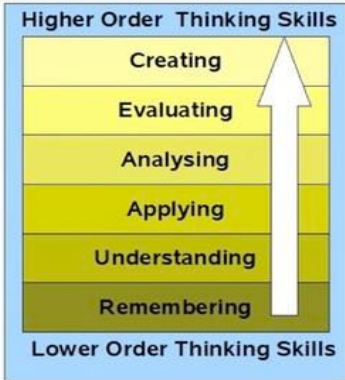
The Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy

1956



Bloom, B., Englehart, M. Furst, E., Hill, W., & Krathwohl, D. (1956). Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals. Handbook I: Cognitive domain. New York, Toronto: Longmans, Green.

2001



Anderson, L. & Krathwohl (Eds.). (2001). A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. New York: Longman.

The original taxonomy (Bloom et al.) defined a scheme describing lower and higher order thinking skills, moving from knowledge at the bottom of the continuum to comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and finally evaluation. The Revised Taxonomy provides a concise descriptive charter for the PMDI course. The course, at its outset, is based on the student teachers **remembering** their experiences as learners; it is based on them **understanding** new input: largely in the shape of evaluation ‘principles’; it is based on them **ordering** or **organizing** their own and their peers’ ideas; it is based on them **creating** frameworks and tools for a critical analysis and it is based on them **re-formatting** and **re-formulating** the data produced into an academic text.

Our overall aim, in line with the major trend of the last 20 years in teacher education, is to help train ‘reflective practitioners’ (see Richards and Lockhart, or Wallace). In relation to the PMDI course, the Bologna Process was seen as more than just a moment to re-label or re-package some existing course content, rather it was seen as an opportunity to create a classroom context which hosted “a community of learners engaged in social practices and the collaborative construction of meanings” (Richards 164). The course actively involves the student teachers in exploring what they may have assumed ELT materials to be. It puts them in a better position to judge whether there is gap between what and how coursebooks ask them to teach and what and how learners learn. It involves both an individual and collaborative effort on the part of the student teachers; it is both self-initiated and also directed in terms of developing their own ‘research’ instruments (checklists, in this case); it is essentially dialogic: “there is frequent personal interaction between the teacher educator and the student teachers and among the student teachers themselves” (Korthagen 38). The idea is not to make reflection a requirement of their teaching lives (see Hobbs) but to see the usefulness of criteria-based evaluation of ELT materials, recognizing this context as being likely to be an important part of their future professional duties. These kinds of decisions should be as objective as possible and not undermined by commercial pressure or lack of knowledge: “[t]he important thing is for teachers to consciously choose the ways they use the textbook or other materials, rather than employing them unreflectively” (Guerratz and Johnston 793).

Early career ELT classroom teachers cannot reasonably be expected to work/teach without coursebooks within the state sector if they have anything approaching a ‘full’ timetable, spread across various different levels of learning. Teacher education courses, including those at FLUP, should aim to bridge the gap between this in-service reality and the pre-service training that they offer. Propositional knowledge alone, in an ‘application-of-the-theory’ model, is unlikely to produce effective practitioners. Our courses should be relevant to the real practices of Portuguese schools: we should utilize the pedagogy of “realistic teacher education” (Korthagen). Our student teachers should be equipped to exercise a critical approach to using ELT materials

based on recognized principles; for example, the S.A.R.S. approach [select, adapt, reject & supplement] as advocated by Graves. In their schools, they should have the opportunity to analyse and discuss the use/adoption of coursebooks with their colleagues (and other stakeholders as well perhaps): to foreground the importance of communicative language use, in context, through the medium of skills-based tasks, as being the main stimulus to enable learners to progress (Bruton). FLUP graduates should not simply 'teach the book' in their ELT classrooms based on the assumption that all therein is correct, they should not expect their learners to simply reproduce "textbook content in tests and through classroom questioning" (Brown 659). In sum, successful PMDI students should be willing and able to question and explore different ways of thinking about teaching and that includes different ways of selecting and using (or not) coursebooks.

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APPENDIX 1

A student teacher generated checklist for coursebook evaluation: 2014/15

ELT Coursebook Evaluation Checklist			Yes	No
Layout/ Formal aspects	Does the coursebook reflect learners' preferences in terms of layout, design, and organization?			
	Does the coursebook provide a good balance between pictures and texts?			
	Are the visuals in the book used as an integral part of teaching or are they essentially decorative?			
	Does the coursebook's table of content include a clear and detailed overview of the functions and structures that will be taught in each unit?			
	Are the objectives specified explicitly in the table of content?			
	Is there a clear articulation between content and skill development?			
	Is there a balance between grammar and vocabulary?			
	Are the units' topic interesting and appropriate?			
	Are the chapters' transitions theme and difficulty smooth?			
	Are the coursebook units of a manageable length?			
	Is there a sense of progression through time?			
	Is the coursebook easily available?			
	Is the coursebook affordable?			
Language work	Is there a balance between input and output?			
	Input	Does the book encourage deductive or inductive approach to learning – or a balance of both (guided discovery)?		
		Does the coursebook expose students to authentic language?		
		Does the coursebook provide accurate language?		
		Does the coursebook contextualise language through characters and settings to maintain interest?		
		Does the coursebook use authentic listening and reading material?		
		Does the language gradually increase in complexity?		
		Does the input reflect students' needs?		
		Does the coursebook expose students to language at an appropriate level?		
		Is there is a good distribution of vocabulary load across chapters and the whole book?		
		Is the new vocabulary integrated in varying contexts and situations?		
		Is the input recycled in subsequent lessons to reinforce its meaning and use?		

		Is the input extracted from up-to-date and accurate sources?			
		Is there a relationship between the input and real world utility?			
	Output/ activities		Is there enough production or just mechanic practice?		
			Does the coursebook include a variety of activities?		
			Does the coursebook include lead-in activities?		
			Does the coursebook provide students with the opportunity to use the target language in a creative way?		
			Do the activities allow students to recycle previously presented language items?		
			Are the activities challenging and motivating?		
			Is there a match between the language presented and the activities provided by the coursebook?		
			Do the activities allow students to negotiate meaning avoiding a mechanical use of the language?		
			Is there a relationship between output and real world utility?		
			Does the coursebook provide students with the opportunity to choose how they want to practise the target language?		
	Skills		Is there a balanced practice in all four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing)?		
		Writing		Does practice provided develop the consolidation of new items?	
			Does practice allow students to develop creative writing?		
			Is the practice appropriate to students' language level?		
			Does practice allow students to produce different types of texts?		
			Does practice allow students to produce texts with real world utility?		
Speaking			Does the coursebook include speech situations relevant to students' background?		
			Does the coursebook provide students with a variety of interaction patterns?		
			Are the activities developed to create meaningful communication?		

	Reading	Is there different text types and genres from multiple sources with different subject content?		
		Does the coursebook encourage students to do extensive reading?		
		Are there adequate and appropriate exercises and tasks for improving reading comprehension?		
		Are the reading selections authentic pieces of language?		
	Listening	Is the listening material contextualised by background information, pictures, questions and activities which facilitate comprehension?		
		Is there a variety of listening supports and sources?		
		Is the listening material as authentic as possible, exposing students to a large range of accents and real voices?		
Culture	Is there a relationship between the content of the coursebook and real-life situations (society)?			
	Are the social and cultural contexts in the coursebook comprehensible to the learners?			
	Does the coursebook reflect an accurate depiction of social reality, identity, social groups and relationships (social class, regional identity, ethnic minorities)?			
	Does the coursebook include an accurate depiction of social interaction and language (different levels of formality; as an outsider and an insider)?			
	Does the coursebook provide students with cultural beliefs and behaviour (moral, religious beliefs, daily routines)?			
	Does the coursebook include relevant elements from the national history (historical and contemporary events seen as markers of national identity)?			
	Does the coursebook take account of social and political institutions (state institutions, health care, law and order, social security, local government)?			
	Does the coursebook provide students with an accurate depiction of national geography (geographical factors seen as being significant by members)?			
	Does the coursebook contain stereotypes and symbols of national identity?			

	Are the topics and texts free from any kind of discrimination (gender, race etc.)?		
Extras	Does the coursebook provide supplementary materials (workbook, Key, glossary, grammar reference section.)?		
	Does the coursebook include self-assessment parts?		
	Does the coursebook have supporting online materials/tests and e-format?		
Practical Considerations	Does the coursebook address different learning styles and strategies?		
	Does the coursebook fit curriculum/goals?		
	Are the objectives specified explicitly in the coursebook?		
	Does the coursebook provide the students with the opportunity for individual study outside the school/ autonomy?		