



Harwood, Nigel (Ed.). 2014. *English Language Teaching Textbooks: Content, Consumption, Production*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 373 pages. ISBN: 978-1-137-27630-8.

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This book focuses on three main areas of textbook development for language teaching, two of which have so far been under-represented in the literature.

THE CONTENTS

In Chapter 1 Nigel Harwood stresses the need for “more theoretical and methodological rigour” (2) in textbook research and recommends that ELT textbook researchers should learn from the “more developed, rigorous and sophisticated” (2) research which has been conducted in mainstream education. He then surveys the published research in ELT and other fields on textbook content, textbook consumption and textbook production.

In surveying content research Harwood reports such inadequacies of current ELT textbooks as poor coverage of vocabulary, little re-cycling of vocabulary, discrepancies between textbook and corpus frequencies and the over-representation of native speaker pronunciation. He also reports studies which are critical of gender, racial and culture bias and of pragmatic oversimplifications. Harwood is critical of many aspects of content research, complaining, for example, of the lack of research on pronunciation and on teachers’ guides and of the ‘sketchiness of many of the methodological procedures’ (10). When he focuses on textbook consumption Harwood points out how few studies have been conducted of “how ELT teachers and students use textbooks inside and outside the classroom” (11). To compensate he reports research from mainstream education which reveals ‘the gap between what the textbook intends and what actually happens in lessons’ (11), as well as the variation in how a textbook is used by teachers with differing backgrounds, beliefs and experience. The section on textbook production provides a comprehensive survey of ELT and mainstream literature as well as a critical but understanding review of writing and publishing practises.

Part I – Studies of Textbook Content

In Chapter 2 John Gray and David Block complain about the way that ELT textbooks celebrate neoliberal ideology and they focus in particular on the under-representation of the working class. They investigate the representation of the working class in textbooks from “the 1970s to the present” (47) by submitting eight textbooks to both quantitative and qualitative analysis and conclude that there has been a dramatic decline in the representation of working class characters between 1970 and 2009 – a decline they attribute to a shift to embedding “a global culture of consumerism” (59) represented by “middle class and wealthy people” (59). They present their findings in persuasive detail and finally come to the conclusion that the “erasure of the working class from ELT textbooks can be seen both as a representative of a failure to educate and as a betrayal of working class language learners” (68). They certainly have a point.

In Chapter 3 Diana Freeman analyses ten global coursebooks (ranging from 1998 to 2009) using a taxonomy for categorising “post-reading comprehension and task question types” consisting of three general categories (Content; Language; Affect) and eight question types. Unsurprisingly she finds a large number of lower order questions but surprisingly she finds an even larger number of “questions which promote higher order thinking and linguistic skills” (73). She provides concise and clear accounts of the literature on question types, the initial trialling of a number of taxonomies, the creation of her L2 reading question-type taxonomy and the application of her taxonomy. She also provides a detailed and rigorous account of her results, a discussion in which she reports interviews with the writers and editors of the textbooks and a conclusion in which she focuses more on the research benefits of her taxonomy than on the significance of her findings. Freeman remains objective and does not critically evaluate the question types favoured by the textbooks. Personally I would welcome evaluation of some of the practises that her research does not reveal (e.g. the tendency to put the higher order questions at the end, thus risking the text being ‘killed’ by the lower order questions which precede them or these questions not being asked at all because of a lack of time).

Chapter 4 is written by six authors who report their analysis of the textbooks assigned for reading instruction for English language learners for pre-service general education teachers in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Singapore. Thirty nine textbooks were analysed to discover the amount of inclusion of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and text comprehension (the essential components listed by the National Reading Panel) plus spelling, assessment and ESL. They give a brief introduction to each of these components and assume that these are essential components (thus ignoring the literature challenging the teaching of phonics and of reading aloud). They then provide counts of these components in each of the textbooks and are critical of the low coverage of the ‘essential’

components in most of the textbooks. The chapter recommends that the four countries revise their textbooks and/or supplement them to make sure that teachers in training are introduced to the eight ‘essential’ components.

The analysis is thorough and its reporting is clear but I find the chapter rather dogmatic in its insistence on the eight ‘essential’ components without providing evidence of their effectiveness in preparing teachers to help learners become proficient readers in English.

Part 2 – Studies of Textbook Consumption

This is a very useful section which helps to fill the gaps in our knowledge of how materials are actually used by teachers.

In Chapter 5 Ahlam Menkabu and Nigel Harwood report their investigation of how seven teachers conceptualize and adhere to their prescribed textbook when teaching an ESP course (English for nursing) at a Saudi Arabian university. The chapter reviews the literature on teachers’ variable use of textbooks both in ELT and first language education. It then focuses on the methodology of the study by describing its context and detailing the focused observations and interviews which were conducted. It reports such results as that most of the teachers selected negative metaphors when describing their feelings about using their textbook, that the textbook played a central role in each of their lessons, that they added more grammar activities, more explanation of medical terms and more content information, that they deleted activities not relevant to the examination and that they often reordered the materials (despite saying that they rarely did). It was also noticed that teachers who had a lot of subject knowledge made more changes than those who did not.

The “Discussion and conclusion” section makes the interesting point that the reality of variable use of the same textbook should inform Ministry policy, curriculum development and teacher training.

In Chapter 6 Fotini Grammatosi and Nigel Harwood present a case study of an experienced teacher’s use of the prescribed EAP textbook at a UK university. A repeated cycle of observations and pre- and post-use interviews revealed that the teacher’s use of the book was influenced by his evaluation of its quality, its mismatch with his preferred pedagogy and such contextual factors as the lack of fit between the book and the students’ needs and the late enrolment of many of the students. The chapter presents a clear and detailed account of the case study and then highlights in its Discussion section how the teacher “radically transformed the textbook material *in situ*” (195). Although the final sections present useful ideas for further research in textbook consumption, I was disappointed (as I was when reading Chapter 5) that the researchers did not conclude with more specific suggestions about how curriculum developers, materials developers and teacher trainers should make use of the information about the variability of textbook use.

Gregory Hadley starts Chapter 7 with a convenient polarisation between “the anti-textbook community” and “the pro-textbook faction” (206) and then lumps into the “anti-textbook community” scholars who have been critical of current global coursebooks but not of the textbook per se (a fact ironically that Hadley later acknowledges). He then launches into a socio-political explanation of the opposition to global coursebooks. He makes reference to such factors as corporatization, massification and deconstruction of culture, none of which have influenced me when criticizing current global coursebooks. My objections have been to the mis-match between what learners are typically asked to do in these books and what we know facilitates language acquisition. Yet Hadley insists that there has been a “clear preference of GT critics for ideological issues over those of pedagogical concerns” (212). He lists critics who “have relied on observation and personal reflection” (214) and conveniently ignores the fact that some of them have based their criticisms on principled, criteria-driven evaluations. He also provides misleadingly partial quotes from a number of the scholars in his anti-textbook lists.

Having dismissed the anti-textbook faction as lacking empirical evidence, Hadley demonstrates the potential effectiveness of global coursebooks by providing empirical data from his six year study of seven hundred students using *Interchange* in Japan. He provides a mass of empirical data and an impressive statistical verification of his results. However the study relies on giving the learners the placement test for the book at the beginning and at the end of their course and then claiming that most of the students had improved because their score was higher at the end of the course than at the beginning.

Part III – Studies of Textbook Production

In Chapter 8 Ivor Timmis reports his case study of a materials development project on which he was a writer. Timmis provides a very clear description of the background, of the publisher’s specifications and of the framework which was decided on by the team leader to drive the units of material. He also makes use of the literature to justify the principles and procedures of the text-driven framework which was made flexible use of on the project. He then revisits the principles in the light of feedback from the publisher which required different principles and procedures and he concludes that he ought to have made a more principled compromise from the beginning. This seems to be a reasonable conclusion but my experience tells me that it is best to start from the principles and procedures which you believe are most likely to facilitate acquisition in the target context and then make compromises in the light of compelling feedback. After all this is what Timmis did and when he saw the published books he was happy that they represented “a good compromise between continuity and change, between familiarity and innovation” (260).

In Chapter 9 Fredricka Stoller and Marin Robinson describe the procedures they followed in order to develop a “textbook that assists university-level chemistry students ...

develop discipline-specific reading and writing skills” (262). This involved articulating priorities and principles, scaffolding the instructional approach, selecting target genres, converting analytical findings into instructional materials, piloting and assessing the materials, and then improving them. They also describe the publication process of finding a publisher, securing copyright permissions, selecting a title, acknowledging contributors and finalizing the copy. They conclude by saying what changes they would make if they had the chance (e.g. “divide our 698-page book into a set of shorter volumes” (293)) and very interestingly what practices they would follow in a similar manner (e.g. “be willing to abandon materials that may have taken ‘an eternity’ to develop” (294)).

In Chapter 10 Christine Feak and John Swales provide an insightful account of the process of revising two EAP writing textbooks in which they focus in particular on “the issues related to addressing the concerns of stakeholders, who may have competing interests” (299). What I found particularly interesting was their realisation that they were writing for an immediate audience (editors and external reviewers) and a remote audience (the end users) and that they needed to become more sensitive to editorial wishes whilst holding their ground on inclusions they were convinced were valuable for the target learners (e.g. references to Google Scholar).

In Chapter 11 Jill Hadfield examines her own materials-writing process and compares her account with those of other writers and with theoretical critiques of the process. She identifies two oppositions in the literature, one between a circuitous and recursive route and a more linear, progressive route, and the other between an intuitive, spontaneous approach and one which is driven by a principled framework. In her conclusion she argues that her own apparently “messy, recursive, spontaneous and ad hoc” (352) process informed by a “tacit framework” (353) of principles is typical of most materials writing and is to be recommended.

CONCLUSION

This book makes an important contribution to the literature on materials development for ELT – especially when reporting on previously under-researched aspects of materials development. The chapters are focused, cohesive and clear and they are impressive in their demonstration of the reliability of their data. However some of them are less impressive in demonstrating the validity of their content and of their assessments of effect and none provides data measuring the actual effectiveness of materials in helping learners to improve their ability to use English. Also the book lacks cohesion in that the chapters are not cross-referred and there are no comments by the Editor at the end of sections or the book. Nevertheless I found the book informative and stimulating and would definitely recommend it.