

# EFL coursebook in learner-centred learning and teaching

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In recent years we have witnessed a lot of changes in teaching foreign languages in our region. Some can be considered new and innovative approaches and methods, but some have been with us since Jan Amos Comenius' times: sometimes in the foreground, sometimes pushed back in order to be drawn forward again later. In other words, there have been numerous discussions about 'the best' coursebook since Comenius' *Orbis sensualium pictus* was published. Jan Amos Comenius is one of the founders of coursebook theory and practice. It was him who clearly defined the communicative values of a coursebook in order that it can be a good teaching-learning material.

It was him who stressed the role of *senses* in teaching and learning foreign languages, as well as, the step by step approach from simple to more complex, from the known to the unknown, from easier to more difficult in order to motivate learners for learning and acquisition, creativity and self-esteem in foreign language use in relevant situations. His ideas about pictures, their denominations and descriptions helped to prepare learners for deeper language study and acquisition in an amusing way, and thus make learning an amusing process which could develop into successful accomplishment of teaching goals.

Comenius' ideas have been developed throughout centuries evaluating an foreign language coursebook from various angles and perspectives, but usually with regard to learners' needs and expectations. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century one of the key personalities was D. D. Zujev (1986:56) who considered a coursebook to be '*a final project in the application of the content of learning...*' On the other hand Průcha considers a coursebook

*inseparable from the teaching-learning process because it is a means of classroom management for the teacher and self-direction of learner's own learning. (Průcha 1984:18)*

In his recent publication Průcha (1997:273) considers a coursebook to be 'curricular object, the source of knowledge for students and teaching material for teachers '.

Famous coursebook writer Louis Alexander (1998) could argue here: '*who owns learning? Is it the teacher or the learner or both*'. Taking into consideration other experts (e.g. Mareš, Kulič) we are convinced that foreign language learning and teaching is a process during which and as a result of what learners undergo significant changes in their accuracy and fluency, as well as in their acculturation development which seems only part of their personal growth and development.

With regard to the above mentioned we can say that if a foreign language teacher wants to achieve good results in his/her classroom, s/he should respect his/her learners and give them enough space for creativity and independence, and be creative and flexible as

a teacher too. Then their common work, cooperation and efforts will result in final success. We are convinced that this is not only the case of a foreign language teacher, but it is also the requirement for a coursebook writer who has to take this responsibility and offer material which should be useful for learners and teachers. Therefore this paper is going to deal with a foreign language coursebook with regard to the role of a foreign language teacher and foreign language learner. In our opinion a coursebook has its functions, structure; it presents certain learning styles and suggests methods and techniques for the teacher and finally it provides both of them with several means of testing and feedback about acquired knowledge and skills. In such a way a foreign language coursebook is an inseparable medium for classroom communication and therefore it will probably remain basic teaching and learning material although some experts in the foreign language teaching do not consider a coursebook a core teaching-learning material and they state that it can be replaced by other sources. In our opinion it is a source of *facts about the language* (e.g. grammar, vocabulary, etc.), as well as the *socio-cultural background* which includes facts closely connected with the English speaking world, but also with many *universal values*. A coursebook (set) is also a source for *developing learner's personality* and also his/her *learning styles and learning strategies*. But on the other hand, we cannot ignore the role of a foreign language teacher either. His/her role(s), experience and involvement help a good foreign language coursebook work in the class.

In other words, a coursebook (set) should offer enough material for auditory, visual, hands-on, etc. learners with respect for the application of cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies. The material for foreign language acquisition should be presented as a system which is being constantly developed with respect for learners' previously acquired knowledge and skills in order that their general and social competences are developed.

Having been involved in coursebook writing and evaluation for some time, we consider some aspects the key ones in connection with a foreign language coursebook: 1 functions of a foreign language coursebook, 2 external and internal structure of a coursebook, 3 respect for learning styles and learning strategies, and 4 evaluation criteria.

### **Functions of a coursebook**

Our idea of a foreign language coursebook functions is closely connected with its validity for teaching and learning foreign language, e.g. the English language. From our viewpoint there are *seven functions* we consider the key ones:

1 *informative function* means presentation of information about the English language, its socio-cultural background and contexts of its global use within the international communication, as it is one of the sources for developing acculturation;

2 *stimulating and developing function* means the development of activity, independence and creativity of students and teachers;

3 *integrating function* means the integration of students' knowledge and experience from other subjects or students' own experience in the English language, as well as the integration of other skills (e.g. dictionary use, the use of reference books, encyclopedias, etc.)

4 *educating and motivating function* means the effort for the formation and development of learners' personalities, their moral, ethical and aesthetic features and principles, as well as students' intrinsic motivation for foreign language study and acquisition;

5 *contrastive-transformational function* means the respect for contrastive approach to the linguistic material of mother tongue and foreign languages and to both cultures, traditions and experience; it also implies the receptive and productive relations of teachers and students to the coursebook (set);

6 *facilitating and relating function* implies monitoring and facilitating role of an EFL teacher, students' active work at school and independent work at home by means of tasks, activities, exercises, etc. in the coursebook and in the workbook; it also implies the cyclic character of the second language acquisition process through real-life situations in mother tongue and target language;

7 *testing function* means that there is material suitable for testing productive and receptive acquisition of linguistic and communicative competence from the viewpoint of a teacher and self-control of the student.

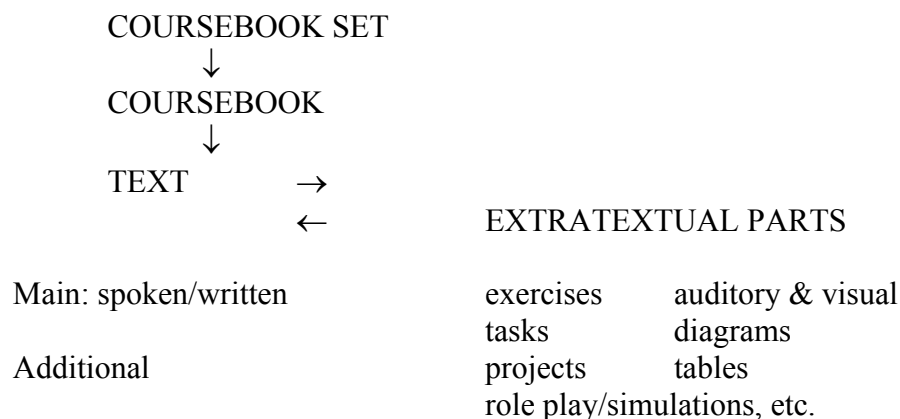
If the authors of a foreign language coursebook respect the above mentioned functions, the foreign language coursebook will enable the teachers and learners to use it effectively and it can be very motivating for learning and teaching foreign language, i.e. the teacher-learner cooperation will be successful.

### Coursebook Structure

From the viewpoint of its structure we consider a foreign language coursebook (set) to be a complex material composed of mutually linked components. Here we are considering the student's book only. We think that within the coursebook set the student's book has the key role because it has been the source of the content of the other parts of the coursebook set which are there to develop the particular topic in student's book and offer more space for students' individual and cooperative work based on their current and previous knowledge and skills.

In other words, a work book should offer enough tasks and exercises to develop the topic from the coursebook, enough material for individual creative work of a learner. The audio-lingual material (audio or video tapes) should present authentic material for effective development of oral skills, i.e. listening and speaking.

In our opinion *text* (main and additional) plays the key role in a coursebook. We think that it is the most important part of a coursebook from which the other *extra-textual* parts (exercises, vocabulary, pictures, etc.) should be created. By means of students' activity and creativity application, they provide space for the development and extension of the topic dealt with in the original [initial] text/s because they connect the particular topic with students' previous acquired knowledge and skills.



With regard to the above mentioned, we consider *text* to be the key element in a foreign language coursebook. When selecting and evaluating it we expect it to correspond with communicative aims stated in standards and syllabuses for the particular age group and level of English proficiency. Having this in mind, we consider the communicative value of

a foreign language text to be manifested in its spoken and written form in order to manifest, for example, differences between spoken and written English, and in such a way help learners to understand their interchangeable roles of expedient and recipient in communication.

It means that a foreign language text in its spoken form and a text in its written form can offer adequate examples of the use of foreign language in real life situations. On the other hand the foreign language text in a coursebook can support and motivate constant classroom interaction between a teacher and his/her students, among students themselves, as well as the interaction between writer and reader/listener, i.e. partners in EFL classroom communication. It is the key medium for the development of skills on the one hand and knowledge about the multicultural background of the English language on the other hand. At the same time it is the space for students' evaluating attitudes to the theme of the text and the life around, which highlights the importance of cultural/multicultural aspects of a coursebook (set).

In this context Straková (2001:14) highlights that 'the effective acquisition of a foreign language can be influenced by the extent of learners' comprehension of the target culture' which need not always be a smooth process. Straková also argues that

*acculturation in foreign language teaching takes place consciously through the content of texts, as well as other materials, and unconsciously through the foreign language and its functions. (Straková 2001:14)*

It means that a coursebook set should provide enough material for the formation of pro-social behaviour, i.e. the ability to perceive and respect otherness in cultures which is transformed to language and speech. It probably means to accept bilingualism or multilingualism as the bridges between languages and cultures, between languages and nations which is the development of users' competences.

This has been also highlighted by Common European Framework for Languages by underlining the need for the awareness of regional and social differences among nations, as well as positive and negative features of one's own culture.

In this context we have to consider also some other aspects which seem to be of some importance too: the age of learners, i.e. the developmental maturity; the standard of learners' abilities to perceive and comprehend the objective reality which the learners will evaluate from their 'child's perception of the world around'; the ability to use learners' previous knowledge and experience in approaching the new and unknown.

It means that a foreign language text and the foreign language coursebook as a whole should reflect external and internal learner's life, but creatively over-evaluated in through the reflection of syllabuses, aims and objectives and content of English language teaching at a particular type of school.

The development of creative thinking with regard to students' experience in other subjects can be supported not only by the foreign language text, but also by its extra-textual parts: verbal (exercise, poems, songs, anecdotes, tasks, projects, etc.) and non-verbal (graphs, maps, diagrams, pictures, etc.). These can be the means which initiate, develop and intensify mutual communication of the partners in a teaching-learning situation, as well as a simulated foreign language real life situation.

### **Respect for students' learning styles and learning strategies**

In order to make the coursebook a useful tool for classroom management, the coursebook writers should respect the fact that all learners of a foreign language are different:

their ways of foreign language acquisition vary a lot. In other words, they use various learning styles and apply various learning strategies.

Psychologists and psycholinguists define *learning styles* as the regularity in human activities/behaviour which has at least two basic components: content of the activity and the form of its application. There is no one way or method suitable for all students to achieve the best results because students use different ways of learning. In other words, to differentiate between learning styles as certain cognitive ways towards learning and information processing, i.e. auditory, visual, audio-visual, hands-on, global, analytic, introverted, extroverted, etc. and learning strategies which the learner consciously or subconsciously applies for processing information, its assimilation, retrieval and use. This means that there are differences in learning styles connected with senses: some learners learn better when they get visual impulses, others learn better when they get acoustic impulses and there are learners who can be motivated by kinaesthetic impulses or some who prefer hands-on.

Williams and Burden (1997) specify the above mentioned statement by quoting J. Rubin's useful distinction between

*'strategies that contribute directly to learning and those that contribute indirectly to learning'* [149] together with her suggestion of *three major types of strategies used by the learners which can contribute directly or indirectly to language learning. The first group she calls learning strategies. These contribute directly to the development of the language system which the learner constructs. They include both cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Secondly, she distinguishes communicative strategies used by the learner to promote communication with others. The third of Rubin's categories is social strategies. These refer to the activities that learners use in an attempt to increase their exposure to the language.* (Williams and Burden 1997:149-151)

The picture of these psychological aspects of a foreign language coursebook would not be complete if we did not mention, at least very briefly, Gardner's *seven [or eight] intelligencies* which can be manifested in an English coursebook through variety of activities, tasks, exercises, for example some possible activities which can develop *linguistic intelligence* (group discussion, project presentation, reading comprehension, story telling, etc.); *logical-mathematical intelligence* (problem-solving tasks, discovering things, puzzles and riddles, etc.); *spatial-sequential intelligence* (mind maps, diagrams, video, etc.); *kinaesthetic intelligence* (brain gymnastics, physical exercises, relaxation exercises, etc.); *interpersonal intelligence* (pair and group work, brainstorming, etc.); *intra-personal intelligence* (self-reflection, self-study, etc.); *musical intelligence* (songs), *natural intelligence*.

In our opinion it is not only a foreign language teacher who should be aware of the above mentioned psychologists' suggestions and research results, but also a coursebook writer. In other words, s/he should respect the principles which more or less govern the choice of learning styles and learning strategies: respect for cultural context, the respect for learners' previous knowledge, the respect for cognitive demands, such as creative thinking, respect for a variety of styles, respect for short-term and long-term memory and respect for learners' own pace in active task completion.

If a foreign language coursebook has been written with this in mind, the learners will have enough space for using the coursebook easily, creatively and actively which consequently will make learner-centred teaching and learning a reality.

## Evaluation Criteria

Quite a number of experts (Cunningworth, Harmer, Hutchinson, etc.) have been involved in foreign language material evaluation and adaptation. They have tried to list evaluation criteria in order that a foreign language teacher can choose 'the best' coursebook (set) for his/her learners. Taking those conclusions into consideration we can consider two aspects to be the key ones: evaluation of a coursebook as a whole and evaluation and testing of acquired knowledge and skills presented by the coursebook.

Taking into consideration the opinions of other authors, we would like to present the following criteria which we consider important in a foreign language coursebook evaluation: external layout and basic information and internal structure and content.

### *External layout and basic information*

A foreign language coursebook respects the addressee, i.e. the student or learner with regard to the level of his/her proficiency. It also respects the syllabuses for the given school and learner's level of foreign language proficiency together with the respect for professional motivation of a foreign language teacher and learners' expectations and needs.

### *Internal structure and content*

We highlight the following criteria:

- the choice and application of methods with regard to teaching, learning and acquisition;
- presentation of grammar and lexis with respect to the principles from the known to the unknown, from the easier to more difficult, from the focus to the margin;
- the link between exercises, activities and tests with the theme of the main text aiming at the development of creativity and independence of students;
- the choice of text with regard to students' age, interests and the level of their communicative competence; it is the main text and additional texts which help to develop students' knowledge about the English speaking countries in comparison with students' own country and language;
- the respect of socio-cultural and multicultural factors and interests of students;
- the development of integrated skills;
- functional non-verbal material;
- functional additional material (even authentic material);
- validity and reliability of tests;
- respect for the application of various learning styles and styles of second language acquisition;
- the role of mother tongue;
- functions of other parts of the coursebook set.

In the year 2001 fifteen members of the Slovak Association of Teachers of English (SAUA/SATE; [www.saua/sate.sk](http://www.saua/sate.sk)) were working on a project the result of which are evaluation criteria which go into more details than the above mentioned criteria. We have defined criteria for evaluating teacher's book, student's book and work book. These criteria include detail information about the coursebook. The evaluation criteria concentrate on: *detail evaluation* (content, layout, skills, tasks, structures and vocabulary, language functions,

relevance to the current syllabuses and curricula), *skills in detail* (reading, listening, speaking, writing), *strong points, weak points and final comments*.

In evaluating work book the criteria writers looked at *detail evaluation* (external factors, internal factors), *strong points, weak points, final comments*.

The evaluation of teacher's book concentrated on general factors, detailed evaluation, strong and weak points.

These are only some of many approaches to coursebook, but evaluation criteria are help for teachers [and future teachers] to think about those or similar ones when trying to choose a suitable coursebook set for his/her learners. In other words, a coursebook (set) is only one of several classroom materials, although still the key one, and it is foreign language teacher's responsibility and freedom of choice – if s/he understands the evaluation criteria and his/her learners in order to develop their talents, learning styles and their preferred intelligences.

We would like to conclude with some questions, assumptions and ideas. Does the coursebook (set) have any future? I agree with other researchers and experts and scholars involved in foreign language teaching and research that there is a future for foreign language coursebook (set/s) but they should respect interests and needs of the learner, as well as should be based on the knowledge about the teaching-learning process: in what way is a coursebook (set) used by the teacher and by the learner. Taking into consideration rapid development of modern technology and CD-ROM industry, we would say that 'classical' coursebook (set) will remain the basic foreign language teaching and learning material, but may be supported by multimedia in order that the learners can get more impulses for the application of their learning styles and learning strategies and in such a way develop their autonomy and independence, i.e. responsibility for successful foreign language acquisition.

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