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Realizing the Possibilities of the ESL Textbook
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Realizing the Possibilities of the ESL Textbook

1.0. THE TEXTBOOK PROBLEM

The textbook exercises enormous influence in English as a second/foreign language (ES/FL) teaching. It represents for both learners and students the visible heart of any English language teaching (ELT) programme. In traditional ES/FL situations such as the undergraduate General English courses in India, teaching is closely tied to the textbook. Given the content-based and memory-oriented nature of the examination, learning English in the Indian ESL context is often, in practice, not much more than learning summaries of the set texts by heart and reproducing them. As a matter of fact, if a question which does not have any bearing on the prescribed texts appears in the examination paper, it is trouble for the examination board! The teaching and learning of English as a second/foreign language is thus almost always textbook-dependent.

But the teacher of English has a love-hate relationship with the textbook. While, on the one hand, he needs a textbook that provides him and his learners with a range of professionally developed materials within tried-and-tested syllabus structures and allows him to spend his valuable time more on facilitating learning than on materials production, he is as often as not disappointed to find that the prescribed textbook is unsuitable for his own learners. I have interviewed hundreds of teachers of English about the textbooks prescribed for their undergraduate students. And I have undertaken research projects on textbooks, which involved interactions with a large
number of English teachers. I noticed during those interactions a strong and widespread grass roots discontent with ESL textbooks.

This discontent is not confined to the grass roots. The textbook is viewed with disfavour even by ELT scholars and theoreticians. But there is a difference: while the chalkface grievance is against particular textbooks, the ones prescribed, the complaint of scholars and theoreticians is directed against the textbook as a medium itself. Their complaint is that, even as a medium, the textbook is a ‘problem’ (Swales 1980). It is because ‘the format of the textbook does not sit easily with the developments in ideas about teaching and learning that have come out of the applied linguistics debate in the last two decades’ (Hutchinson and Torres (1994) – ideas which value the dynamic and interactive nature of the learning process, and which, therefore, favour greater negotiation and individual choice in the classroom. In the ELT literature, therefore, there is considerable hostility to the textbook as a medium. But, as Hutchinson and Torres (op. cit.) point out what is happening in the real world – the practical world – as against the world of ideas is interesting: the textbook has not withered away; it survives. It not only survives but thrives and prospers; more and more textbooks are being written.

That the textbook survives and prospers is proof enough that, at the grass roots level, the textbook is needed. But, in most ESL situations, the possibilities of the textbook are not fully realized – both in terms of the design of textbooks and in terms of their use in the classroom. That is why the complaint against textbooks is so widespread. My concern in this paper is to discuss those possibilities. But, before that, I shall place them in the context by surveying the anti-textbook debate. My primary concern is with the ideological issues in the textbook debate, but I shall discuss a few practical factors also.
1.1 Practical Factors

1.1.1. The textbook ignores the linguistic-cognitive mismatch

One of the fundamental problems with General English textbooks in use at the undergraduate level is that they ignore the mismatch between the learners' linguistic and cognitive levels. Conceptually or cognitively, the undergraduate learner is mature. But, as far as his proficiency in English is concerned, he is little better than a child. An average student at the first-year degree level is unable to follow lectures in English; he finds it difficult to read even simple English with ease; and his productive abilities are much worse. But General English textbooks do not normally take into account this reality. The cognitive level of the books is in keeping with the cognitive level of the learners of this age group. But, unfortunately, the linguistic level of the materials is also high, because they consist of literary and semi-literary pieces, which are beyond the grasp of the learners – and sometimes of the teachers themselves!

1.1.2. The textbook promotes content-based and memory-oriented learning

This problem is an offshoot of the one discussed in 1.1.1 above. Most of the ESL textbooks in use on undergraduate programmes are the literary-humanistic type, and the materials they offer are beyond the grasp of the learners. The teacher, therefore, resorts to what has been considered by generations of ESL teachers in India to be the only possible course in such a situation: ‘[...] lecturing, text explication, translation and dictation of notes’ (UGC 1989:18). Such a situation tends to promote content-based and memory-oriented learning, which draws a great deal of support from the examination which only seems to test memory of reproducible content.

1.1.3. The textbook lacks relevance and appeal

The relevance of an ESL coursebook depends upon whether it takes into account the purposes for which English is needed in a given context. The coursebook writer must, therefore, address himself to the following questions that Sridhar raises: