

To use or not to use: adapting the textbook for the course of English for laboratory technicians

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1 Introduction

Courses of English for specific purposes taught at the Medical faculty of Masaryk University usually do not follow any particular textbook. Keeping to the topic syllabus, teachers have at their disposal different resources (coursebooks, supplementary textbooks) from which they pick and choose whatever material and activities they deem useful for meeting their course's goals and objectives. Understandably, this relative liberty of action has its considerable assets. At the same time, the absence of a textbook and the ensuing liberty of choice might present the teacher with the classic agony of choice. It seems that the best position would be to both enjoy the open creative space and to follow the directions outlined by a textbook. The ESP course of English for laboratory technicians appears to embody this very situation.

Taught without the use of a textbook, the course—prior to 2007—offered considerable liberty as for the materials exploited. In 2007, a textbook¹, published by Masaryk University Press, became both the backbone of the syllabus and the principal source of materials for the students. However, in 2012, the IMPACT project² enabled further innovations opening new spaces for the teacher initiative bringing in modifications of the syllabus, creating new teaching materials (worksheets) as well as e-learning activities. Logically, these innovations went hand in hand with modified goals and objectives of the course, which in turn meant implementing new teaching methods. This, in its turn, necessitated adapting the textbook in question.

In the present contribution we would like to describe, analyse and defend some adaptation strategies undertaken with a view of making the teaching and learning processes more efficient and up-to-date. To do so, we would, firstly, like to set the textbook into context. This should provide the reader with the necessary background. Next, Kathleen Graves' adaptation criteria will be introduced, as well as her concept of adaptation cycle. Finally, a practical example will demonstrate the adaptation strategies undertaken. The aim of the present article is then to show the importance of critical approach to any material used in the classroom and stir

¹ Dastyh M., Červený, L., Najman, I. *English for laboratory technicians*. Brno: Masaryk University Press, 2007.

² For more information, see <https://impact.cjv.muni.cz/>.

debate on the advantages and disadvantages of using textbooks in particular, and adapting study material in general.

2 The textbook in the classroom

2.1 Advantages and disadvantages

Graves (2000: 174) states some advantages of using a textbook, such as providing a syllabus, security for the students, consistency in, and considerable amount of, study materials (visuals, readings, activities), saving the teacher a lot of time and energy. The disadvantages concern relevance and appropriateness of the materials, bias towards one aspect of the language, and imbalance in the typology of activities (*ibid.*).

While some of the criteria mentioned above play a key role in the decision-making process, others have less impact. The most important point, in our case, was to provide students with a clear blueprint which would make them feel safe as to where the course is heading and what they have achieved so far. The structure of Dastyh's textbook is extremely helpful in this aspect: each of the fifteen units is built following the same structure—opening text, vocabulary, technical terms definitions, grammar explanation and exercises—which provides the students with the much-needed order and gives the teacher a basis to start from. The textbook contains valuable authentic texts and materials which constitute an important backbone for the whole course. However, given the new set of goals and objectives, the textbook had to be rethought methodologically. To do this, its contents and structure needed evaluation.

2.2 Textbook evaluation

As Grant points out, 'it is clear that the type of textbook you use will have considerable influence on the way you teach and the way your students learn.' (Grant 1990: 12)³. He then goes on to make a classic distinction between, grossly speaking, two large categories of textbooks: traditional and communicative⁴. Traditional textbooks try to 'get students to learn the language as a system' (Grant 1990: 13). Their most striking characteristics are the emphasis on the forms (rather than communicative function), reading activities (rather than listening and speaking),

³ Similarly, Kathleen Graves compares the textbook to a piano claiming that 'just as a piano does not play music, a textbook does not teach language. The textbook is a stimulus or instrument for teaching and learning. Clearly, the quality of the instrument also affects the quality of the music. However, if it is in tune, even the most humble piano can produce beautiful music in the hands of a skilled musician.' (Graves 2000: 175).

⁴ It also should be pointed out that the dichotomy 'traditional vs communicative' might not be that clear-cut: traditional teaching often involves communicative elements, and communicative activities are often 'not...very communicative at all' (Nunan 1987: 144).

use of L1, stress on accuracy (rather than fluency) and focus on a syllabus (Grant 1990: 13). The other category consists of communicative textbooks which create 'opportunities for the students to use the language in the classroom, as a sort of 'halfway house' before using it in real life' (Grant 1990: 13). These textbooks are recognisable by features which include communicative functions of language, reflection of students' needs and interests, emphasis on skills and activities (mainly listening and speaking), specific definition of aims, authenticity of language of everyday life (Grant 1990: 14).

Even if it might seem difficult sometimes to draw a clear line between the traditional and communicative material, the textbook of English for laboratory technicians meets most of the criteria adduced for textbooks of the first category.⁵ The teacher, whose role in the process is crucial⁶, has to draw the line and decide on the modifications and adaptations. In its traditional approach, Dastyč's textbook places big emphasis on translation method. It is not our objective, as non-native teacher⁷, to downplay the role of translation and L1 in language teaching⁸. Quite on the contrary—often, the use of L1 in the learning process proves beneficial⁹ and students were not discouraged from using L1 when necessary¹⁰. On the other

⁵ Grant mentions four communication tests to find out if the textbook falls into the first or second category:

1 Is the language—spoken or written—unnatural? (textbookese)

2 Are the language exercises all merely textbook activities of a kind no one does in real life?

3 Do the activities only emphasise accuracy (particularly written accuracy) rather than fluency?

4 Does the course emphasise study—or practice? (Grant 1990: 16)

Penny Ur's criteria for coursebook evaluation have also been considered, but these are meant to help teacher *choose* an appropriate textbook for her course. As there is only one textbook available for the course in question with no alternative at our disposal, Ur's criteria only helped evaluate the coursebook with a view of making necessary modifications and arrangements.

⁶ According to Grant, the teacher should:

a) to assess the students' aims, and learning styles, their likes and dislikes, their strengths, and their weaknesses;

b) to decide what methods and materials are most appropriate, given the aims of the syllabus

c) to decide whether to use, adapt, replace, omit or supplement the methods and materials used in the textbook (Grant 1990: 16)

⁷ Cf Medgyes (1994), pp. 65–67.

⁸ Cf Guy Cook's *Translation in Language Teaching* (Oxford 2010) who tries to rehabilitate the TILT approach, vilified by the proponents of the direct method.

⁹ 'A flexible approach will allow the student to ask for clarification and the teacher to give it when necessary. In this way the teacher is able to monitor students' understanding, to ensure they do not feel lost, and allow them to express their own thoughts, needs, and worries. For these reasons, own-language use including translation, is likely to be far more empowering and student-centred than monolingual teaching, which is a sure way of concentrating power and control in the hands of the teacher alone.' (Cook 2010: 130)

¹⁰ As the students are at the intermediate level, the opportunities of using L1 are more varied: 'the amount of TILT for explanation may decrease, while the amount of TILT for developing translation skills and explicit knowledge may increase.' (Cook 2010: 132). Other advantageous activities are mentioned by

hand, regardless of all the advantages of using translation and L1 in teaching, changes in the goals and objectives of the course led to reducing the role of L1. Based on direct exposure to English, our approach was still far from radical language acquisition methods as promoted by Krashen (1987). Even if we tried to provide students with sufficient information input and diminish the affective filter as much as possible, our approach was more of the learning rather than the acquiring type. In summary, our goal was to include all aspects of language (all four basic skills), expose the students to everyday laboratory situations (lab videos, role-plays), make them use English actively and, last but not least, let them stop being afraid of actually using English.

3 Kathleen Graves—adapting textbooks

As mentioned earlier, teachers play a crucial role in the whole process. Sometimes they may feel wary of adapting, textbooks often being considered sacred and un-touchable (Graves 2000: 176). As written documents, they might exert paralysing power over the teacher who, by following it blindly, exposes herself to the danger of ‘deskilling’ (Apple 1986). In this way, the teacher forgoes the opportunity to make her own decisions concerning the teaching process. As Graves further claims, ‘a good textbook—one that meets students’ needs, is at the right level, has interesting materials, and so on—can be a boon to a teacher because it can free him or her to focus on what the students do with it.’ (Graves 2000: 176). At the same time, as Graves notes, textbooks are rarely written for a particular group of students, and thus adaptations are often recommended or even required.

In order to understand how to use a textbook, the teacher has to consider two aspects: internal (the content of the textbook) and external (everything other than the textbook). These two perspectives help the teacher focus on *what* she is adapting and *what* she is adapting the textbook *to*. Firstly, it is advisable to consider ‘how (the authors) conceptualised content, what the organising principle(s) is (are), how the text content is sequenced, what the objectives of each unit are, and how the units are organised.’ (Graves 2000: 176).

Taking into account Graves’ criteria, it can be said that Dastych’s textbook is conceptualised in terms of topics and associated vocabulary and grammar. The materials and exercises provide no communicative functions, though. Similarly, no pronunciation, speaking or listening activities are included. Grammar and topics are also the two organising principles of the textbook. It seems that a topic syllabus was developed first with grammar topics being incorporated subsequently. Only *exercises* focusing on specific grammar structures seem to be included, *activities* lacking completely.

Larsen-Freeman: recognising cognates, deductive application of rule, fill-in-the-blanks, memorisation and use of words in sentences (1986: 14).

Once the textbook structure is understood, the teacher can then move on to decide how she wants to adapt it. Graves conceives the adaptation process at three levels: activity, unit and syllabus. (Graves 2000: 188). Adaptation at the activity level concerns only activities with no changes in the syllabus and the order of units. At the unit level, activities can be done in a different order, modified, left out completely or added. At the most general level, new areas are added to the syllabus or parts of it eliminated. It is important to point out that adaptations are cumulative: adaptations at one level involve adaptations at another one. The choice depends on the context¹¹ and the students' needs. Thus, fulfilling Krashen's wish to lower the affective filter¹², the teacher might wish to 'develop activities that would focus on learners' needs, give some control to the students, allow for students' creativity and innovation to enhance students' sense of competence and self-worth' (Graves 2000: 188) Also, the teacher—who thus necessarily steps out of her tradition role¹³—might try to enhance what is in the textbook and by adapting at different levels make students more active learners, broadening their learner strategies, enhancing their autonomy and making them reflect on their learning (Hedge 2000: 75–106). In the course of English for laboratory technicians, the aim was then to weave the activities into the existing framework of the book based on contextual factors such as the course schedule and students' expectations. (Graves 2000: 189) At the same time, all the adaptations and modifications have to do with the teacher's belief in the importance of student participation in the learning process, which works as a motivation to provide more opportunities for interaction (Graves 2000: 191).

As far as the unit level is concerned, activities included there can be reshuffled, or sequenced differently. Like in other aspects, teachers are individual personalities and each one will decide on a different order of sequencing. As Graves puts it, 'teachers have good reasons for sequencing activities the way they do. The reasons have to do with their views of what language learners need to know and be able to do in order to practise and master different aspects of language, views of how the four skills interact and should be learned, and views of how activities build on each other.' (Graves 2000: 197)¹⁴

¹¹ In our case, the IMPACT project provided the beneficial context for innovations to be implemented.

¹² Cf Krashen (1987, pp. 30

¹³ Cf Harmer (2001) where the traditional roles of *controller*, *assessor* and *corrector* are balanced by the roles of *organiser*, *prompter* and *resource*.

¹⁴ One of the important aspects of every textbook is its hidden curriculum which might be defined as '(the) views which are embedded in the aspects of language addressed in the textbook, who and what are portrayed in the visuals, readings, and dialogues, and how students are asked to work with the material.' (Graves 2000: 200). As will become clear from the practical example, the book evinces certain views on how the students are supposed to learn their English, views which came into conflict with the adaptation aims, mainly in terms of the role students should play in the learning process: 'Being clear about your own beliefs about the role you want your learners to take in their learning, and about the skills and

To sum up, the teacher tackling a textbook should be aware of her 'beliefs and understandings, the givens of (her) context, and what (she) know(s) about students and their needs.' (Graves 2000: 202)¹⁵ Also, and importantly, it is vital to bear in mind Graves' concept of adaptation cycle: any activity, unit or syllable that has been adapted goes through a necessary stage of re-evaluation in terms of efficacy, appropriateness and conformity with the goals and objectives of the course¹⁶.

4 Practical example

Having considered some theoretical aspects of adapting a textbook, in the following part we will attempt at a practical demonstration with a view of showing some possibilities offered by the book of English for laboratory technicians. Respecting Graves' division of the adaptation process into three layers, attention will first be paid to adaptations at the syllabus level. This should bring us to the unit adaptation level which will be dealt with together with specific activities.

4.1 Syllabus level

Not many changes have been made in the syllabus, as the textbook—the backbone of the course—was kept to, at least structurally. Some new areas have been added, given the students' needs: topics such as first-aid, haematology and biochemistry classes came up. None of the existing areas was left out completely, as all topics included in the textbook are equally important for the students.

4.2 Unit and activity level

It is at the unity and activity level that teachers can realize most of their beliefs and understandings. The textbook in question is a golden adaptation opportunity for a teacher who believes in students' active participation in the learning process, who wants her students to cooperate and discover for themselves, a teacher who

strategies you want them to learn, can help you to be aware of the beliefs underlying the texts you use. Your ability to adapt the textbook so that it aligns with your beliefs and purposes will depend on clarity about those beliefs and your own role, and comfort with bringing to the fore and dealing with issues that are ideologically based.' (Graves 2000: 201).

¹⁵ The givens of your context: e.g. institutional latitude with respect to adapting a text, schedule, examination system, number and level of students, time of day. (Graves 2000: 203) Your beliefs and understandings about how people learn languages: e.g. through interaction or introspection, by using all four skills, by identifying problems and proposing solutions. Your students' needs and interests: e.g. their level, whether they will use the language in specific contexts, whether they have certain expectations about how they will be taught. (ibid.)

¹⁶ The plan you have drawn up in the preceding investigation is only the first part in the cycle of adapting a textbook. This follows the same cycle as course development: **planning** how to teach with the text, **teaching** (all the while adjusting as you plan and teach), **replanning** based on evaluating the teaching and the text, **reteaching** with the text. (Graves 2000: 204)

is ready to step aside and make room for students' initiative. Ideally, this section will demonstrate this modified approach to teacher's role by displaying some of the changes implemented when dealing with specific exercises. As both levels of unit and activity adaptation interpenetrate considerably, they will be dealt with together.

At the unit level, the sequencing of the sections of individual units was considered as part of the reconceptualising process. This concerned mainly the opening reading section of the units followed by one-to-one English-Czech vocabulary lists. Other activities were often added and still others, mainly translation exercises, were left out completely, and systematically. In the following, a practical example of the adaptation technique will be described.

The original layout of Unit 5, focusing on osmometry, presents the students with a text and a subsequent list of English-Czech vocabulary. As there are no exercises or activities accompanying the text, it may be presumed that its purpose is to be translated using the words attached. The teacher's goal in adapting this activity could then be to activate the students, stopping them from using English passively. This effort has to do with the students' role and future needs—rather than becoming experts in translation, students will probably need other skills, such as being able to use different reading techniques, speak to their English-speaking partners, write reports or research articles.

The first step was to think of a lead-in activity which, in this case, was a short brain-storming session where students were asked to list any issues or vocabulary relating to the topic. The words were listed on the whiteboard and the concept of key words explained to the students. Next, always with closed books, students were asked to listen to the teacher who went on to read the opening text. The task was for the students to write down any word(s) they consider as key to the topic in question. The text was read twice, then the students compared their lists in pairs. Finally, a mind-map was created on the whiteboard using all or most of the words suggested by students. As a follow-up, students were given the text, but in a modified form with blanks. They were asked to fill in the gaps with the key words. The text was then followed by a set of true-false statements for the students to decide¹⁷.

As can be seen, students are led to be active (brainstorming) and aware of various learning strategies (key words, group work). Listening and speaking skills are put forward, outbalancing the passive reading-translation part of the class. Writing, which previously included L1, is restricted to L2—students are supposed to complete the text by English vocabulary. Finally, one reading technique (scanning) is

¹⁷ This activity has been inspired by Deller, Sheelagh. Price, Christine. (2007). *Teaching other subjects through English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

put to practice, as students look for particular information to complete a task. In this way, the modified goals and objectives of the course can be fulfilled.

5 Conclusion

Not always are ESP courses taught by a textbook written specifically for a group of students. This, however, was the case of laboratory technician students thanks to the care and effort of MM. Dastych, Červený and Najman. Their coursebook, published in 2007, was a major contribution, unparalleled so far in this field, to ESP textbook resources. Neatly structured, the book is a useful tool for the students who have to cope with amounts of specific knowledge. In this respect, the publication is invaluable, providing the students with a unique source of information, both lexical and grammatical, all stored in one place and easy to find.

In 2012, the IMPACT project enabled major modifications to be brought in and made the teacher face a question of cardinal importance, namely to what degree it is important to use the existing textbook. Rather than discarding the textbook completely, adaptation strategy was opted for.

The present article attempted to trace the adaptation process in three main lines. Firstly, the use of textbooks in classrooms was considered and two major textbook categories briefly outlined. Then the coursebook of English for laboratory technicians was analysed in the light of Graves' adaptation strategies. Finally, one example was provided to illustrate the main points. The aim of the article was to describe the learner-centred adaptation strategy adopted in one particular case as well as to demonstrate that the teacher does not have to rely completely on a written book if she or he wants to deliver classes where the textbook stops being the focal point and the spotlight shifts towards the students themselves.

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