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In Defense of Textbooks Terry Said Extends on Recent TESL-L Discussion

In a recent on-line discussion on TESL-L, posters discussed the merits and demerits of using textbooks in their teaching. Like some other posters, I was also aware, yet remain surprised, that some new teachers coming out of university have been told that they shouldn't use textbooks at all; that they should be creative and make all their own materials. I think such advice to new teachers is ill-advised. While creating materials in university classes may have been a fun and useful learning activity, the reality is that during the first year of teaching most teachers are overwhelmed by the amount of work they have. What teachers in training need to learn is how to evaluate and supplement the textbook they are using.

In my opinion, the problems with textbooks are not the books themselves, but how they are chosen. Most ESL textbooks are written by ESL teachers—they're not some evil plot by publishers. (Though new unchanged editions may be!) All too often textbooks are incorrectly chosen for the program or class they'll be used in so that the textbook doesn't do what it needs to do. Unfortunately, a lot of teachers don't have the option of choosing the textbook. A textbook can do many good things. If the textbooks are appropriately chosen for the program, it can keep teachers focused on what the overall purpose of the program is. It can also give an idea of what students have studied at different levels. It can offer teaching suggestions and supplements so that teachers can expand their knowledge and activities base. For the above reasons, I believe that even seasoned teachers should give their textbooks a chance.

However, if you are stuck with an inappropriate textbook, then I'd still recommend you go through and see what you can salvage. I think this is especially important if students have been required to buy the book. Nothing annoys me more than to spend \$80 on a book, and then to never use it. Of course, you're going to supplement with your own materials that have proved useful in the past. If possible, give feedback to the person(s) who chose the textbook. They have no way of knowing it isn't working unless they hear that.

New and seasoned teachers should learn how to choose textbooks. If you have the opportunity to choose a textbook, look through ESL publishers' catalogs for books that appear to meet the goals of the class. Most publishers now have online catalogs that let you look at the table of contents and example pages. You can also ask other teachers for their recommendations. You can often do this at on-line listservs such as TESL-L. If you attend a conference, make sure to stop by the publishers' tables. Once you have narrowed down your selection, order exam copies from the publishers. Which (if any) exam copy matches best with what you want to achieve in your class? Is it the right level? Does it have activities that you like, and that students can learn from? Does it have supplemental materials that can be used by you and the students? I also believe when possible that a good student textbook should have enough information in it so that students can continue to use it as a reference as they improve their English. It is possible if you are teaching an English for specific purposes class that you may not be able to find an appropriate text. Therefore, there are times when you will have to invent the wheel. But I think new teachers are being given an unfair piece of pedagogy when they are told they should not use a textbook. Teachers (especially new ones) should not be made to feel guilty following the examples of experienced ESL teachers who have written textbooks. In my opinion, if teachers are so overwhelmed developing new materials, then they run the risk of burnout and not so good teaching.

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