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Prof. Lucrecia D’Andrea de Mirande
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Type of Presentation:
40 Minute Paper

Paper Title:
The textbook in the ELT classroom:
A case study in Tucumán, Argentina.

Abstract:
This paper is intended to investigate what role is assigned to the textbook by ELT professionals in San Miguel de Tucumán, Argentina, whether it is considered an agent of change or a script dictating the course of action.

The findings offered, which derive from the analysis of teachers’ opinions about textbooks, express the reasons that explain and, in a way, justify the role assigned to the textbook in a complex socio-political and economic context.
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Summary:
Within the field of English language teaching, the textbook has been considered a universal requisite to ensure the success of the teaching and learning processes. In fact, the implementation of the educational reform in Argentina has witnessed the explosion of textbook supply intended to meet the demands of the new curricula. In this context, the textbook emerges as an effective agent of change that promises to relieve teachers of the burden of opening new paths. In spite of this promising role, the textbook has historically been criticised on the grounds that it seems to have taken on the teacher's responsibility to decide how the teaching process should develop.

In view of this context, it would be certainly interesting to investigate what role is assigned to the textbook by ELT teachers in San Miguel de Tucumán, whether it is considered as a crucial agent of change or it is a script dictating the course of action to follow in the classroom. Thus, a small-scale research has been carried out in order to find out how textbooks are judged.

The present research paper is a case study restricted to the specific interpretation of the data collected. Such data comes from a set of questions...
responded by 52 in-service teachers, the majority of whom are graduate professionals in the area of ELT.

The survey consists of a set of open and closed questions related to the subjects’ opinions about aspects such as textbook content, organisation, presentation, etc. In addition to the data in the questionnaire, some yearly plans designed by the subjects are studied and compared with the table of contents found in textbooks.

The findings offered, though limited in scope as the information processed is self-reported data provided by a small number of teachers, may represent a significant contribution to the knowledge of the variables affecting the ELT quality in our community.

The findings obtained show that the ELT professionals in our survey assign a leading role to the classroom textbook, actually between 50% and 70% of class time is devoted to tasks suggested by the course book. The remaining lesson time is dedicated to work based on supplementary material of different types. In addition, the confrontation of some yearly plans with the respondents’ claims show that there is some discrepancy between what the teachers say and what they actually do. It is this lack of correspondence between the respondents’ self-reports and reality that points to the need of further research in this area to corroborate the findings in this study.

Yet, the most valuable finding may lie in the analysis of the varied number of reasons that explain and, in a way justify, the role assigned to the textbook in a complex socio-economic and political context. To conclude, the paper appeals to writers, publishers and teachers within the field of ELT to work co-operatively to design textbooks appropriate to the needs, demands and features of each region.
Introduction

Within the field of English language teaching, the textbook has been considered a universal requisite to ensure the success of the teaching and learning processes. In fact, the implementation of the educational reform in Argentina has witnessed the explosion of textbook supply intended to meet the demands of the new curricula. In this context, the textbook emerges as an effective agent of change that promises to relieve teachers of the burden of opening new paths. In spite of this promising role, the textbook has historically been criticised on the grounds that it seems to have taken on the teacher’s responsibility to decide how the teaching process should develop.

This paper is intended to investigate what role is assigned to the textbook by ELT professionals in Tucumán, Argentina; whether it is considered an agent of change or a script dictating the course of action. The findings offered, which derive from the analysis of teachers’ opinions about textbooks, express the reasons that explain and, in a way, justify the role assigned to the textbook in a complex socio-political and economic context.

On textbooks
Textbooks have evolved parallel to the evolution of the ELT methods, thus in the first half of the 20th century, a typical coursebook included grammar rules, conjugations, vocabulary lists and translation exercises. Then, in the 50s’ the textbook came to include a narrative followed by questions, idiomatic expressions, grammar with different parts of the speech and conversion exercises. In the 60’s and early 70’s, dialogues and situations were introduced followed by a rigorous practice of structures and some exercises intended to develop the four skills.

With time, the textbook has become a medium to foster communication throughout activities aiming at the development and integration of both productive and receptive skills.

Together with the traditional sections devoted to grammar and lexis, the newer textbooks present sample language in context with information about real people and real facts. They have also incorporated colourful images, photographs, pronunciation exercises, games, songs, and puzzles. In fact, the traditional coursebook has been replaced by a package consisting of the students’ book, the practice book, audio and video cassettes plus the teachers’ book with:

... additional instructional and assessment resources such as educational objectives, daily lesson plans, chapter and unit reviews, chapter tests, practice worksheets, motivational activities, follow-up exercises and so on (Airasian 1995:291)

Although the latest versions of the coursebook seem to provide everything teachers and students need, the materials published these days are intended to cater for a wide variety of students, teachers and classroom contexts. Bell (1998:118), a well-known materials writer, admits that this sort of textbook is limited in its applicability. Considering the large number of contexts books are intended for, it is obvious that international materials can never fully meet the unique needs and readiness of every student and
teacher. Another limitation is that most materials writers follow their own intuitions usually informed by their experience of what is important to teach and learn a foreign language. Yet, not all writers proceed in the same way. Tomlinson (1998:4) confesses he knows some textbook writers who actually “clone” successful features of popular books to design their own materials.

Taken to the classroom the textbook may play two basic roles, either a prescription about what and how to teach or a tool which only has life and meaning if mediated by a teacher. If teachers rely too heavily on the textbook, many adverse effects may occur. Teachers give up the opportunity to be creative, follow the same lesson pattern and become technicians who fail to adapt their lessons to their particular students and contexts. While teachers no longer participate in the daily decision-making about classroom events, students get bored and demotivated by the repetitiveness of the teaching practice. Conversely, if the textbook is to be considered a tool, then it turns into a useful resource that facilitates teaching and fosters learning. For this to happen, teachers need to make the compromise that they will adapt the ready-made materials to their specific situation and that they will supplement the coursebook with additional material adequate for a particular group of individual students.

The Study

In view of what has been said, it is interesting to investigate what role is assigned to the textbook by ELT teachers in San Miguel de Tucumán, whether it is considered as a crucial agent of change or if it is a script dictating the course of action to follow in the classroom. Thus, a small-scale research has been carried out in order to find out how textbooks are judged.

The present study is based on the information coming from a survey administered to fifty-two subjects, teaching either at primary or secondary schools. The majority of the subjects are university graduates, about one-third
of them are teachers graduated at tertiary level institutions, and only three subjects out of the total are in-service teachers without certification.

The survey presented to the teachers consists of eleven items: six open-ended questions where the subjects are asked to give their opinions, and five multiple-choice questions where they are expected to choose one or more given options. The questionnaire is intended to require the respondents to express their views about aspects such as textbook content, organisation, presentation, and supplementary material. At the time when the survey was administered, the fifty-two teachers were together about to start a teacher training course. When required to complete the survey for the present study, the teachers willingly agreed to do so. It took them about 20-25 minutes to answer the questions, very few of which were not responded. In addition to the data in the questionnaire, some yearly plans designed by the subjects are studied and compared with the table of contents found in textbooks.

Results

In the first question of the survey administered to the subjects, they are asked to mention what the characteristics of a good textbook are (see table 1.). To this question, many respondents (60.67%) indicate that a good textbook should have updated topics which should be true to life, as well as closely related to students’ ages, interests, likes, needs, and socio-cultural background. Others (42.59%) express the need for a balance between grammatical and communicative activities to practice the four skills with a good amount of listening and reading material. Some teachers (28.70%) attach importance to the textbook layout, which, in their opinion should include motivating, attractive and colourful pictures, appropriate to students’ ages. Other characteristics mentioned, are good organisation, clarity in the presentation of language items, and the inclusion of contextualised practice,
situational units, authentic material, evaluation activities, all of which should respond to the communicative approach.

In the second question, the respondents are required to point out the characteristics of a bad textbook (see table 2). Half of the teachers surveyed (50.5%) respond that a bad textbook is so because it lacks adequate organisation, it is too structured, it includes long units with a repetitive format, it has a poor design with few unattractive pictures. A similar number of teachers (48.1%) state that what may spoil a book are topics which are boring, unsuitable, too far from reality, unappealing to students, inadequate to their interests, or devoid of cultural information. Some respondents (42.9%) criticise grammar-centred books, the excessive amount of grammar per unit, and its inadequacy to the students’ level. As regards reading material, a few teachers (23.1%) think that long, artificial, unrealistic texts make a textbook inappropriate. A similar number of respondents reject books that propose mechanistic, limited, repetitive activities which are too guided or ungraded. Similarly, few teachers object to books which focus only on one skill, present too much or too little vocabulary, or those which are too expensive.

In question three, the respondents are asked to indicate the type of organisation principle they prefer in choosing a textbook (see table 3). Here, three alternatives are offered: topics, situations and grammar. Half of the subjects surveyed (50%) prefer a topic-based textbook while some others (29%) would rather have a situational approach. The rest (21%) still prefer the linguistic aspect.

Next, question number four asks the respondents what they find a textbook useful for (see table 4). Here, there is no vast majority of subjects choosing one of the many answers offered. The most salient reasons for a textbook to be considered useful are the following: first, that a book is useful to motivate students and meet their expectations; then, that it is useful to facilitate teaching, to guide teachers’ practice and to help them in their planning task. Another aspect to consider is that teachers seem not to be
compelled by their schools to choose a particular kind of textbook so that they are free to make their own choices.

The fifth question enquires if planning is based on the content proposed by the textbook, or if it is based on the contents dictated by the institutions, or by both (see table 5). With respect to this question, half the respondents (55%) say they base their planning on those contents proposed by the textbook, while the remaining subjects (36%) say that their institutions dictate the course contents.

In question number six, the respondents have to indicate the percentage of a typical lesson devoted to the activities suggested by the course textbook (see table 6). At this point, the vast majority of respondents say that the percentage devoted to bookwork ranges between 50% and 70%.

Question seven asks the respondents to indicate what the five most important areas in a textbook are out of the following alternatives: writing, reading, listening, speaking, vocabulary, games, pronunciation, songs, spelling and poems (see table 7). The results show that the respondents give more or less equal importance to the four skills, followed by the area of vocabulary. Less importance is given to games, pronunciation, songs, spelling, and poems.

The eighth question is a follow-up intended to find out what sort of material teachers supplement their course books with (see table 8). Even though the range of answers provided is vast, the preference of the teachers regarding the activities implemented to supplement their books is oriented towards the use of games and songs. Other sources of supplementary material are texts providing extra info, the Internet, CD-ROM programmes, videos, grammar exercises and literary texts (plays, short stories, poems, readers, etc.).

In the following question the respondents have to judge the illustrations in a textbook (see table 9). Here, the opinion of more than a half of the informants is that the illustrations in a textbook have a positive influence on
students’ motivation. On the other hand, one third of the teachers consider the illustrations in texts to be useful.

Question ten requires that the teachers make explicit the type of content they look for in reading passages (see table 10). What they expect of textbooks is really varied but the vast majority care about the quality of the topics chosen; these should be interesting, motivating, meaningful, updated, relevant to students’ reality, according to their ages and related to real life situations. Other types of content they prefer include news, humour, music, films, computers, values, natural science, famous people, cultural differences, social themes, environmental issues, and controversial matters.

Finally, question eleven focuses on the advantages and disadvantages that the respondents may find in teaching a class without a textbook (see table 11). The salient advantage pointed out by the teachers is the freedom and flexibility to make decisions. Another important advantage is that not having a textbook allows variety in relation to the topics, activities, and material selected. In addition, some respondents say that not having a textbook allows them to adapt the lesson content to the students’ needs and interests. Other advantages proposed are the possibility creating new activities, encouraging motivation, using their imagination, offering a more balanced practice of skills, sequencing the content, working at the students’ pace, using materials other than textbooks which means not spending money on books.

On the other hand, the main disadvantage that the respondents mention is that the preparation of classes without the help of a textbook becomes time and energy consuming (see table 12). Other disadvantages have to do with the difficulty to organise the content and to focus on a specific topic; the money needed for the photocopies students may use is also mentioned as a drawback. A smaller percentage express that not having a textbook results in boring classes and makes both teachers and students feel less confident, demotivated and without a sense of order.
DISCUSSION

The findings offered, though limited in scope as the information processed is self-reported data provided by a small number of teachers, may represent a significant contribution to the knowledge of the variables affecting the ELT quality in our community.

Perhaps taking into account an ideal textbook that meets all their demands, the respondents say that the necessary characteristics for a textbook to be considered good have to do with the type of topics, the quality of the layout and the need for a balanced approach. It can be noted from the answers that CLT is present in the teachers’ concern about the value of topics as a potential for communication and in their request for balance between grammar practice and communicative activities as well as between the treatment the receptive and the productive skills. This need for a balanced approach is reinforced when the respondents affirm that the most important areas in a textbook are those dealing with the four skills. The fact that the respondents attribute much importance to the layout may be related to the power of visual images as a means to motivate and involve students in the learning task. With respect to the skills, it is unexpected that the teachers should not ask for a book which emphasises the receptive skills given that in our EFL context the textbook is an important source of input. Also, the absence of a request for vocabulary as an important section of a good textbook may imply that the lexical aspect of the English language is neglected, or that the teachers think that vocabulary treatment is implicit in the development of topics.

When asked to describe a bad textbook, the teachers may have resorted to existing textbooks they have already used. The information collected indicates once again the teachers’ concern about the importance of topics and layout. Together with the worry about topics, there is a strong
criticism of the excessive amount of grammar and the use of it as the
organising principle. With respect to reading material, teachers worry about
length, authenticity, or lack of sufficient exercises. In sum, the features
assigned to a bad textbook describe a traditional book with a mechanistic and
repetitive format that may belong to the times of audiolingualism or even the
grammar-translation method. The coherence between the positive
characteristics of a good book and the negative ones of a bad text show that
the teachers surveyed adhere to a more communicative approach to teaching.
This adherence is also evident in the type of textbook organisation they want
since the majority of the subjects prefer more communicative organising
principles such as topics and situations.

As regards the function of textbooks in EFL classrooms in San Miguel
de Tucumán, it can be said that the roles played by books are to motivate
students and meet their expectations, also to facilitate teaching, guide
teachers’ practice and help them in their planning task. Another aspect to
consider is that the teachers are not compelled by their schools to choose a
particular kind of textbook so that they are free to make their own choices. In
a word, the textbook role is so important that half or more of the class time is
devoted to the activities proposed by it. During the remaining class time the
teachers resort to supplementary material, mainly games and songs. Other
sources of extra material are texts providing further information, the Internet,
CD-ROM programmes, videos, grammar exercises and literary texts (plays,
short stories, poems, readers).

The importance assigned to the development of the four skills together
with the list of supplementary materials above coincide with the ranking of the
most important areas of a textbook: writing, reading, listening, speaking,
vocabulary, games, pronunciation, songs, spelling and poems.

Just as one of the most important roles of the textbook is that it should
motivate students, the teachers’ demand for content in reading passages is
such a variety of topics that it is clear that motivation is a constant worry in
teachers. The vast majority of respondents look for topics which are interesting, meaningful, updated, according to the students’ ages, relevant to their realities, and related to real life situations.

The analysis of the disadvantages of teaching without a textbook listed by the respondents would suggest that they are very much concerned about their professional performance and less concerned about the learners. This could be inferred from the large number of answers saying that, without textbooks, teachers would have to invest a lot of time and energy to design activities and to make decisions on content, grading and sequencing. It can also be observed that some teachers fear that, despite their work and effort, they might not be able to carry out such a complex task successfully, and thus they might lose track. In addition, the teachers comment that without a textbook they would have to resort to the use of photocopies, which in itself brings about many other problems: teachers are left without a vital source of motivation, and this contributes to students’ boredom and lack of interest. It is the case that students usually forget, lose or ignore the photocopies perhaps because they are not as appealing as the colourful layout of a textbook.

The consideration of the advantages of teaching without a textbook listed by the subjects describes the performance of an ideal professional who is free, flexible, creative, imaginative, and ready to provide a variety of activities as well as to adapt the lessons to their students. Besides, the work done by this professional relieves parents from the burden of having to spend money on books.

Confronting the advantages and disadvantages, it is surprising that the total number of subjects surveyed declare to be using a textbook but yet believe that teaching without a textbook allows them to be highly qualified professionals. What may be hypothesised here is that the disadvantages represented by the absence of a course book are perceived as more in need of attention.
Even though very few respondents give importance to the textbook as a useful tool to aid planning, more than a half of them say they actually base their planning on contents proposed by textbooks. This incoherence may suggest that the teachers do not say what it is that they actually do. Given this lack of correspondence in the answers, a set of ten yearly course plans are observed and contrasted with the textbooks used by the respective teachers. Very interestingly, the totality of the analysed plans follows exactly the table of contents of the coursebooks involved. Here, it may be hypothesised either that the teachers do not admit that the responsibility of planning is not theirs, or that they find no fault in replicating the list of contents in the textbooks.

CONCLUSION

The respondents are well-aware that no textbook can be the total answer to language teaching needs, consequently they assume it is their responsibility to supplement the textbooks with other type of material to meet the needs of a specific group of learners. It is clear in the respondents’ views that the aim of ELT in secondary schools is to help students communicate in English rather than study or analyse the language itself, which suggests that their teaching style is more updated than the traditional grammar-centred approaches.

The information collected through this study does not support the initial statements claimed by the literature: that the course book may be either a crucial agent of change or a script dictating the course of action. Yet, the analysis of the survey gives enough evidence to infer what role would be assigned to the textbook in San Miguel de Tucumán, Argentina. In this context the course book appears as a provider of topics to develop communicative competence, a source of motivation for the students, as a provider of interesting input, and as a guide to organise the teaching process.
The fact that the book emerges as a source of motivation is not unexpected since the students in the classes surveyed are mostly adolescents at secondary school who never seem to be appeased with any particular kind of tasks or content.

Less surprising is the teachers’ perception of the textbook as a guide, considering the restrictions of our context: badly-paid taxi-teachers in charge of a great number of classes with little and thinly-spread instruction time. In this socio-political and economic context teachers seem to put heavy pressure on textbooks in that their role should be to facilitate the teaching task, in terms of money, time and effort.

Although the answers corresponding to the various questions support each other building up a coherent whole, there is one area where the teachers’ self-report does not match their actions. The observation of the actual yearly plans designed by some of the teachers reveal that their plans replicate the table of contents of their textbooks though the respondents say that the role of the book is only an aid for planning. This discrepancy between what the teachers say and what they actually do suggests that further research is needed to confront the results obtained and the data coming from the direct observation of classes.

Given that the textbook plays such an important role as a provider of motivation and class content, it would be desirable that both writers and publishers should carry out genuine research together with teachers so that they can produce materials teachers want to teach with. Perhaps, a compromise should be made among writers, publishers and teachers to come to an agreement on the choice of EFL textbooks to meet the changing needs of our learners. To achieve this goal, ideal though not impossible to accomplish, it is fair that teachers should be given a voice in the complex task of selecting the appropriate content to design materials relevant to each context.
REFERENCE


BIBLIOGRAPHY


Biographical Note
Prof. Lucrecia D’Andrea de Mirande is Associate Professor of English Didactics at “Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad Nacional de Tucumán.” She holds an MA degree in Linguistics – TESOL from the University of Surrey, England. At present she is a consultant of the “Proyecto Polos de Desarrollo” del “Profesorado de Lenguas Vivas de Salta.”

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Prof. Sara I. López is Associate Professor of English Grammar II at “Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad Nacional de Tucumán” and coordinator of English at “Colegio Nueva Concepción.” She holds an MA degree in Applied Linguistics from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, USA.
TABLE 1
Characteristics of a good textbook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Balance</th>
<th>Layout</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Authentic Mat</th>
<th>Grammar</th>
<th>Exercises</th>
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TABLE 2
Characteristics of a bad textbook

<table>
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<th>Percentage</th>
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TABLE 3
Textbook Organization

<table>
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<th>Percentage</th>
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TABLE 4
Textbook usefulness

- MOTIVATION
- TASK FACILITATOR
- GUIDE
- MEET EXPECTATIONS
- PLANNING
- SCHOOL REQUIREMENTS
- CONFIDENCE

TABLE 5
Basis for Planning
TABLE 6

Time devoted to textbook activities

TABLE 7

Most Important Areas in a Textbook
TABLE 10
Type of content in reading passages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interest</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interesting Topics</td>
<td>35%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Values/Culture</td>
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<td>Famous People</td>
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<td>Authentic Material</td>
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<td>Social Issues</td>
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TABLE 11
Advantages of teaching without a textbook

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<th>Advantage</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<td>Flexibility/Freedom</td>
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<td>Variety of Topics</td>
<td>35%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students' Interests/Needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disadvantages of teaching without textbook</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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<td>Time Consuming</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>Less Motivation</td>
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<td>Difficulties for Teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of Resources</td>
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