

Book Review: The Construction of English: Culture, Consumerism and Promotion in the ELT Global Coursebook

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This article reviews J. Gray's 2010 book, The Construction of English: Culture, Consumerism and Promotion in the ELT Global Coursebook, published in the UK by Palgrave Macmillan for £49.88.

The Construction of English: Culture, Consumerism and Promotion in the ELT Global Coursebook examines the multifaceted nature of coursebook construction: from grammar and syntax to market forces. Gray argues that coursebooks created for export are “cultural artifacts” where authors, working within the constraints of publishers, imbue them with what are considered marketable values and therefore position them as “language as a commodity”. In this sense, Gray argues that English has been “McDonaldized” in an industry where a standardized product is not appropriate for everyone. This book will be of particular interest to language teachers who select materials and create their own, as well as language teacher educators.

After detailing the premise of the book, as indicated above, Chapter 2 surveys the literature with a focus on reviewing how culture and language are connected and used in the English as a Second Language (ESL) world. Chapter 3 draws heavily on the “circuit of culture” model created by Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Macky, and Negus (1997) to produce a framework for evaluating the four coursebooks which Gray selected, largely based on their high sales figures. Chapters 4 and 5 apply the framework to the coursebooks, exploring a range of issues including how artwork is used to associate English with success, the positive bias Received Pronunciation (RP) often receives and how gender roles and ethnicity have evolved in coursebooks to the point where they may now seem unrealistic, which may elide any polemic issues associated

with them. Chapter 6 attempts to substantiate the issues raised in the coursebook evaluation by analyzing guidelines given to authors, reporting on interviews conducted with publishers, and through theory by reviewing the literature on a number of issues within society such as consumerism and promotional culture. Chapter 7 reports the findings from interviews conducted with a number of ESL teachers to explore any positive or negative facets of coursebooks which are important to them. In Chapter 8, Gray provides a number of recommendations: the need for language teacher education to spend time reviewing the kinds of issues highlighted, the fact that English needs to be “pluralized”, and finally he offers some ideas on how coursebooks could be more localized to fit their context of use.

This book astutely draws attention to coursebook content, beyond the surface language, that teachers are inadvertently disseminating to their students; e.g., the inclusion of more ethnic minorities and women in positions of power glosses over the issues of racism and sexism. Many teachers or publishers highlight the inclusion of more women and minorities as a positive, which it can be, but Gray importantly explicates that this commodifies feminism and multiculturalism. These findings are significant because as Gray notes, these issues and others such as consumerism and artwork are unlikely to be covered by short training courses in the materials design and evaluation sections. Gray places teachers as the primary consumers of coursebooks, therefore when most teachers or

institutions choose a coursebook, pragmatic considerations such as cost, language variety (British, American, etc.), the number of exercises, how interactive it is, and what teaching approach it reflects (e.g., communicative language teaching) are most likely to be germane, while the issues Gray highlights are likely to be overlooked. Furthermore, as a growing number of English language teachers are non-native speakers, the issue of power relations between “English culture”, those cultures on the outer circle (Kachru, 1985), and the culture of those students learning English as a lingua franca is coming more to the forefront of English Language Teaching (ELT) research. Gray’s book argues that the cultural capital transmitted through ESL teaching is no longer an ancillary issue to the language itself.

While the majority of the research was carried out with great care and precision, from creating an evaluative framework to devising the format for interviewing ESL teachers, some aspects of the methodology if conducted differently may have yielded different or more enlightening results. Firstly, the interviews with the publishers were taken from an earlier study and therefore some of the findings from the more recent application of the framework to the coursebooks could not be substantiated with these data. This means that some explanations were sought entirely in the literature and as a result some conclusions are based purely on a theoretical perspective. Secondly, the interviews with the ESL teachers drew entirely from teachers in Barcelona. Although these were experienced teachers, some of whom may have taught in a number of countries, this has the result of drawing heavily from one context. Finally, only general English coursebooks are examined, which excludes possible findings from other genres of ELT.

Many salient issues are raised within global coursebook construction; however, very little empirical data are used to determine what effect, if any, these actually have on student learning. Though little mention is made of this in the book, and obviously not a primary goal of the author, this issue may be the most relevant to language teachers. Furthermore, as indicated by Gray, the views of the students themselves are an important facet of these issues but are not covered in this publication.

Gray’s book illustrates how coursebooks are concomitantly innovating with ELT philosophy, but can be influenced more by market forces than educational paradigms. The socially con-

structed (i.e., market constructed) nature of ELT coursebooks can have an impact on students and teachers within and beyond the classroom. Research into ELT materials and coursebook development, and perceptions thereof, is greatly enhanced by Gray’s book. What is more, Gray gives educators a framework to reflect on and determine what, if any, are the “hidden economic and ideological dimensions” (Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1992) of a coursebook.

References

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