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ESL MiniConference

The ESL Teacher as Relevance Engineer Are Textbooks Really So Necessary?

Our faculty is in the middle of what we call “Curriculum Development Week.” At the end of each semester, we get together to reflect on our teaching and program policies and look ahead to what changes need to be made. It’s three straight days of meetings, so it’s not exactly fun, but it is useful.

Today, we got on the subject of textbooks. The original topic was curriculum revision, but we got a little sidetracked. Like, a 90-minute derailment about how most of us love, but some of us vehemently hate textbooks. If you’re wondering, I fall into the “vehemently hate” category.



Ashley Green

So, why do teachers love textbooks? Well, textbooks provide a lot of structure to a class. And, I think that’s it. I am not trying to belittle their argument at all: textbooks do provide a lot of structure to a class. I also think that’s really important. I team taught once with a teacher who basically just played a lot of games with his students and called it teaching. The students had fun, but whether they learned anything was arguable.

All the same, I hate textbooks. More specifically, I hate ESL textbooks targeted for adult learners. And here’s why:

- 1. The textbook never quite fits the class. I always wind up with a textbook slightly above or below the level of the students in the class. Textbooks are created to serve as general an audience as possible, so it’s inevitable that they will not perfectly fit any class. I, on the other hand, can bring in my own materials which will suit my class much better.
- 2. The themes are generic, and often cheesy. Every textbook has a chapter on family, sports, and hobbies. Students learn useless vocabulary like “stamp collecting” or “parasailing.” Look, I’ll admit this

is not true of all textbooks. But I've been burned a few too many times.

- 3. Dear god, the audio files. Ah, the thrilling conversations between Yoshi and Jose, who both speak perfect American English, despite being from Japan and Argentina, respectively. They talk about their exciting weekend plans: Yoshi wants to go hiking, but Jose prefers to watch a movie. Compromise: hiking on Saturday and movie on Sunday!
- 4. The language is inauthentic. The reading textbook teaches students how to infer the meaning of unknown vocabulary from context clues. A useful skill, to be sure, but the textbook kindly provides ample context clues, making the definition painfully obvious. In reality, most texts we read don't give us such helpful clues.

Writing textbooks teach students how to write various kinds of essays: definition essays, comparison/contrast essays, classification essays. Do you know how many classification essays I wrote in college? Not one. Ever. My "favorite" writing textbook provides a sample essay about the metaphorical power of an hourglass (Time is slipping away...). In what universe do the textbook writers live that my students will have to wax poetic for five pages about an hourglass?

Listening textbooks provide lecture samples that include "authentic English," with the perfectly-rehearsed coughs, laughs and filler words. These "mistakes" don't sound like mistakes. They sound like they were done on purpose, which they were.

- 5. Textbooks are boring. I should qualify that statement by saying that textbooks are boring to me. I find them inherently dull, even the decent ones. I don't know how to make them interesting, so I don't like using them. I do, however, like the YouTube videos I find or the interesting articles published in the school newspaper. I like the content that my students generate in the class, when a simple discussion of American education turns into a week's worth of writing class lesson plans.

Now, let's be clear, I don't want to devalue what textbook writers do. What they do is important and really, really hard. I wouldn't want to do it. I wouldn't be any good at it. And I totally get why people cling to textbooks. It's not just the teachers, students get a little freaked out when you don't use a textbook. "How can I be learning if there's no book?" But textbooks serve a valuable purpose. For some teachers, they provide a jumping off point, a framework to build an excellent class. That's great.

What I find frustrating is the implication that because I don't use a textbook, I don't teach as well. No offense to the textbook writers/fans,

but I think I teach a hell of a lot better without a textbook. Is it more work? Yes, a lot more work. And I enjoy it. Because I'm weird. But also because I know that I'm giving my students the best class I can. And isn't that really everyone's goal?

Article by Ashley Green

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