

Book Review: Teaching Materials and the Roles of EFL/ESL Teachers: Practice and Theory

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Teaching Materials and the Roles of EFL/ESL Teachers: Practice and Theory by I. McGrath (2013). London/New York: Bloomsbury.

In a professional world signaled by the fast and invasive growth of marketed materials, Ian McGrath's (2013) book, *Teaching Materials and the Roles of EFL/ESL Teachers: Practice and Theory*, examines the roles and types of agency that teachers may exercise by drawing conclusions from a remarkable body of research. Interestingly, the book title indicates that the focus is not only on teachers, as perhaps opposed to researchers or materials writers, but also on practice.

The book is divided into an introduction and three parts. The organization within the parts shows that an equal number of chapters should not be a crucial criterion for, in this case, course book organization. Part 1 contains three chapters, Part 2 is developed through four chapters, and Part 3 allocates two chapters. In the paragraphs that follow, I will summarize and reflect on the main contents developed by the author.

Whereas the title places practice before theory, McGrath starts dealing with external theory. By external theory, the author means those rationales, informed decisions, and business drives behind marketed materials. Part 1 starts with the usual discussion around the benefits and drawback of course books at schools and teacher education. Furthermore, the author problematizes the distance between teachers and learners as end users and materials writers. Readers will also find detailed accounts of the processes behind publishing.

In Part 1 the author discusses how lesson planning, materials, and materials evaluation are interrelated. Because course books are not conceived as monolithic tools which teachers cannot change, there is a sophisticated analysis of adaptation and supplementation. Thus, teachers are convincingly called to explore the roles of evaluators, adapters, and creators of their own materials to fill the gaps detected between a course book and their learners and curriculum.

First, McGrath analyses the reasons and procedures behind adaptation through bullet-point ideas, examples, and principles. These include localization, modernization, individualization, personalization, humanization, variety, and simplification, complexification, and differentiation. While readers may find it hard to see these principles as clear-cut, the author successfully tackles this complex landscape by reviewing different authors and condensing common threads and practices. Secondly, McGrath asserts that supplementation can be achieved by incorporating materials from an existing source or by using materials specially designed by the teacher. Through these options, teachers can strengthen accuracy, meaning, and any language skills. Although the author admits that developing original materials requires training and time, he believes that the load can be shared through collaboratively-developed materials. Through the processes of selection, evaluation, adaptation, and supplementation, teachers will engage in professional development signaled by reflection, innovation, and experimentation.

What is innovative about Part 1 is the discussion of material development in teacher education programs. Readers may appreciate that McGrath makes a plea for the inclusion of spaces which deal with course books, for example, in teacher education both at pre-service and in-service levels. The running view is that teacher education tends to train teachers under an approach which disregards marketed materials and projects the assumption that good teachers design and employ their own resources only. In McGrath's opinion, such an approach widens the perceived gap between theory (teacher education) and practice (teaching at schools). Since teachers will often find course books imposed on them, a wide variety of resources to benefit from, or the lack of materials, they should need to explore, reflect, and experiment teaching in all these situations.

Part 2 adopts a relational view because teacher and learner perspectives are placed in tension so as to arrive at points of contact and a holistic view of the classroom. At first glance, readers may find the contents in this part repetitive because they will find themes, such as evaluation, adaptation, and supplementation. Nonetheless, readers need to bear in mind that all the principles and experiences reported here do not come from experts, but from teachers and learners themselves.

What is worth highlighting from this part is that McGrath carefully integrates teacher and learner responses to course books as tools or as teachers, authentic materials, learner-generated materials, and types of sources of input and activities. Through this section, there are persuasive discussions which stress points of convergence and departure between what publishers and research encourage and what teachers and learners enact in their classrooms.

Those points of departure or gaps in course book use are often seen as teachers not conforming to expectations. Differently put, if a course book proves unsuccessful, the teacher is blamed for not being able to understand the rationale behind the course book. McGrath groups the reasons behind such tensions under seven, what he calls, logistical constraints or "lack-of's". These reasons are: fit or congruence, systemic freedom, time, training, confidence, motivation, and faith in materials. The author believes that these constraints should be included in teacher education programs so as to help teachers examine, reflect, and creative alternatives.

Part 3 recovers the principles, benefits, challenges, and practices thoroughly discussed in the previous chapters. Based on them, it examines implications for teachers, policy makers at institutions, publishers, course book writers, research, and teacher education. While readers may find some of McGrath's ideas a bit idealistic, they are also opportunities to think "outside of the box". The author's concerns with teacher education are highlighted at this stage through a practice-based proposal. Course book evaluation, adaptation, and supplementation should be systematic activities in teacher education. Systematicity and sequence could be achieved by building blocks that gradually take teachers from materials evaluation to materials adaptation and supplementation to materials design according to McGrath.

Overall, McGrath offers an excellent book because he includes everyone's voices by reviewing publications from different settings and actors. Teachers are invited to become critical users of course books, and active agents of change. It is the teacher and the learner who should manage and manipulate the course book and not otherwise. In terms of practice and theory, the book succeeds in establishing a dialogue between external and internal theories.

However, this book does not truly discuss materials, but course books. Therefore, readers should be aware of the fact that course books are the object of the volume. This means that flashcards, realia, or digital materials do not appear with the same attention.

All in all, McGrath's book is convincing as his arguments concerning course books are impressively supported and focused on teacher development and practice given the detailed discussion of supplementation. I highly recommend this book particularly to teacher educators and curriculum developers because it provides a clear picture of the publishing process and what teachers do and can do with course books.