Module Eight: Lesson Planning - Working with Coursebooks and Schemes of Work

Introduction:

Many private English language schools around the world centre their curriculum around commercially produced and published coursebooks. To some degree, EFL publishing and EFL teaching have developed hand in hand over the last three decades. Recently however, with the advent of Scott Thornbury’s Dogme approach to EFL (see Module Three), the use of coursebooks has become a point of some contention. The arguments against coursebooks is that they are limiting and prescriptive in their approach to language learning - the coursebook is at the centre of the learning process, not the students’ lives and experiences. Also, the anti-coursebook lobby point out that the topics and materials in coursebooks are not universally inclusive and are very biased towards northern European liberal democracies in their cultural scope. As a result, issues and ideas designed to be discussed in class in speaking and free practice activities may have little or no relevance to other cultures or students’ lived experience.

However, the EFL publishing bandwagon continues to roll on with new courses and coursebooks being published every year, and older established titles revamped and repackaged. It is understandable that someone wishing to set up an English language school may view buying into packaged courses and materials as a means of getting up and running without the need for many months of planning and curriculum design. Subsequently, a large majority of schools around the world use coursebooks and many students feel more comfortable learning in a coursebook-led environment.

This module provides a brief overview of the basic structure of EFL coursebooks and some suggestions for cherry-picking materials to suit your students’ needs. The second part of this module runs through how to develop a short series of six lessons into a scheme of work.

EFL Coursebooks: An Overview

Virtually all EFL coursebooks follow a classic format of ten to twelve units/chapters plus supplementary materials. The Headway series, originally devised by Liz and John Soars and published by The Oxford University Press, was one of the first to develop a user-friendly approach to instructional materials which embedded the teaching of specific grammar points into themes and skills practice.
The concept was to create an English language learning course based on specific levels ranging from beginner to advanced, with the learner progressing through the levels after completing a progress test at the end of each course.

Each unit comprises three to four thematically linked lessons (for example: ‘Travel’ or ‘Families’) that explore different aspects of language learning, with each subsequent lesson building on the material presented and practised in the preceding lessons. The ‘student’s book’ is complemented by a ‘teacher’s book’ which clearly lays out the stages for each lesson and gives tips and ideas for extension activities and, thankfully, also provides answer keys for practice exercises and tests. In addition to the basic course, there are listening materials to supplement the text and student workbooks which contain grammar practice exercises. Recent developments in technology have enabled the supplementary materials to be expanded to include CD-ROM and DVD resources and online quizzes and games.

The success of the Headway series led to similar courses being devised along the same lines with popular products such as English File and Inside Out providing alternatives to the once-ubiquitous Headway courses.
In essence, a coursebook-led English language curriculum certainly cuts down on planning and preparation for the teacher as all the material is clearly laid out and logically presented. However, as stated in the introduction to the module, questions have arisen in recent years as to the efficacy of coursebook-led curricula. On one hand, students often like the comfort of a coursebook and it provides ample opportunity for additional study outside of the classroom. On the other hand, the prescriptive approach can be quite narrowing as the teacher is in essence teaching to the materials in the book in order to push the student through to the next level. As long as the student passes the end of course test they are deemed to have progressed sufficiently to move on to the next course/level. Private language schools are essentially businesses and therefore the students are viewed as paying customers. As a result, unscrupulous language school owners will pay little heed to ascertaining if an individual has really made the required progress to move on a level, as long as they pay their tuition fees and buy the materials (which are often sold at an inflated price to maximise profits).

Another aspect that doubtless informs some private English language schools’ seemingly slavish devotion to coursebook-led materials is that they are expensive. On average a simple student book retails at around £25 and with additional materials and digital add-ons it is understandable that the school would be anxious to get their money’s worth.

Stop Reading and Reflect

Make some notes as to the pros and cons (no pun intended) of a coursebook-led curriculum from the point of view of both teacher and student.

Students who are used to having a coursebook may also be suspicious of the current trend for ‘materials light’ teaching. Certain cultures revere the printed word and the presence of a textbook reassures the student that the material presented to him is legitimate, authentic and correct. In actuality, the opposite could be argued, as the material is carefully differentiated and tailored for different levels (particularly the audio materials) and so bears little resemblance to authentic English texts. A further criticism of many coursebook-led curricula is that, along with not being universally appropriate in terms of cultural references, the materials are not always appropriate for a range of different ages. The Headway series, particularly between the levels beginner to intermediate, are pitched very much at young adults with the material becoming more appropriate for mature learners as the course levels progress. However, many language schools have mixed age classes meaning that a lesson in which the topic was business etiquette from an advanced coursebook may go over the head of a teenage learner in the same way that a lesson on computer games may be of little or no interest to many adult learners.

Conclusion
Following a coursebook from start to finish can be a laborious process for both teacher and student and can feel a little like both are just ‘going through the motions’ at times. It is good practice to vary the content and focus of lessons and devise lessons and activities from supplementary resources. Many younger learners who have attended the same school for a period of time are also prone to becoming bored with the format of coursebooks which rarely vary from a standardised presentation/practice/produce structure. Maybe every third lesson, put the coursebook away and plan a lesson with an interactive and communicative focus with games or group work and task-based activities. Coursebooks are nonetheless a valuable resource of easily available, differentiated textual materials and practice exercises and should not be dismissed out of hand. If the teacher has conducted a thorough needs analysis of their student cohort they should be able to cherry-pick coursebook units and topics that they feel their students will respond best to or that will stimulate them to practise their language skills and enjoy the lessons.

Case Study: Working With Schemes of Work

A scheme of work (SOW) is a vital tool for teachers, either when planning a course from scratch or linking individual lessons. A good scheme of work should show a progression of learning outcomes, carefully scaffolded towards an overall aim or goal. It is often referred to as the teacher’s equivalent of a builder’s plan or architect’s drawing. It should clearly show how a course has been constructed and the stages of development when put into practice. Like a builder’s plan, the scheme should be flexible enough for changes to be made as and where necessary and should be regularly revised and updated according to differing circumstances and conditions.

A SOW differs from individual lesson plans and should not be used in place of individual planning procedures. A SOW should show an outline and schedule for work to be done in the classroom, learning outcomes to be achieved and contain information about assessment methods and the focus of each component.

Scenario:

By way of illustration, below is a sample SOW for a six-week intermediate level group of young adults. The course is partly based on a hypothetical coursebook named SpeakEasy, however, resources at the school where the course is to be held are minimal and most of the students cannot afford the coursebook. As a result the teacher has been required to ‘cherry-pick’ coursebook materials which can be photocopied for the students as and when required and supplement the course with additional activities and materials. The course is to run between early January and the middle of February with nine hours of material/instruction broken down into six 90-minute blocks.

Sample Scheme of Work:

Note: This SOW template is downloadable from within the online module.
SOW Template

The template for the scheme of work is structured around ten information columns running from left to right with six corresponding rows for each individual component lesson.

Column One: Week/ Date
Contains the number of the lesson in the sequence of six and the date the lesson is to take place.

Column Two: Theme
Contains information on the theme or topic for the lesson that the skills practice and tasks are going to be embedded into. These should be appropriate to the age level and should be chosen to reflect the students’ interests and experiences. For this reason sports, holidays/travel and future technology have been chosen as appropriate for older teenage learners.

Column Three: Resources
Contains information on the resources that will be required, in this case photocopies of selected pages from the SpeakEasy student’s book and files cards, flip chart paper.

Columns Four to Six: Learning Outcomes
This section is divided into three distinct but interrelated sub-columns reflecting the individual and collective learning outcomes for each lesson.

- 1.0 Interpersonal
These are the personalised skills that the students will be practising, such as talking about experiences or expressing likes and dislikes. The interpersonal can often, but not always, overlap with the functional learning outcome (3.0), depending on the context and the shape of the lesson.

- 2.0 Informational
This is the specific real-life information or area of knowledge that the students will be exploring. For example, the topic for Lesson Two is sports but the informational outcome is the cultural importance of sports and sports stars as celebrities, etc. Lesson Four is a class debate so the informational outcome is simply famous people from world history.

- 3.0 Functional
This relates to the specific language function which is being practised and/or is the focus of the lesson, e.g. expressing opinions/giving advice, etc.

Column Seven: Grammar
Contains the specific grammar point(s) which is(are) being introduced, revised, practised or compared and contrasted.
Column Eight: Writing / Vocabulary

This section contains details of any writing tasks to be undertaken and any key vocabulary that may need to be taught for the students to attempt the tasks.

Column Nine: Assessment

This section contains details as to the methods via which assessment for learning will take place in the classroom. Will the teacher be informally assessing via listening for errors and speaking with the students or will there be more formal testing taking place?

Column Ten: Progress Notes

This column is for the teacher to make short notes after the lesson and keep a running record of how the class is progressing and also to set any short-term targets if necessary.

Commentary

As an intermediate-level class of young adult learners they should be familiar with the tenses such as past simple and present simple and future simple and the focus for this six-week course is to introduce them to some of the uses of present perfect and contrast this tense with previously grasped grammar. The second part of the course is to revise future simple and to introduce ‘going to’ for future plans.

Lesson One:

This lesson is designed as a ‘getting to know’ lesson to allow the teacher to gather information about the class, evaluate their level of English and relative strengths and weaknesses and conduct a needs analysis on individual students and the class as a whole.

Lesson Two:

The focus in lesson two is to encourage the students to practise speaking and in particular, to develop the confidence to express their own opinions (in preparation for the class debate in lesson four). The grammar focus is on reviewing and revising the present simple for likes and dislikes.

Lesson Three:

The focus in lesson three is on presenting the comparison between the use of past simple and present perfect when talking about past experiences and to introduce the students to ‘going to’ when describing future plans or predictions.

Lesson Four:

The focus in lesson four is to provide a free-speaking activity and to provide a break from coursebook-led lessons and materials. Students will have been set a homework task the previous week but some class time will also be allowed to prepare for the class balloon debate.

Lesson Five:
The focus in lesson five is to continue developing students’ understanding of ‘going to’ for future plans and predictions, and contrasting this with future simple tense ‘will’. The latter part of the lesson is to include some practice exercises in preparation for the final-week test.

Lesson Six:

The final lesson is largely devoted to a progress test on work covered over the previous five lessons. The test is timed at one hour (30 minutes grammar, 10 minutes listening, 20 minutes writing) with the final 25–30 minutes given over to grammar games and communicative activities.