Teaching material in the EFL classroom

- teachers’ and students’ perspectives
Abstract

The principal aim of this essay was to study why some teachers at upper secondary school choose to work with alternative material in the English classroom, whereas others choose a combination of alternative material and coursebooks. The investigation further deals with how alternative material is used. What students think about various kinds of material and whether they are encouraged to influence the choice of material has been considered as well. The method used was interviews with three teachers and six students.

The results of the study showed that all three teachers agreed that coursebooks should not be the only teaching material used in the classroom; they believed that the use of coursebooks alone would be boring and not very stimulating for the students. Coursebooks combined with alternative material were considered to work very well as teachers and students benefit from the advantages of both. Furthermore, alternative material would be used more if it were not such a time-consuming business for the teachers. Concerning how the three teachers made alternative material, practice varied. One teacher for who mainly used alternative material and also made it herself, had many different sources, whereas the other two teachers mostly used books and movies. Regarding the students, their requests of teaching material varied. The majority however preferred either alternative material or a combination with coursebooks. They also declared that they are encouraged to influence the choice of material.
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**Appendix**
1. Introduction

However appealing a particular method might be to you as you first encounter it, however sensible and practical it might seem, the best method is one which you have derived through your very own careful process of formulation, tryout, revision, and refinement […] There are no instant recipes. No quick and easy method is guaranteed to provide success. Every learner is unique. Every teacher is unique (Brown 2000:15).

Why do some teachers choose to create and use their own teaching material whereas others prefer to mainly use coursebooks? What do their pupils think about this and do they have any influence on the chosen material?

My own experience from school when I was a pupil myself is that the combination of textbook and workbook ruled. It was not until my first practical teacher training period that I came across alternative teaching material in the English classroom. My tutor did not use coursebooks; she put together her own themes for the pupils and only chose material from authentic texts such as magazines, newspapers, the Internet etc. I was so inspired by this that I decided to make my own teaching material for my last practical training period. The whole procedure was very time-consuming, but it was definitely worth it. I enjoyed it and the evaluation I received gave mainly positive feedback from my pupils.

In view of the fact that the Swedish national curriculum and syllabus for the upper secondary school concerning English as a subject lacks any prescriptions regarding what material to use, teachers have great autonomy of choosing whether or not they wish to use alternative material (Gymnasieskolans regelbok 2005:207ff). The main point is that as long as students reach the goals, teachers have the liberty to use material of their own choice. They can choose alternative material, ready-made material such as coursebooks or a combination of both. One might then ask, if teachers are free to choose what material to use, why do not more teachers ask their pupils what they are interested in and how they wish to reach the goals?

Students’ influence is an important component of the Swedish curriculum: it is every teacher’s responsibility to ensure that every pupil has influence on the methods of working and contents of teaching (ibid 2005:145). Teachers have a lot of opportunity to include their students in the planning process, especially considering that English is a subject with endless possibilities: you can read, write, see a movie, listen to music, talk about anything, etc. As long as it is English it does not matter: “Whether they are texts of information or works of literature, language is the stuff they [texts] are made of” (Kramsch 2000:8). Whatever
material a teacher chooses for his or her students, the students can influence these choices. When using coursebooks, students can decide what chapters and exercises to work with and what to skip. They could also be encouraged to select material outside of coursebooks and hence combine coursebooks with other material. In my experience, this way of combining different teaching materials seems to be more common today than the use of coursebooks or alternative material alone.

1.1 Aim
The aim of this essay is to study various aspects of alternative material in the EFL classroom. My research questions are:

- What considerations are made when teachers choose teaching material?
- How do teachers create their own material and what aspects are considered?
- What do students think about alternative material and coursebooks in the English classroom and are they invited to influence decisions concerning the choice of material?
2. Background

2.1 What is alternative teaching material?

Alternative teaching material can be any material used in the English classroom excluding coursebooks. Usually the concept of coursebook includes not only textbook and workbook but also recordings and other material offered in a package from a publisher (Woodward 2001: 145). Coursebooks can also be placed in a category called ready-made material.

Alternative material is mainly referred to as ‘authentic’ or ‘real-life material’. Mitchell (1995:39) describes authentic material as material that was originally produced for native speakers. According to this criterion authentic teaching material can for example consist of magazines, newspapers or recordings of real-life conversations. Little et al (ibid 1995:45) define authentic texts as follows:

An authentic text is a text that was created to fulfil some social purpose in the language community in which it was produced. Thus novels, poems, newspaper and magazine articles, handbooks and manuals, recipes and telephone directories are all examples of authentic texts; and so too are radio and television broadcasts and computer programmes.

Obviously there is a wide range of texts to choose from when searching for alternative teaching material.

In Kramsch’s (2000:177) view “the term ‘authentic’ has been used as a reaction against the prefabricated artificial language of textbooks and instructional dialogues; it refers to the way language is used in non-pedagogic, natural communication”. Moreover, Harmer (2001: 151) contributes with an additional term for alternative teaching material: ‘homegrown materials’. Primarily this is material made by teachers themselves, for example overhead transparencies, pictures, worksheets with exercises (grammar, vocabulary etc). This ‘home-made’ material is often designed with the help of authentic texts such as articles from newspapers or magazines, books or the Internet\(^1\). Furthermore there is even an expression for teachers who prefer to create their own material to using coursebooks: “do-it-yourself” teachers, who of course have their own “do-it-yourself” approach (ibid 2001: 304f). In conclusion, alternative teaching material is authentic, often self-made by teachers, originally created for native speakers and mainly does not include the kind of artificial language that often occurs in coursebooks.

\(^1\) Home-made material such as exercises is not necessarily authentic, since these can consist of invented sentences.
2.2 The production of alternative material

Harmer (2001:151) suggests a five-stage procedure when teachers make their own teaching material. Focus is put on the making of the material rather than the actual use of it. The first stage is planning and to begin with all the material obviously needs to be comprehensible and attractive to the students. In order for the material to achieve these criteria one can have Krashen’s Input Hypothesis (in Brown 2000:278) in mind when deciding how challenging the material should be for the students. This hypothesis argues that:

[an] important condition for language acquisition to occur is that the acquirer understand (via hearing or reading) input language that contains structure ‘a bit beyond’ his or her current level of competence... If an acquirer is at stage or level \( i \), the input he or she understands should contain \( i + 1 \).

It is therefore important for the teacher who creates the material that he or she makes sure to present a language that the students can understand and that simultaneously challenges the students to make progress (ibid).

Furthermore, topics must be chosen and also what activities are required from the students (reading, speaking, writing, etc). Aims ought to be considered as well and are very important. Trialling is the next stage and refers to trying out the material before it is used in the classroom. In order to do this, colleagues, a friend or a student can be asked for their opinions about the newly produced material. In this way spelling mistakes or vague instructions can be discovered in time. The third stage is evaluating which contributes to improving the material for future use and also provides ideas about the production of other materials. The following stage is classifying, (e.g. to categorise the material alphabetically) a useful process in order to access the material easily for future use. There could be as many ways of classifying as there are teachers. Lastly, there is record-keeping which reminds of classifying. It is very useful for long-term planning to have documentation of material and evaluations, especially if it is to be used in different classes (Harmer 2001:151).

2.3 The communicative approach and the importance of authenticity

According to Kramsch (2000:185) communicative approaches to language teaching emphasize exposing second language learners to spoken or written texts that are authentic, that is to say containing no artificial language that is produced for pedagogic purposes. The intention of authentic communication is to make learners better understand both “speaking customs and
ways of life of the target country” in order to behave more native-like. This approach is especially useful for teaching immigrants in English-speaking countries (ibid).

Mitchell (1995:39) also emphasizes the importance of authenticity in the communicative approach and claims that it is a ‘key concern’ for this approach. Authentic material helps language learners to appreciate it as a link to the real world outside the English classroom. This accustoms learners to becoming familiar with the target language and prepares them for real situations. Lightbown and Spada (1999:168) too observe students’ need to deal with authentic material so they can prepare themselves for language situations outside the classroom.

Tornberg (2000:17) further points to the significance of meaningful and authentic teaching material and observes a problem in schools where students are expected to acquire knowledge that has been established outside the classroom. This knowledge is then supposed to be mediated in a way that makes students capable of seeing a connection between the classroom and the real world. If this connection is absent and school reality consists of a worn down classroom and coursebooks that are out of date, there exists a risk that pupils only associate language with what happens in the English classroom and what is tested in exams. Their language acquisition then ends up in a ‘no-man’s-land’ where there is a great distance to native-speakers and their world (ibid). Nevertheless, if authentic material is used, this distance can be reduced.

However, Mitchell (1995:40) points out that there is a problem with the communicative approach: the question of grammar. When students are encouraged to speak as much as possible and focus is on meaning rather than on form, they often make grammatical mistakes. Many teachers solve this problem by teaching grammar in traditional ways and simultaneously use authentic material as their main resource. Mitchell (ibid) quotes Brumfit who points out that “teachers should plan systematically for a balance between meaning-oriented ‘fluency’ work and form-oriented ‘accuracy’ work”.

Kramsch (2000:178) claims that there has been an increased need to develop both communicative and cultural competence in language teaching. In order to fill these needs the use of authentic texts becomes salient. However, to merely use authentic texts is not enough to make it authentic according to Kramsch. The ultimate situation is to use a text as it was intended to be used originally. If for example a German menu is utilized for grammatical practice, it is not used in the way native customers make use of it at a restaurant (ibid). However, whether this is relevant or not when using authentic texts in the English classroom, could be discussed.
Moreover, in the same way as in natural situations we read texts for different purposes, the choice of text and reading practise should also result in students learning how to deal with different sorts of text in a realistic way, preferably taken directly as authentic texts from newspapers or magazines. Every text does not have to be used for learning grammar or extending one’s vocabulary. Sometimes it is sufficient merely to read a text and understand its main points (Tornberg 2000:79).

2.4 Coursebooks versus alternative material
Many teachers choose to use coursebooks as their main resource in the classroom whereas some teachers use them only to complement alternative material. Lundahl (1998:11) believes that there is a reason to react if an entire course revolves around coursebooks and suggests a combination of coursebooks and alternative material. Furthermore, he remarks that there are many advantages with authentic texts; “above all they give students a chance of meeting contents that interest them, stories that fascinate and linguistic challenges that cannot be offered by coursebooks” (ibid, my translation). However, he also points out that several coursebooks today provide texts of good quality.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of using coursebooks and alternative material respectively? Unfortunately there is not enough time and space for mentioning all possible aspects in this study and therefore only some will be brought up.

2.4.1 Coursebooks – pros and cons
Woodward (2001:146) writes about advantages and disadvantages of using coursebooks in language teaching. Some benefits of coursebooks are that they give students comprehensible directions and a sense of progress; students can clearly see what and how much they have accomplished in a course as they proceed in their textbook. In addition, since coursebooks are often written by experienced teachers, goals from the syllabus are included. Coursebooks also provide teachers with ready-made material, which makes planning less time-consuming since the planning has already been made and the material already been chosen. Furthermore, they give students independence, as every learner is free to look ahead and use the coursebooks without depending on a teacher (ibid).

As mentioned above, coursebooks also have disadvantages. Little et al (1995:46) point out that some textbooks have characters and situations that are of no interest to students. In addition, if course material is organized in the same pattern, students might be bored and find the coursebooks predictable. It may also be the case that the level of the coursebooks does not
match that of the students (ibid). Moreover, some authors of coursebooks construct unfamiliar cultures. There are coursebooks that contain typical ‘coursebooks families’ that actually have little equivalence to the majority of people living in the target-language culture. As a result, learners will not acquire an understanding for what the society where the natives in their target language live looks like in reality (Tornberg 2000:52).

2.4.2 Alternative material – pros and cons
Kramsch (2000:200) points out some significant ways where real-life material has advantages over coursebooks. To begin with, when coursebooks are used, students’ knowledge is structured by chapters in a textbook, whereas real-life material provides less organized knowledge that encourages more complex thinking. Furthermore, Kramsch claims that coursebooks mainly teach language structure, that is to say rules, grammar and vocabulary. However, this may not teach the learner to use his or her knowledge in real-life situations and adapt it depending on different contexts. Lastly, she also states that whereas coursebooks decide what students should learn, real-life materials call for the students to discover themselves what language skills they possess and lack (ibid). Moreover, alternative material can be essential to the students’ motivation and their need to be sufficiently challenged (Lightbown and Spada 1999:168). In addition students have great opportunities of getting teaching material that matches their level (Harmer 2001:305).

The arguments in the previous section that speak for coursebooks are similar to those that go against alternative material. Harmer (ibid) points out that using alternative material is very time-consuming. In addition there is a “risk that students will end up with an incoherent collection of bits and pieces of material”. Nevertheless, if the alternative material is thoroughly planned, there is a smaller risk that the alternative material will be incoherent. Moreover, Lundahl (1998:103) observes that when searching for alternative material becomes the students’ responsibility, problems emerge. Here are but a few: Are the texts on the students’ level, or are they too difficult/too easy? Are the students capable of working with the texts; in other words, are they able to make a text their own, the result being in their own words? Are they critical to the content? Is there a risk that the method of working (the search for material) overshadows the content and their learning about the topic in question? These problems are more difficult to handle for weaker students.

It should also be mentioned that some cons related to coursebooks may apply to alternative material as well. If a teacher for example does not include the students in the planning process of alternative material, there is no guarantee that the students will find the material
interesting. In addition, concerning the level of coursebooks not matching that of the students, the risk may be even greater with alternative material since this is rarely adapted to a certain level.

2.5 Including students in the planning process

There has been and still is a lot of indication nowadays that students’ influence is rather limited when it comes to the choice of material and method of working in the English classroom. And this is the case despite the fact that according to the Swedish syllabus concerning English as a subject every student has a responsibility for his or her language acquisition (Eriksson & Jacobsson 2001:8).

The most important thing teachers can do in Woodward’s (2001:16) view is to get to know their students. The reason for this is obvious; the more teachers can find out about their learners, the more information they have to help them to make choices in topics and material. Students can be involved in the decisions as well; they can be asked about what topics and materials they are interested in (ibid).

Eriksson and Jacobsson (2001:9) claim that students experience increased motivation and more efficient acquisition if teachers give them more influence on what method and material to use. Tornberg points out that there are good reasons to believe that if students for example are allowed to decide the topic of a conversation themselves and they are in control of the course of it, their motivation and engagement in the conversation can be influenced in a positive way (2001:46). Furthermore, it makes sense that students experience their acquisition as more meaningful if they participate in the planning process and consider for themselves what goals to achieve. In addition, if students are included in the decision making, the teaching stands a better chance of being individualised because who knows better what level to work at than the students themselves (Eriksson and Jacobsson 2001:9)? However, as many teachers have experienced, it is not always possible to observe every single student’s needs.

Most teachers agree that it is sensible to include students in the planning process, mainly because of the reasons mentioned above. However, adding students in the process does not always work out satisfactorily. Teachers might meet resistance from their students because some of them are frustrated and anxious when they have to make their own decisions, whereas others have difficulties in getting started and planning what, how and when to do it. Consequently, some students could be very reluctant to taking responsibility for their acquisition. In addition, there are always students who seize the opportunity of making as little effort as possible. Even students who have positive attitudes towards making their own decisions about
what and how to learn, might feel lost if they do not know what is expected of them. Moreover, it makes it even more difficult for a teacher if the colleagues do not believe in including students in the process; therefore support from fellow teachers could be very important (Eriksson and Jacobsson 2001:9).

3. Method and material

As stated in section 1.1, my aim is to study what considerations are made when teachers choose teaching material. Another question deals with how teachers make their own teaching material. I also wanted to find out what students think about this and whether they are encouraged to influence the choice of material used in the classroom.

In order to answer my research questions, I used a qualitative method and interviewed three teachers and six students. One teacher mainly uses alternative teaching material, whereas two teachers combine alternative material with coursebooks.

3.1 The qualitative method

There are several different ways of working with qualitative methods. Consequently, there is no fixed method of how to process the material received from a qualitative study. It is therefore salient to account for the whole process in order for the reader to understand how the study has been carried out. The main purpose of qualitative studies is according to Patel and Davidsson (1994:99ff) to get a different and a deeper kind of knowledge than that of quantitative studies. The ambition is to see and understand the whole picture instead of fragments. Bearing this in mind, in-depth interviews serve as a good method to accomplish this.

3.2 The interviews

One of the interviewees was chosen due to the fact that the teacher in question has been my supervisor during one of my practical training periods and I knew that she uses alternative material. The other two teachers interviewed were suggested by my essay supervisor. The six students were chosen on the basis of having the interviewed teachers as their English teachers (two students per teacher).

All teachers received the interview questions (see the interviewguide in the appendix) by e-mail a few days before the interviews took place. Two of the interviews were carried out in a small room at their schools. One school however did not have such a room available; there-
fore I had to conduct the interview in a corner of the staff room. A minidisc was used to record the interviews.

My intention at the beginning was to interview and record the students as well, but I only managed to do this with one teacher’s students. These students were interviewed together in order to make them feel more comfortable with the situation. Furthermore, since they have the same teacher and are in the same class, they answered most of the interview questions together. Concerning the other four students, for practical reasons it was more convenient for everybody to carry out the interviews via e-mail. I sent them the interview questions and they e-mailed back. All the interviews were carried out in Swedish and quotes have been translated in the presentation of the results.

3.3 Presentation of teachers and students
The teachers’ and students’ names are made-up in order to keep them anonymous; they received strategic names that reflect their sex and use of material. Alice mainly uses alternative material, whereas Conrad and Conny both use a combination of alternative material and coursebooks. Alice’s students are given the names Anna and Adam. Conrad’s students are called Rosa and Roger, and lastly, Conny’s students are named Natalie and Niklas.

3.3.1 Alice, her school and students
Alice is in her early thirties and received her teacher diploma in 2001. She is qualified to teach English and French at upper secondary school. Since she graduated she has worked at three different schools, one secondary school and two upper secondary schools. At the time being Alice works at an independent upper secondary school. This school has approximately 400 students and 25 teachers four of which teach English. The students have three different programmes to choose between: The Natural Science Programme, The Social Science Programme and The Health Care Programme. In addition to the core subjects, these programmes are specially designed and offer many opportunities for students to choose courses according to their interests. Alice teaches students at The Natural Science Programme and The Social Science Programme.

Alice’s students Anna and Adam are both in their first year at The Natural Science Programme. Anna will probably receive a VG\(^2\) at the end of the English A-course. Adam is a clear MVG student in English.
3.3.2 Conrad, his school and students

Conrad is in his mid thirties and graduated from the teachers’ training programme in 2000. He has worked for five years as a qualified English/Swedish teacher. Overall he has held a position at four different schools, three of which are secondary schools. He now holds his first position as a teacher at an upper secondary school.

Conrad’s school is a rather large municipal school with approximately 1200 students and roughly 150 teachers about 15 of which teach English. The school has nine different programmes and depending on what programme a student chooses, it prepares for ensuing studies or work. Most programmes at this school are vocational. Some of the programmes are: The Construction Programme, The Vehicle Programme, The Hotel and Restaurant Programme and The Social Science Programme which has three different specializations: economy, team sports and media. Conrad teaches students at The Media Programme and The Hotel and Restaurant Programme.

The interviewed students, Roger and Rosa are both in their second year and attend The Hotel and Restaurant Programme. Roger achieved an MVG at the end of the English A-course whereas Rosa achieved a G.

3.3.3 Conny, his school and students

Conny is in his early forties and received his teacher diploma in 2004. He began working as a substitute teacher at his present school in 2002 and was permanently employed after his university graduation. Altogether he has worked as an English teacher at two different schools, both at the upper secondary level.

Conny’s school is run by the municipality and has around 1450 students and 120 teachers, 15 of which are English teachers. This school provides five different programmes, three of which are national programmes: The Arts Programme, The Natural Science Programme, and The Social Science Programme. The other two are specially designed programmes: The Athletic Programme and The International Baccalaureate Programme (a programme where all courses are taught in English). Conny teaches students of The Social Science Programme and The Athletic Programme.

Natalie (VG) and Niklas (G) are two of Conny’s students, both in their first year at The Athletic Programme.

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3 Besides the eight core subjects and project work which a specially designed programme includes, students can choose specific courses from other programmes (Skolverket [www]).
3.4 Problems and limitations

Many of the problems I encountered concerned the interviews. I had much trouble finding teachers to interview. My first idea was to interview three teachers at upper secondary school who mainly used alternative teaching material. Since I only knew one and there was too little time to find two more teachers, I had to reconsider what teachers to interview. Finally, with help from my essay supervisor, I found two teachers who use a combination of coursebooks and alternative material. This forced me to change my interview guide in order to adapt the questions so that they suited teachers who used both coursebooks and alternative material. One of the interviews was conducted in a staff room and, fortunately, despite the murmur among the present teachers, the recording turned out well. This distraction might have affected the answers, although I believe that this is not the case. On the contrary, I think the teacher in question felt more comfortable being questioned among his colleagues.

Another problem was to get hold of the teachers’ students and as mentioned above, four of the students were interviewed via e-mail. However, I do not believe that this will have affected the results in a significant way, even though I might have received more comprehensive information in face-to-face interviews.

Since this is a rather small study, it is difficult to generalize any results. I only interviewed three teachers and six of their students. On the other hand, I do believe that these teachers’ and students’ opinions about teaching material might mirror many others’ opinions in view of the fact that several of their answers were rather similar to each other.

4. Results

In this section, the interviews will be presented, one by one, the teachers first and the students last. Since the length of the interviews varied, the extent of each of the presentations differs as well.

4.1 Interview with Alice

As mentioned above, Alice primarily uses alternative teaching material and she also produces the main part of this material herself.

4.1.1 About teaching material and students

Alice first came across alternative teaching material during one of her practical training periods. However, she already knew when she was a pupil that she would never use coursebooks
when she became a teacher, given that she found these books extremely boring and not very stimulating. She says that:

Now that I know what material I like using, I realise that students are very tired of coursebooks, after nine years of compulsory school. They are extremely grateful for using various methods of working and new, fresh material.

Even if Alice thinks that most coursebooks are boring, she also says that it would be stupid not to take advantage of teaching material that has been made by people being paid for it. As a matter of fact, more and more recent coursebooks do contain some authentic material.

Furthermore, Alice strongly believes that students’ attitudes towards teaching material depend entirely on the teacher’s attitude towards the material and the methods of working. As long as the students are motivated and convinced that alternative material can be fun and interesting, it works very well. However, weak and lazy students are more difficult to motivate since they depend on the structure found in coursebooks. They also have trouble understanding the relevance of alternative material and that it counts as course material just like coursebooks do.

When it comes to beginners (in French for instance), Alice prefers coursebooks. She explains that beginners need structure and coursebooks are very good at this; the chapters are well organized, for example: first chapter - go to the coffee shop, chapter two - how to ask for directions, chapter three - how to order at a restaurant, etc. In addition, vocabulary and verb tenses are introduced gradually. Consequently, alternative material might be too much of a challenge for beginners.

Alice’s main inspiration was a tutor who supervised her during one of her practical training periods. This tutor is a teacher in her sixties who is convinced that coursebooks are not the way to teach language to students and influenced Alice to start thinking about this too. Alice then began to look through many different coursebooks in order to find guidelines about how she could make her own material and develop themes. She looked at different Internet sites and googled for things that she thought might be interesting for her students. Then she also started to use fiction, magazines, movies and partygames for example. This is still her inspiration when she creates her own material.

Alice says that her ambition when she makes alternative material:
...is above all to create variation, enthusiasm among the students and curiosity, because no lesson is the same and the students appreciate this, they always write this in evaluations... tailoring the material to make it suit the group, even if they are heterogeneous, it is possible...creating material that is up to date, feels relevant and also to colour the material depending on what programme a student has chosen. Few coursebooks meet these criteria.

What is always part of the ambition is to consider the syllabus, vary examinations and as mentioned above, to use different working methods.

Often Alice starts a new theme (e.g. fear, commercials or love) with a warm-up such as brainstorming. When the students work with these themes, she tries to use as varied working methods as possible for them; reading, writing, listening and speaking. Furthermore, it is very important for her that the material has a nice lay-out. She would not dream of giving her students a piece of paper with merely text. She wants the themes and tasks to look interesting and fun to work with.

Concerning time, she always plans lessons and creates her material outside the 45 hours of the working week, in her own spare time:

Language and literature have been my main interests in all my life and now these are combined with my teacher profession. Actually, I don’t know what my limit is. I will enjoy creating my own material as long as it doesn’t feel like a burden, then I would have to cut down on something... I cannot feel any inspiration or be creative when I’m at school; not when students constantly come knocking on my door and ask for help.

The inspiration can appear at any time. Often she wakes up at night with a new idea that she has to write down immediately.

Regarding the students’ influence Alice starts every new course with a questionnaire where she asks the students about how they used to work in their old schools, what methods they used, how they would prefer to work now and what topics they would like to work with. She asks them to estimate their level concerning the target language and what grade they aim at as well. Furthermore, they discuss the criteria for the different grades. She also says:

Every lesson is more or less evaluated, at least orally; the youth of today will tell you if they don’t like something and you also observe the atmosphere in
Moreover, written evaluations are always made before autumn-break, because then Alice has had a chance to get to know her students. She also adds evaluative questions to tests, essays and projects.

4.1.2 About colleagues
One of Alice’s colleagues mainly uses coursebooks, whereas the other two primarily use alternative material and sometimes coursebooks. All four English teachers meet regularly for what they call ‘idea seminars’ where they discuss new ideas, show each other material and exchange material with each other.

At the end of the interview when I asked Alice if she would like to add anything, she told me about the last school she worked at, a large traditional school. She said that she received criticism from colleagues, both directly and behind her back. One explanation could be that the other teachers had difficulties accepting her popularity among the students as she used new and different material.

4.2 Interview with Conrad
Conrad’s material consists of both coursebooks and alternative material. He thinks he uses both equally much.

4.2.1 About teaching material and students
Conrad first tried out different ideas of alternative material during one of his practical training periods. He began working with alternative material because he enjoys working with topics that he is interested in and curious about and these are not always easy to find in coursebooks. It might also be the case that his students have requests about topics that cannot be found in coursebooks; then he has to find material elsewhere. For example, at his present school he teaches several classes in vocational programmes, such as The Hotel and Restaurant Programme. If these students would like to work with recipes or something else that reflects their choice of programme, there is not much to be found in coursebooks. Conrad then has to find
alternative material, maybe television shows such as “The Naked Chef”. It is important for him to take care of the students’ interests since this is everybody’s gain.

Concerning his use of coursebooks he says:

I think it’s good to have coursebooks because you always have a structure; if the class gets out of track, coursebooks can make it stable again. It’s also easier for the students to keep up. On the other hand it’s not always amusing to work with the same material since it might feel old, you want to work with new material, material that’s up to date and something I find interesting or something they find interesting and then you will have to go outside [coursebooks].

With alternative material it is easier for students to work at their own pace, whereas when working with coursebooks everybody must keep the same pace. One of the disadvantages of using alternative material is that it is very time-consuming making it, since there is so much work behind it. Even if you have decided what topic to work with, you still need to put together the material. You also need to have an idea behind it and it should fit the syllabus. Coursebooks on the other hand are already planned out for you and ready to be used. They even have a teacher’s guide that advises you how to work with the material. The disadvantages of coursebooks are that their topics are not always interesting to students and that they are often out of date, since everything changes so fast. However, some coursebooks actually have links on the Internet that are kept updated, which is a good compromise.

Conrad finds a lot of his alternative material on the Internet but also works with film that he uses as a basis of discussions, music (lyrics) and newspaper articles. The syllabus is always considered when he creates alternative material. He also makes sure that he does not overuse one working method and he wants to combine reading, listening, writing and speaking. It is very easy to give the students written tasks and sometimes he needs to think about giving them different sorts of tasks such as giving a speech for example. Moreover, he is often inspired by coursebooks; they provide guidelines that come in handy when he makes his own material.

Weak students suffer when working with alternative material, since they find it too difficult, Conrad says. It is often possible to make the material easier for them and simplify the instructions, but not always. Sometimes the students work with projects where they need to search for facts themselves, which involves more independence. This freedom is often difficult to handle for weak students since they prefer structure to autonomy. He says that it is
never easy to satisfy an entire class. It is impossible to have 25 individual teaching plans for each lesson.

Conrad believes that the majority of his students like to work with alternative material and that they appreciate the variation; at least this is what they write in evaluation forms. He tries to evaluate whenever there is time to spare, but always at the end of a project and always at the end of each term.

Some students say that they want to decide what to do, but then they won’t come around to do it because they don’t know what they want to do and then it all ends up with me making the decisions for them. When I do decide something, they sometimes claim that they never have a say about what to do! They are allowed to come up with suggestions. Sometimes I make the decisions about what to do, sometimes they do.

As mentioned above, it is never easy to satisfy every individual student.

4.2.2 About colleagues

Concerning Conrad’s colleagues, he thinks most of them use both coursebooks and alternative material. There is probably no teacher who only uses alternative teaching material. The English teachers at this school do not have regular didactic meetings, but it does not stop the teachers from sharing material with each other.

4.3 Interview with Conny

Conny uses a combination of alternative material and coursebooks. He estimates this use to being 50/50, but the interviewed students claim that it is more likely 70 % coursebooks and 30 % other material.

4.3.1 About teaching material and students

Conny explains why he uses both coursebooks and alternative material:

Coursebooks make everything easier for me; alternative material is more fun for the students, that’s the way it is. That’s a very clear opinion in all my courses. The thing is, it’s not always necessary for them to know what kind of coursebooks we’re going to use, it’s something that is pre-programmed: coursebooks are crap.
Since he started his teacher’s training programme, he has felt that coursebooks should be complemented by other material as well. The use of coursebooks alone was never an option, partly because it would be too monotonous for him and partly because it would be difficult to keep the students motivated.

Sometimes Conny wants to make planning easier and then he takes advantage of material that already exists: in coursebooks there are texts, wordlists and exercises. There are no benefits in producing new material from this point of view, especially considering that there is already enough to do as a teacher. If time were not an issue, he would have produced and used more alternative material.

The main advantage of coursebooks is all the material that is included. He says that:

Nobody can deny that it takes time to make tests. What advantages are there?
I’m thinking that it’s easier for the students to only keep track of the coursebook than to remember to bring handouts to class, especially since the course-material is only one book where both textbook and workbook are included. It’s also easier to control what the students work on if they work with coursebooks. They might learn more this way but on the other hand we must not forget about motivation. The disadvantages are that the students experience the texts as uninteresting because they are often not about them and their lives.

When Conny works with alternative material, he mainly uses fiction, especially those books that are also available on film. He tries to blend the four abilities, listening, reading, writing and speaking. Common tasks are: reading a book, understand what it is about, discuss it, work with the language and write an analysis about differences between the film and the book. Moreover, he occasionally uses articles from newspapers. Sometimes he starts with a chapter in a textbook and then complements it with other literature. The Internet is used very moderately; he says that it is something he could use more but at the same time he is conservative and feels that he works as a complement to his students; he wants to enlighten them that there are other sources than the Internet for finding material.

He says that it is possible that weak students might feel insecure when using alternative material, but he has not noticed any difference. Furthermore, Conny tries to be democratic; students are free to come up with suggestions of topics and they evaluate a couple of times every term. It is important for him that he knows what they think about his material and he can often tell their opinions about something by just looking at them.
4.3.2 About colleagues
Conny thinks that most of the teachers at his school use a combination of coursebooks and other material. There are no organised meetings between the English teachers at his school, although spontaneous meetings do take place. Conny says that he is very fortunate to share his working space with another English teacher. Sometimes they discuss material, share viewpoints about it and also give each other ideas.

4.4 Interviews with the students
As mentioned above, Alice’s and Conrad’s students were interviewed via e-mail whereas the interviews with Conny’s students were recorded. The students’ grades, year and programmes will be repeated in footnotes for the reader’s convenience.

4.4.1 Alice’s students
Adam’s\(^4\) previous English teachers have mainly used coursebooks, except for one teacher in his ninth year who used a combination of coursebooks and alternative material. His answer to the question whether he prefers coursebooks or alternative material is that he definitely prefers alternative material. The reason for this is:

I’ve learned so much more with my teacher’s own material than I did with coursebooks. You get tired of coursebooks, with the alternative teaching material you don’t. It’s funnier and easier to take an active interest in the lessons. Personally, I don’t see any disadvantages, but one can be that the lessons are on a higher level and students who think English is a difficult subject might keep up better with coursebooks. However, I haven’t experienced this when it comes to our English lessons.

Adam also informs me that during this last school year the class has evaluated about four times and it is through these evaluations the class can influence the material. He thinks it all works very well.

Anna\(^5\) has only worked with coursebooks earlier. Not until she began upper secondary school did she come across alternative teaching material. She continues:

\[^4\] Adam is an MVG student in his first year at The Natural Science Programme.
\[^5\] Anna is a VG student in her first year at The Natural Science Programme.
The use of coursebooks alone was very monotonous. Now that I’m in upper secondary school, we haven’t used any coursebooks, though sometimes we get extracts from coursebooks. I think the material we work with now is great. Alice knows what she’s doing and always comes up with new things. If we had another teacher who wasn’t just as ingenious as Alice, I think that coursebooks would probably be better… but as long as you vary the material and working methods it makes a subject fun.

Moreover, Anna says that the class has not yet evaluated this semester, though she thinks the class has sufficient influence.

4.4.2 Conrad’s students
Rosa’s\(^6\) previous teachers in English have only used coursebooks. She prefers coursebooks because:

I learn better with textbook and workbook. You read a text and then you do the exercises and answer questions about the text.

Rosa claims that her class almost never evaluates in written form, but instead they are asked regularly about how they would like to work. She thinks this works very well.

Roger\(^7\) writes that he has mainly used coursebooks earlier. This is still the case, but occasionally Conrad makes tasks that are connected to *The Hotel and Restaurant Programme*. Sometimes Conrad also makes extra tasks in addition to those in the workbook. About choosing between coursebooks and alternative material Roger says:

I think it’s good to have coursebooks, but you don’t have to work with these all the time because then it can easily be boring, you need to do other things too as the exercises in the coursebooks are rather alike. There is a need for material that focuses on the programme you’re at, so that you really feel that you will benefit from it later when you start working, especially if you want to work abroad.

At the beginning of each course the students are asked about what they want to do during the semester:

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\(^6\) Rosa is a G student in her second year at *The Hotel and Restaurant Programme*.

\(^7\) Roger is an MVG student in his second year at *The Hotel and Restaurant Programme*. 

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Conrad tries to fulfil our ideas as long as they suit the syllabus. This is great because it gets funnier and more interesting and it feels good to be able to influence the lessons.

Roger and his class usually evaluate every course some time during the last weeks of a semester.

4.4.3 Conny’s students
As mentioned above, Nathalie\textsuperscript{8} and Niklas\textsuperscript{9} are in the same class which means that they have the same answers to some questions.

Natalie’s former teachers have used coursebooks more or less, but sometimes she received handouts as preparation for a test and occasionally a teacher showed a movie. Concerning teaching material she says:

It’s good to follow coursebooks, but then it’s always fun to work with something new that’s also up to date, it’s funnier to read an article from a newspaper or something like that because there are often boring texts in coursebooks, but it’s still good to have the vocabulary and grammar that come with coursebooks. A combination would be best.

Niklas’s answer is similar to Nathalie’s when it comes to former teachers and their material. The only difference is that one teacher he had in his ninth year sometimes used self-made booklets with different themes. If Niklas could choose between coursebooks and alternative material he would prefer alternative material, because he believes coursebooks are boring and old. On the other hand, he is convinced that he learns more with coursebooks than with other material.

They both say that they evaluate twice every term, but whenever they want to, they can influence the choice of material. Conny has asked them to come up with suggestions of texts they would like to read and work with, but so far no student has done this. Nathalie thinks it is because they have so many other subjects to worry about that there is simply no time to look for interesting texts as well. They would both prefer more alternative material and less coursebook.

\textsuperscript{8} Nathalie is a VG student in her second year at The Athletic Programme.
\textsuperscript{9} Niklas is a G student in his second year at The Athletic Programme.
5. Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to find some answers to my research questions concerning teachers’ use, making and thoughts of teaching material and what students think about alternative material versus coursebooks. I also wanted to gain knowledge of how much students are encouraged to influence the choice of material. Hopefully teachers and teacher students will read this essay as an inspiration to reflect on the choice of teaching material and the importance of including pupils in the planning process. Those who are curious about how to create one’s own teaching material might benefit from this study as well.

After reading several books on language didactics and finding more about coursebooks than about alternative material, one wonders if coursebooks are still the most common teaching material. Another reason to believe that coursebooks are more common than alternative material when teaching a foreign language, is how difficult it was to find teachers who mainly use alternative material. Alice’s teacher kind seems to be very rare, which is no surprise considering how time-consuming it is to create alternative material. In addition, when the teachers were asked about what material their colleagues are using, the majority seemed to use a combination of material. However, when the students were asked about what material their previous teacher used, the majority answered coursebooks. This indicates that it might be more common to use coursebooks in compulsory school, whereas a combination of different teaching material is more frequent in upper secondary school.

From what I have experienced during my practical teacher training, the results in this study turned out as I expected. There were few surprises regarding the teachers’ and students’ opinions and experiences of teaching material. All three teachers agree that coursebooks should not be the only teaching material used in the classroom; they believe that the use of coursebooks alone would be boring and not very stimulating for the students. Some authors discussing disadvantages with coursebooks also support this. Lundahl (1998:11) for instance believes that coursebooks should be combined with alternative material. The only disadvantages of alternative material mentioned in the teachers’ interviews are that the making of material consumes a lot of time and that it might be tougher on weak students. Few of the disadvantages brought up in section 2.4.2, such as the problems stated by Lundahl were discussed in the interviews. If I were to do a follow-up interview and put a different focus on alternative material, such as whether teachers experience the problems described by Lundahl, I might receive different answers.
Furthermore, alternative material, according to the interviews, has mostly advantages and is appreciated and often preferred by the students. It was interesting that Alice’s students who mainly work with alternative material really highlight the positive aspects of this and do not appreciate coursebooks at all. Conrad’s and Conny’s students, who work with coursebooks and other material approximately equally much, are more positive to coursebooks and think it is good to follow these. Two students even believe that they learn more with coursebooks than with alternative material, whereas one of Alice’s students is convinced that he learns more with alternative material. This might indicate that teachers’ attitudes towards teaching material influence their students’ attitudes, which was also suggested by Alice. Moreover, there also seems to be a connection between the students’ grades and their attitudes towards teaching material. The students with higher grades were in general more positive to alternative material, whereas the students with lower grades preferred coursebooks or a combination of material. This is something that Alice points out in her interview; weaker students often favour coursebooks for various reasons. Lundahl also mentions this when he discusses students’ problems with alternative material (1998:103).

Concerning how the three teachers make alternative material, practise varies. Alice for example who mainly uses alternative material and also makes it herself, has many different sources, whereas the other two teachers mostly use books and movies. However, all teachers think it is very important to take advantage of different methods of working, that is to say having the students speak, listen, read and write for example. They also claim that they are democratic; for instance, they let their students evaluate regularly and welcome ideas of topics. Their students confirm this in their interviews. This points in the opposite direction of what Eriksson and Jacobsson (2001:8) observe about students’ limited influence on the choices of material used in the English classroom. We should of course keep in mind that this is a small study, the results of which cannot be generalized.

My choice of method, interviews, gave me plenty of information to work with; in fact sometimes it was difficult to decide what information to use in the essay and what information to leave out. Furthermore, by using interviews as a method, I received thorough information, which I do not believe would have been the case if I had used questionnaires.

This study focuses mainly on alternative teaching material, but it is important to point out that it is not normative. As illustrated by the quote in the introduction, there is no “best method”. Therefore it would also be interesting to look into how coursebooks are used (perhaps interviews with teachers who only use coursebooks) and structured these days. One could for example study how common it is for authentic texts to occur in coursebooks, inter-
view students who use different coursebooks and ask them to evaluate their textbook and workbook. It would also be interesting to compare and analyse different course materials and interview authors of coursebooks.

6. References


Appendix

Intervjuguide

Intervju med lärare

Inledning
Upplys om anonymitet och uppmuntra frispråkighet
Fråga om det är ok att använda minidisc
Eventuell uppföljning via e-mail om nödvändigt

Bakgrund
När tog du din lärarexamen?
Hur många olika skolor har du undervisat på? På vilka nivåer?
Kan du beskriva skolans organisation lite kort? (elev- och lärarantal, program, speciell inriktning t.ex.)
Hur många engelsklärare finns på skolan?

Alternativ 1 (lärare som huvudsakligen använder alternativt material)

Om undervisningsmaterial
Hur kommer det sig att du inte använder ”vanliga” läromedelsböcker (textbook+workbook)?
Hur kom du på att du ville frångå läromedelsböcker? När började du göra eget material?
(Har någon inspirerat dig till att göra eget material? Har dina vfu-perioder (och handledare) påverkat dig? Lärarutbildning?)
Vilka fördelar och nackdelar finns med att göra eget undervisningsmaterial?

Vad tycker eleverna?
Vad tycker dina elever om materialet? Tycker de om det eller föredrar de kursböcker?
Är det någon skillnad mellan vad svaga respektive starka elever tycker om val av material?
Hur ofta utvärderar du?
Får dina elever vara med och bestämma vad materialet ska handla om, hur det ska se ut? Om så är fallet, hur går det till?

Kollegerna?
Vad använder dina kolleger för undervisningsmaterial?
Diskuterar ni material med varandra? Delar ni med er av varandras material?

*Alternativ 2* (lärare som kombinerar eget material och kursböcker)

Om undervisningsmaterial
Hur kommer det sig att du kombinerar kursböcker (textbook+workbook) och annat material i din undervisning? (varför inte enbart kursböcker eller enbart annat material?)

När började du använda alternativt material och hur kom du att börja göra det?

Vilka fördelar respektive nackdelar finns med att göra eget undervisningsmaterial?
Vilka perspektiv tar du med? Har du liknande upplägg som i kursböckerna? Tar du hänsyn till läroplanen i engelska eller nationella prov?
Är det tidskrävande att arbeta med eget material? Hur mycket tid tar planeringen i anspråk?

Vilka fördelar respektive nackdelar finns med att använda kursböcker i undervisningen?
Tar kursböcker hänsyn till läroplanen i engelska eller nationella prov?
Är det tidskrävande att arbeta med kursböcker? Hur är det jämfört med att planera undervisning med alternativt material?
**Vad tycker eleverna?**
Vad tycker dina elever om kombinationen kursböcker och annat material?
Är det någon skillnad mellan vad svaga respektive starka elever tycker om val av material?
Hur ofta utvärderar du?
Får dina elever vara med och bestämma vilka delar i kursboken som ska arbetas med, eller vilket ämne det alternativa materialet ska kretsa kring?

**Kollegerna?**
Vad använder dina kolleger för undervisningsmaterial?
Diskuteras ni material med varandra? Delar ni med er av varandras material?

**Intervju med elev**
Vilket undervisningsmaterial har dina tidigare lärare använt? (Läroböcker eller annat)
Om du fick välja, skulle du då föredra kursböcker, textbook+workbook eller alternativt undervisningsmaterial? Varför?
Hur ofta utvärderar klassen?
Får du vara med och påverka? Om inte, skulle du vilja det?