

Coursebooks, revision and recycling

Whether we like it or not, forgetting things we've studied before is part and parcel of the learning process. In class, students often feel they should remember language they've already looked at and may well feel guilty or embarrassed about admitting they've actually forgotten. Interestingly, we often retain an annoying memory of remembering - but NOT the memory itself. Students often remember having seen certain words or bits of language before, but have simply forgotten what they mean!

Perhaps out of a desire not to draw attention to such human failings, or else because we think students may find it boring to go over bits of language again, teachers often don't intervene in the processes of forgetting. Nevertheless, no matter how much we may hope that students make time outside class to revise things, we don't really have any right to expect this to happen. Students are just like teachers - busy people with all kinds of pressures on their time. As such, it is up to us as teachers to take more responsibility for ensuring that language is explicitly recycled within our classes and for making sure we revise regularly.

However, the way the majority of coursebook series are written and structured militates against language being recycled in class. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, most coursebooks don't consider teaching the language of typical conversations or typical examples of grammar. Instead, they start off with grammar meanings and rules. Secondly, they don't start out with typical chunks of vocabulary in use, but with single words - or, at best, collocations. Thirdly, they look at skills, with an over-emphasis on authentic reading texts and interview-based listening activities.

One problem with setting out to teach grammar rules is that this often results in an attempt to produce original or 'interesting' contexts in which to practise the language. The fact that many coursebooks are based around a very similar structural syllabus, with the present simple being followed by the present continuous, followed by the past simple, and so on, means that such contexts are one of the few means available to writers to distinguish their product. However, funny or creative contexts for common everyday structures actually make life harder for students. They present sentences students won't use or hear being used outside of the classroom and won't see recycled within their coursebooks. At the same time, these examples deny students the chance to meet the more common, everyday, 'mundane' examples of the grammar - the things they are actually far more likely to hear, and thus the things that are worth spending more time recycling.

A further problem is that traditionally, the grammar in coursebooks has tended to come in one big block. It is as though students' language problems are seen as being an illness, with grammar at the root of the ailment, whilst the study of structures and rules is some kind of super aspirin! Students are required to focus on structures in glorious isolation from each other and are given little time to digest the information offered. They may spend two or three days looking at, for instance, the present perfect. Then, before they have had time to fully digest this, they are off onto the next structure. Whole sections of books get expunged of certain structures so that one or two can be focused on. As such, recycling very rarely happens. In real conversation, however, grammar does not work like this. In fact, the recycling of chunks, expressions, questions and answers is commonplace.

Teaching with *Innovations* – Module 8: Revision and Recycling

If we spend less time looking at structures in isolation and more time looking at grammaticalised chunks of lexis - such as:

I haven't decided yet, I just haven't had time, I've never heard of him, I've always wanted to go there

then students are more likely to be exposed to the common patterns of the language more often. It is obviously good to look at grammar from time to time, but it is better to have smaller grammar points more often, and to have the same structures being refocused on often, in different ways at different times.

A third problem is the fact that coursebooks rarely contain enough conversations. Many coursebooks opt for listenings that are predominantly interview-based. The conversations, such as they are, often emerge from nowhere and are simply question-answer, question-answer. *Innovations* comes from a different starting point: it takes topics of conversation and considers where they come from, how they start and how they develop. Obviously, there are many formulaic starting points, and being familiar with these and adept at using them is important in terms of controlling how to have fluent conversations.

Those who learn a language as a mother tongue are naturally adept at this - native speakers constantly repeat the same openings, ask the same questions, have very similar conversations. We have language naturally recycled for us. Children learn the present perfect not through the study of rules and forms, but by having their parents ask them: *Have you brushed your teeth? Have you washed your hands?* and so on! Coursebooks tend to shy away from this kind of approach, partly for reasons of economy - conversation takes up more paper! - but there are also marketing reasons involved. Conversations tend to look denser on the page, and a photo or some white space is more pleasing on the eye. However, students learn language from language and if we wish to take revision seriously, conversation needs to be far more central to what we teach in class.

A further problem with some coursebooks is their over-use of authentic materials. Authentic texts are often inadequately graded and force difficult and obscure words into the classroom, where teachers are then required either to tell students to ignore or guess them or to try and think up extra examples for them. To then add insult to injury, these words are hardly ever recycled within the coursebook series themselves. By writing dialogues and texts themselves, coursebook writers can have a far greater degree of control over the language students meet, and ensure that language gets recycled over time. This, in turn, gives teachers more chances to ask similar questions about language each time they meet it in class, thus aiding revision.

One final problem is that coursebooks tend not to recycle topics over a series. Topics frequently vary from level to level. However, as anyone who has ever learned a language outside of class will testify, it takes time to get good at having conversations about certain common topics. Coursebooks, therefore, need to take this on board. Topics need to be revisited and students need to have the chance to revise what they've learned already and extend what they can do around the subject. *Innovations* tries to ensure that there's plenty of explicit recycling of topics, conversations and language.

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