

Window-dressing vs cross-dressing in the EFL sub-culture

Scott Thornbury

Mario Rinalucci is justifiably contemptuous of the superficiality and small-mindedness of current EFL coursebook content. By extension, he condemns as superficial and small-minded the EFL sub-culture that produces and uses these texts. I am not so sure, however, that to extrapolate in this way is entirely fair: I know few, if any, teachers who strongly identify with the values promoted by the books they are using, and I know a good few who deliberately set out to subvert these values. I also credit teachers with the common sense to realise why their coursebooks are the way they are. Few teachers are naïve enough to expect the global publishing industry to produce and market books which – because of their content – would end up either gathering dust in Third World warehouses or being piled up in the street and torched. Was there ever a time, after all, when EFL texts didn't provoke a snicker or a sneer?

And yet ... and yet ... I can't help wishing Mario was right. Do we really have to be permanently enslaved to what he calls the 'UK EFLese subculture' and its trivial concerns? So long as grammar rules, the answer, I fear, is yes. As I have argued elsewhere (Thornbury 1998), the global marketing of English exploits the addictiveness of grammar in much the same way as the tobacco industry exploits the addictiveness of nicotine. This obsessive concern for form means that coursebook topics and texts are rarely tapped for their communicative potential, but exist solely as vehicles for language presentation and practice. Their capacity to engage the learner cognitively or affectively is a secondary concern, hence their banality. As Grady (1997) puts it, 'The textbook represents all types of issues and all types of discourse as not requiring much thought or action beyond the decision as to the appropriate grammatical structure – everything is reducible to form' (p. 9).

Form is safe. It sells books. Meaning, relevance, engagement: these are unstable, fickle, not safe. Nor marketable. 'Don't rock the boat' is the message writers receive from their publishers. It won't sell. As Mario says, the avoidance of an explicit ideology is itself powerfully ideological. With EFL publishing controlled by ever fewer and ever bigger monopolies, one can't help but see parallels with other supposedly non-ideological global marketing operations. Hollywood and MacDonalds spring to mind.

Publishers are quick to respond to such gripes by arguing that they now take a much more responsible atti-

tude towards content. Nowadays coursebooks deal with such global concerns as ecology, feminism, land-mines, Third World development etc. Indeed, in some countries, such as Spain, it is a requirement that coursebooks for use in schools incorporate a cross-curricular focus and deal with themes (*temas transversales*) such as human rights and sexual equality. Moreover, publishers issue their writers with detailed guidelines as to how to 'help guard against sexual and racial stereotyping and to encourage the use of inclusive language wherever possible' (to quote from just one of these guidelines). Thanks to this awareness-raising effort, many of the iniquities relating to gender bias in textbooks – such as those identified by Porreca (1984) – have been remedied.

But to what extent is all this simply window-dressing? My own experience of writing for the Spanish market, for example, has taught me that the cross-curricular focus means that, so long as you make passing reference, in the Teacher's Book, to the *temas transversales*, everyone is happy. Thus, a unit about pop music is justified as being concerned with 'education for sexual equality' on the grounds that, because some of the musicians are female, it promotes 'non-discrimination in the pop music scene' (Palencia and Thornbury 1998 p. 78). This issue is not discussed in the unit in question, nor was it the grounds for choosing this particular topic. Of course it wasn't. But everyone is happy.

Take gender bias – again. Much has been written – and much has been done – to increase the visibility of women in EFL texts, so that it matches their visibility in the real world. People of different ethnicity, age and physical ability are also coming into view – perhaps not in proportion to their real world visibility – but a start has been made. As the guidelines from my publishers point out: 'While [these guidelines] focus principally on sexist bias, the ultimate aim is to avoid discriminatory language and stereotypical images in whatever context (e.g. age, class, ethnic origin, disability etc.).'

Etc? Etc? What does that 'etc.' conceal? I'll tell you what it conceals: *sexual preference*. Gays and lesbians: a minority so taboo that publishers dare not speak its name. Yet the issue of gay invisibility is a good measure of the industry's moral integrity. Where are the coursebook gays and lesbians? They are nowhere to be found. They are still firmly in the coursebook closet. Coursebook people are never gay. They are either married or studiously single. There are no same-sex cou-

ples in EFL coursebooks. There are not even same-sex flatmates: coursebook people live with their families, on their own or with their opposite-sex partners. Coursebook family trees and family photos are rigorously heterosexual. The sexuality of famous lesbians and gays who make it into coursebooks – such as Martina Navratilova, Rudolf Nureyev, Oscar Wilde or Quentin Crisp – is never even alluded to, let alone mentioned explicitly. In the *New Headway English Course* (Soars & Soars 1996) the writers and/or their publishers tie themselves in knots trying to avoid having to say that W H Auden's *Funeral Blues* (which includes the line 'He is dead') is a love poem written by one man in memory of another: 'A loved one has died. What in general does the poet want the rest of the world to do?' etc. (p. 123).

In no coursebook or EFL text does the word *gay* appear. Yet the *Collins COBUILD Dictionary* (1995) gives it four diamonds in terms of frequency: it is in their top two frequency bands, which in turn represent the top 1,900 words in the language. These words 'account for approximately 75% of all English usage – so their importance is obvious' (p. xiii). Not obvious enough to include in *Headway*, however.

Even when coursebooks are bold enough to treat what until recently have been taboo topics, homosexuality is still a no-no. *Cutting Edge Intermediate* (Cunningham & Moor 1998), for example, has a unit which deals with 'some controversial laws and issues around the world' (p. 117). These include euthanasia, gun control, the decriminalization of drugs and post-menopausal pregnancy – but not gay-related issues, such as homosexual age of consent, gays in the army, gay marriage, gay adoption, or even cross-dressing.

'One of the most widely examined manifestations of sexist attitudes is omission', says Porreca (1984: 706). Gayness is about as omitted as anything can be. The EFL situation mirrors the way Hollywood used to be, where 'gay characters and references to the existence of homosexuality were routinely laundered off the screen for the better part of half a century' (Russo 1987 p. 63). And it is not just the coursebooks that are de-gay. Significantly, the issue of heterosexism is glaringly absent from discussions of materials bias and cultural content. Porreca herself (op. cit.) makes no mention of it. Nor does Grady (op. cit.). Nor, curiously, does Mario. Even Nelson (1993), in an article entitled 'Heterosexism in ESL', ignores the issue of gay invisibility in EFL or ESL materials. Why is this – given the relatively high proportion of gays and lesbians in EFL? Why are we so invisible about our invisibility?

The answer, I suspect, is that no one in their right mind expects things to change. Anyone who thinks publishers are going to include explicit gay content is living in cloud cuckoo land. They'll do CONCEPTION, BIRTH, BABIES, ILLNESS, DEATH, RELIGION and all the other topics on Mario's list before they do HOMOSEXUALITY. The EFL world may be ready for woman mechan-

ics and house-husbands and mixed-race couples and post-menopausal pregnancy. But it is not ready for gay men and women. It is not that the EFL subculture, as Mario defines it, is hostile to gayness. It is more a case of embarrassment, even fear, coupled with an instinctive feeling that homosexuality and education do not mix. A case of: I don't care what they do, so long as they don't do it in the coursebooks and frighten the students.

Nevertheless, the failure even to address the issue raises doubts about the sincerity of publishers' hand-on-heart PC-ness. 'A significant and growing number of people are concerned about sexism in language and the general exclusion and invisibility of women and *minority groups*,' read my publisher's guidelines (emphasis added). On the basis of their treatment – or rather lack of treatment – of my minority group, this high moral tone appears to me to be skin-deep and opportunistic. One suspects that the publishers do not themselves identify with this 'significant and growing number of people' who are concerned. (Else why not say 'we are concerned?') Moreover, these concerned people are 'significant' only in the sense that they can influence sales: they are the vast majority of teachers and directors of studies who happen to be women. If the publishers were truly concerned, if they were genuinely 'inclusive', they would not include one minority while excluding another, whatever risks this might run.

Prove me wrong. There are a lot of gay and lesbian teachers out there, and a fair few gay and lesbian students, too, I would guess. Can I ask publishers to do us a favour? If you can't include overt gayness, how about a few covert signs that you really do care? How about a few same-sex flatmates? Unmarried uncles? Holiday postcards from Lesbos or Sitges? Two women booking plane tickets together? Two men sharing a restaurant table or doing the dishes?¹ How about including one or two more 'out' celebrities in your deck of famous people: Boy George and k d lang, for example? You don't have to say they're gay. Maybe they're not. Who cares? But, apart from discreetly acknowledging a significant segment of your clientele, you would be providing those teachers and students who are less afraid of homosexuality with a means – should they choose to use it – of unlocking the classroom closet and allowing gay and lesbian issues to emerge into the light of day. As Apple (1992) argues: 'Teachers have a long history of mediating and transforming text material when they employ it in classrooms. Students bring their own classed, raced, and gendered biographies with them as well. They, too, accept, reinterpret and reject what counts as legitimate knowledge selectively.' (p. 10). This reinterpretation and transformation process would be made a little easier if publishers (and their writers) were to take a few dainty steps up Queer Street themselves.

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Notes

1. As an example, I offer the only instance I have found of covert gay imagery in all the many books I have combed through while writing this article: it's from *Accelerate*.



Excuse me,
has this town
got a hotel with
a disco?