First of all, I would like to thank Freda Mishan (2021) for a fascinating and insightful article into English language teaching (ELT) coursebooks. She covers a wide range of perspectives and raises many important issues. Although I may have different views on some of these, I think she has done a great service in helping me look with fresh eyes at what many teachers take for granted: the humble yet ubiquitous ELT coursebook.

Like most teachers, I have little input into the choice of coursebooks I use. Hence, many of the points Mishan makes are interesting, even important, but essentially irrelevant in my classroom as I have no control over coursebook content. I will return to this point later. However, her article needs to be read and pondered (and acted on) by ELT publishers.

She notes the need ‘to declare my own context and experience’ (p. 3). Our contexts have overlapped; I have worked in Europe, Asia and Australasia. The non-overlapping parts may give rise to the points of difference, such as the Asian preference for US English and culture rather than the UK-centric focus of European ELT, and the local flavour of English as a second language (ESL) materials in New Zealand and Australia.

Her range of coursebook examples (adult, general English) is limited, and covers, in my experience, a very small proportion of the coursebooks available. Mishan ignores coursebooks for exam teaching, business English and very young learners. She adds ‘even though [my critique] may apply to others’. I am not sure that it does apply to other coursebooks, however. Although I have used various editions of English File (e.g., Latham-Koenig, Oxenden, & Seligson, 2016), Headway (e.g., Soars & Soars, 2003) and English Unlimited (e.g., Rea & Clementson, 2011), which she mentions, most of my learners are in some kind of formal education, or preparing for a type of examination, or both. She makes no mention of coursebooks for English for academic purposes (EAP) or young learners or content and language integrated learning (CLIL), which are different from each other and from coursebooks for teaching adults general English. This could be overcritical as Mishan has defined her context and it would be impossible to cover more than a section of published ELT coursebooks. However, as her selection for critique is homogenous and not representative of ELT coursebooks, many of her points, detailed below, would not apply to a consideration of a wider range of coursebooks.

The pros (Section 2 ‘Why coursebooks?’) can be summed up in a single word: practicality. ‘The reliance of the ELT profession on these conveniently packaged materials is [...] unquestionable’ (p. 4). The negative argument in favour of coursebooks is also important: What else would we use? These two points are very valid. For all the teachers’ room grumbling about coursebooks, my job would be a lot harder without them. Mishan’s repeated use of the word ‘reliance’ suggests a crutch and one that teachers use, which ignores the fact that for almost all of my classes I have been obliged to use a specific coursebook. Oxford University Press’s English File 4th edition intermediate has ten different items, which is not what I would call convenient (Oxford University Press, n.d.). They have, for example, ditched the CD-ROM, but still have audio CDs.

Section 3 covers criticisms of coursebooks. Section 3.1 is about money and ‘the concessions that coursebooks […] make for commercial reasons’ (p. 8). I do not think it an accident that the very
first sentence of her article talks about the ‘the long and lucrative’ history of ELT publishing or that this is her first point of criticism. The aim of a publisher, like any business, is to make money. If they can do so by publishing the perfect book, that is great. If they can do so by publishing anything less, that is great (for them) too. The ‘great compromise’ (Bell & Gower, 2011) is the Cinderella’s slipper of Mishan’s title, ‘really only a fit for one context, not the “one size fits all” it purports to be’ (p. 9). Although her analogy does not quite work (it is not clear to me what the ‘Cinderella context’ she refers to is), the point is still valid. The emphasis on money ‘unquestionably compromises pedagogy [which] is admitted by authors themselves’ (p. 9). This statement alone is shocking. In what industry would designers admit to creating a substandard product to make more money—not, it should be noted, to reduce costs and make a cheaper product?

Mishan describes her section on culture (3.2) as the heart of the article: ‘how to present language essential for attaining L2 competence within an acceptable cultural frame of reference’ (p. 11). Her criticisms are valid, but I feel she takes criticism too far. She says that ‘in many non-Western contexts, [learners] balk at culturally alien behaviour’ (p. 14). My learners have been curious, occasionally confused, sometimes surprised, but there has been no balking. This, however, probably points to the success that publishers have had in balancing on ‘the cultural tightrope between the diversity of cultures which [the ELT coursebook tries] to portray and to serve’. Here, the absence of coursebooks for young learners is notable: in the locally produced books I have used there is Maria from Russia, Min-jun from Korea or Kenji from Japan, who interact with characters from English speaking countries and who exchange cultural information. (‘We take our shoes off when you come inside.’) Such materials are widely used in state schools where English is often compulsory.

Mishan says it is ‘difficult [for learners] to identify with the lives they see represented in coursebooks’ (p. 14) before going on to acknowledge that ‘educationalists might maintain that exposure to different experiences is what learning all about’ (p. 14). As an ‘educationalist’, there is no ‘might’ about it. In my teaching contexts, past and present, almost all learners were very interested in exactly such experiences. The more general issue here is that—for my students at least—this kind of issue is simply not relevant. If learners are asked whether they identify with the people in coursebooks, I presume they will say ‘no’. If they are not asked, will this even cross their minds? I have never heard an unsolicited comment on the cultural content of coursebooks. One learner asked, after a discussion on the content of coursebooks in general, ‘Will this help me get 6.5 in IELTS [International English Language Testing System]?’ In my experience, learners are focused elsewhere.

As mentioned, Mishan’s limited range of coursebook examples perhaps undermines some of her criticism. In Section 3.3, for example, she says the ELT publishing empire ‘only minimally acknowledges [World Englishes]’. Most of the coursebooks I have used have had a range of contexts and accents, both native and non-native, inner circle and outer circle, although the people represented are distinctly middle class. How relevant world Englishes are for students is questionable. Only those students at the highest levels, and usually those who have spent time in an English-speaking country, are able to recognize that one accent is different from another, let alone identify where it might be from.

Section 3.4 criticizes the fictional Britain portrayed in ELT coursebooks. I can only presume this criticism reflects her own European experience and is certainly not true in other contexts. The school I worked for in Korea, for example, paid a bonus for North American teachers because ‘they sounded like the coursebooks’. As a new teacher I was told to ‘teach what I speak’. This also applied to cultural background. Students would ask me about New Zealand, not because they were planning to go, but just because that is where I am from.

Section 3.5, on the ‘shaky relationship’ (p. 18) between second language acquisition (SLA) research and the coursebook, is Mishan’s ‘strongest reservation about coursebook dominance in the language teaching field’. Teachers, in my experience, do not read academic SLA literature and certainly not for lesson preparation. There are a number of reasons for this: lack of access is an initial stumbling block and even with access, teachers are not trained to find relevant studies or how to read them, let alone critique them. Teachers rely on ‘ELT names’ (Thornbury, Harmer, Scrivener et al.), who ‘translate’ SLA research for the day-to-day realities of teaching, a fact Mishan acknowledges later. Mishan notes earlier
that new or busy teachers appreciate having reliable material (p. 4). This is very true, and I would say applies to all teachers. It saves time and energy, and it gave me, as a new teacher, confidence that what I was doing had been sanctioned by experts.

Mishan says (section 3.6) that ELT in the West has been under a ‘Communicative dictatorship’ for half a century. This is strong, unequivocally critical language. As a teacher, I was born and bred into the communicative approach and I cannot even imagine any other option. Language is social and is fundamentally about communication. One student I had was a businessman who explicitly did not want business English. He explained that for the ‘business stuff’ he used professional interpreters. He needed to talk about football or the weather or family with prospective business partners outside the business meetings. This student did not want to learn a language to negotiate, but to communicate.

Having ‘put the coursebook in the dock’ (p. 6), Mishan’s final section contains ‘ways forward?’ Her overall criticism is that the ‘global’ coursebook ‘falls between two stools’ (p. 27) and part of the solution is that publishers should ‘follow the lead of researchers in the area of technology and language learning’ (p. 28). Mishan’s suggestion would be sensible and practical for almost any other industry, but for ELT publishers this is, quite frankly, laughable. About five years ago, a coursebook made reference to ‘the CD-ROM’ (i.e., part of the set of learning materials). My student, who was about 25 and preparing for post-graduate studies in the UK, asked me what a CD-ROM was. After a moment’s thought, I said it was like an app but on a disk. ‘Why is it on a disk?’ she asked. I had no answer for that. Anecdote is not, of course, the singular form of data, but she was not laughing at the use of outdated technology; SHE HAD NO IDEA WHAT IT WAS. Expecting ELT publishing to do anything even vaguely competent with technology is wishful thinking. Interactive whiteboards, anyone? Mishan’s proposed solution, while theoretically sensible, is unrealistic. Perhaps this is why she added the question mark. I am not aware of any materials that have been developed (or even adopted) by publishing houses for online teaching such as we have witnessed in the COVID crisis, and—at time of writing—it has been a year since my institutions stopped face-to-face lessons. Even when face-to-face, my lessons over the past few years have been almost entirely paperless. This, I realize, is not an option for many teaching contexts, but is becoming more and more widespread where I teach. Minimally, homework is assigned, done, submitted and checked without recourse to a photocopier. Mishan makes an aside about copyright law (p. 7) and while this might not an ELT coursebook issue per se and therefore outside the scope of Mishan’s article, it certainly is an ELT publishing issue. E-materials, from established ELT publishers and from elsewhere, are becoming more widespread. Teachers are resourceful, creative and generous. They find or create material for their students’ particular needs and they share it. Something you never hear in a teachers’ room: ‘I’ve got a great activity for narrative tenses. I’ll give you a copy for $5.’ Yes, teachers (and students) use pdfs of published materials, just as teachers use photocopies. This is not going to change in the foreseeable future.

At the beginning, I promised to return to point of not having control over my choice of coursebook. My ultimate response to Mishan’s article is to ask myself what I DO have control over in the classroom. The coursebook is a tool and like any tool it should be used with care. I do not write every single word on the whiteboard, nor do I teach every single word in the coursebook. I might not be able to choose the coursebook I use, but I can control how I use it. The choices I make in this respect are based on some of the issues Mishan raises and after reading her article, I am better informed about making those decisions.

References
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