

Book Review: True Colors by Jay Maurer and Irene Schoenberg

Luis Fernando Gómez J.
Universidad de Antioquia

"Materials are, in fact, an essential element within the curriculum and do more than simply lubricate the wheels of learning. At their best they provide concrete models of desirable practice, they act as curriculum models, and at their very best they fulfill a teacher development role. Good materials also provide models for teachers to follow in developing their own materials." (Nunan, David. The Learner-Centered Curriculum. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Introduction: The General Environment of a Textbook

In what follows I will provide an analysis of what may be called the general environment of the textbook. Basically four questions concerning the environment of the materials will be examined, namely: view of language, methodology, learner role and teacher role. The central question here is to find out if the environment created by the material promotes effective language learning. The evaluation process, then, helps us gain a better understanding of what is effective, what is less effective, and what appears to be of no use at all.

A general examination of the environment created by Jay Maurer's textbook shows that the **purpose** is clearly defined ("Student Book 1 is for false beginners"), the **type** of exercise effectively and economically accomplishes the purpose, the **ratio** of language given/learner task is economic, the **content** is interesting, the **authenticity** is reflected in meaningful and challenging tasks, and the **level of difficulty** is adequate.

With realistic expectations made on these

materials and considering that language materials strictly speaking are **only part** of the co-operative management of language learning, one can say that **True Colors: Student Book 1** (TC SB1) establishes a complete and adequate general environment for English learning and, thus, will surely promote effective language learning when applied in the countries of the "Andean" region.

A **detailed evaluation** of the material shows that it clearly reflects the principles by which it has been written. True Colors is a communicative course and thus it has construct validity; that is, it is theoretically valuable. The empirical validity of the textbook was also evaluated because the materials were given to students under real-life circumstances, and it was found that they actually work well with a class.

The View of Language in TC SB1

A close view at the 10 units in TC-SB1 reveals not only that the materials are communicatively based, but also that full account has been taken of all factors which contribute to successful communication: a confident command of structure, a good

working vocabulary, sensitivity to the differing types of language appropriate in various situations, familiarity with a wide range of text types, an integrated balance between the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

There is also an implicit admission that language is complex: there is no attempt to oversimplify language for students, and the author has elected to organize the course into units, each containing a manageable body of new language to focus on.

In general, the textbook reflects a clear awareness that adult learners bring a certain degree of linguistic experience to the learning of English, and this experience can be used to good advantage.

The Methodology in TC-SB1

The keynote here seems to be flexibility. The author has offered a learning package which can be regarded more as a teaching resource than just a textbook. There is a drawback, however, concerning the necessary order of presentation in TC-SB1: it has to be used as a traditional textbook in that one has to begin at the beginning (Unit 1, then Unit 2, etc.). It is not possible to start at different points in the book basing this decision on different students' linguistic needs or thematic interests. This is so mainly because of the sequencing established for grammar presentation and practice.

The Learner Role in TC-SB1

TC-SB1 is designed for false beginners and adult beginners. They will certainly find the textbook stimulating and interesting. The author has sought to bring pleasure and challenge to the learning process while keeping the materials firmly based on communicative principles.

TC-SB1 provides opportunity for learners to speak, listen, read and write for a purpose, and for a purpose which is likely to be relevant for them. The textbook tries to include authentic tasks that learners may have to cope with in the outside world.

The materials see learners as individuals with different personalities, interests and learning styles, and encourage autonomy in that students may be led to take a certain amount of responsibility for their own learning.

In TC-SB1, the author has aimed to keep faith with the learners by providing, in addition to the textbook itself, a set of additional resources (tape recordings, for example).

In recognition of grammatical and lexical consolidation in a course with a communicative emphasis, many exercises focus on structures and vocabulary development.

Concerning grammar and vocabulary, there seems to be no recognition that different learners learn in different ways at different times and at a different pace. Since not all the learners move forward at the same pace, it would be wise if TC-SB1 would contain exercises and activities which could be used as extra materials for faster learners. Also, the textbook could contain more review units (not every five units) so that learners could measure their own progress and needs and could move to further units in case they control the language materials under evaluation.

The Role of the Teacher in TC-SB1

An apparent drawback of this textbook is that it provides for teacher control most of the times. This means that the author could introduce the features of flexibility

and variety for teachers too, so that they could adapt the materials to their own approach and style. There might be times when teachers would prefer to keep a low profile as learners work on a fluency exercise in groups or in pairs. There might also be times in which teachers would want to be in control of all factors in the class.

The Spheres of Human Development in TC-SB1

When evaluating textbooks an additional factor of human development can be considered, namely, four basic spheres or domains as follows: the **cognitive**, the **social**, the **affective** and the **entertaining** domains. These spheres of human development will be analyzed in relationship with TC-SB1.

First, the **cognitive** sphere refers to all the cognitive operations involved in the learning process. The textbook favors the two basic stages followed by adult students while they are learning a language, these stages are **reception** and **production**. There is an adequate equilibrium between both of them. In relationship to the presentation of the language, the three basic blocks of the book (oral communication, skill support, grammar) allow for the students to progress with language. Even though the book is designed for a communicative course, it takes into account grammar as the foundation for communication. This is an advantage because some communicative texts neglect grammar, and it is really a mistake because students need to get in contact with the **linguistic system** of the language as an important condition for becoming able to communicate in the language. According to this, TC-SB1 gives attention to the development of the **linguistic skills** as well as the **communicative abilities**. There is a

specific aspect that could be improved: in the text there are not many activities that demand critical thinking from the students. For example, the reading comprehension exercises at the beginning of all units are very mechanical.

Second, the **social** sphere, which refers to the social aspect, in the book is really very well developed. TC-SB1 encourages interaction as a basic strategy for achieving communication. Individual reception, as a previous stage for having group production, means interaction. The situations presented correspond to daily life situations, so they have natural elements that really reflect the social sphere of students.

Third, the **affective** sphere has to do with feelings. The material presents situations that affect students. In the conversations proposed, the likes and dislikes, for example, are important.

Finally, concerning the **entertaining** sphere, pleasure is very important for human beings. In this, TC-SB1 includes fun activities such as games (interactive games).

The Specific Environments (Units) in TC-SB1

Having provided an analysis of the very positive aspects in TC-SB1, in what follows I will refer to more specific "negative" aspects. My analysis must not be considered as a pejorative view of the textbook but rather as a way to include comments which could help teachers make changes in the material which are likely to be beneficial in terms of its effectiveness. In this way, then, I consider this section as a formative and illuminative evaluation which could contribute to making the materials better.

Presentation and Grammar Practice in TC-SB1

Some of new **grammar items** in the textbook are not exactly meaningful; that is, they are presented out of **context**. Although they are presented in a systematic way and they are related to what has been previously learned, some grammar items are not appropriate to a given context nor are they relevant to learners' needs and interests; concerning the **quantity** of grammar per unit, it seems that too many grammar structures are introduced at a time.

Instructions should not only be presented in a clear and concise manner, but also illustrated through examples. This should be so because complex skills are learned and routinized after earlier use of controlled processes. Sometimes instructions are long and confusing or even ambiguous.

Concerning **exemplification**, this should be provided for each of the tasks or activities proposed to students for them to have a clear pattern to follow (in some units, for instance, no examples are provided to guide the student to know exactly what to do)

As for **practice activities** for new structures, they are adequate in number, varied, meaningful, and sufficiently controlled. However, some are not appropriate to the cultural context of the "Andean" region nor are they relevant to the learners' needs and interests.

Illustration and space distribution are adequately controlled. Key information is properly highlighted, grammar is nicely presented in boxes containing tips as a clear strategy for explanation. However, these **grammar charts** could be clearer for

the students. They will probably not visually establish the difference between the grammatical rule and the example that shows the rule. It would then be useful to make the difference between the metalanguage and the language itself.

In general, there is correspondence between **titles** and dialogues of each unit. Also, in general, the titles reflect a specific grammatical item of each unit.

Concerning **activities**, one must say that true/false activities may be confusing since they contain statements which cannot be deduced from the dialogues. Activities, in general, do not provide too many opportunities for the students to be creative. Most activities are designed for the teacher to simply control students' production. Other activities appear to be isolated.

Activities specifically related to Reading Comprehension need to be revised; most of these exercises just require to use endoforic information; they do not demand the student to go beyond the text. These are, actually, "comprehension exercises", but not reading activities. Exercises ask for a controlled or closed answer, while activities demand open answers, and of course, they cannot be controlled. In reading comprehension activities, it is necessary to demand from the students the use of exoforic information. This means to propose more critical tasks.

Reading comprehension exercises seem to be monotonous. All units propose the same type of exercise: "answer true, false or I don't know" and "circle the correct answer". Only in a few units one finds a different kind of exercise which is in relation to vocabulary in context. In other units vocabulary is not exploited in the first

conversation. It is necessary then to work more on vocabulary, specifically vocabulary in context. The book needs to be enriched in strategies for working vocabulary.

Finally, the following **general comments** could be considered:

- There is not too much variety of texts. For example, it would have been good to include advertisements, news, recipes, poems, short stories, songs, and so on. The presence of non-verbal language is also necessary, and the use of communicative strategies for exploiting this kind of language. It is also necessary to work more on cultural aspects, maybe to place special emphasis and to underline cultural differences in the English language.
- Sometimes one has the impression that most of the material is adapted, and the presence of authentic material is neglected. It will be interesting to include scientific and literary texts with their corresponding references. One positive aspect is that the textbook develops interesting and up-dated material, for example, about computers.
- Concerning writing, there is more emphasis on **composing** rather than on **productive writing**. This means that students need more creative material for developing the most difficult ability, that is to say **writing**. Something similar happens with **listening**, in fact, there is more emphasis on listening, which is more receptive and mechanical, while listening is productive and discriminative.
- As for **motivation**, the material has variety and pace. The subject matter of reading texts and listening passages is

likely to be of genuine interest for the learners, taking into account their age, social and cultural background, and their learning objectives. The material is attractive, its activities encourage the personal involvement of the learners in the learning process, and it incorporates problem-solving elements in the learning activities.

Conclusion

In evaluating TC-SB1 it was necessary to examine the ways in which teaching and learning are sensitive to the language learning process. The evaluation relates then not only to the aims and contents of the materials, but also to the procedures for working with the textbook and related performing tasks in the classroom. It was necessary, thus, to evaluate many factors from the view of language to learner performance to teacher role and specific environment of the materials. From this, one may conclude that because TC-SB1 has both theoretical and empirical validity, the teachers may decide on the very few adaptations and corrections proposed. These are included with the sole purpose of contributing to the eventual improvement of the textbook.

Reference

MAUERER, Jay and SCHOENBERG, Irene. (1998) *True Colors. An EFL Course for Real Communication*. New York, Longman.