Telling Tales: Changing Discourses of Identity in the ‘Global’ UK-Published English Language Coursebook

Introduction

The English language coursebook is a pedagogical tool but also a cultural artefact and, in evaluating any cultural artefact, there must be a consideration of the culture within which this artefact is produced and the prevailing discourses that have shaped it, as well as its own role in influencing current and future discourses. Lave and Wenger (1991: 52–3), in discussing the situated nature of learning, write that:

Activities, tasks, functions and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning.

These broader systems of relations are given little attention in literature on the design and evaluation of language teaching materials and tasks. The primary focus of such literature has been to provide the reader with the tools to analyse whether and in what respects materials and tasks reflect ‘established’ and ‘accepted’ principles of language teaching methodology. There have been few in-depth explorations of why the coursebook is as it is, or of possible links between coursebook content and broader changing cultural, historical and socio-political systems of relations. This chapter explores the stories learners are asked to tell about themselves in global UK-published English language coursebooks written for and used by young adults studying in a multiplicity of contexts. In doing this I draw on perspectives from the fields of cultural and media studies, discourse studies, narrative theory, psychotherapy and social,
cross-cultural and critical psychology and suggest that an understand- 
ing of powerful discourses of identity can help us answer the question 
of why the global coursebook is as it is. I conclude by considering the 
implications for all those involved in the writing and publication of 
global coursebooks, as well as the teachers and learners who use them.

What do we mean by ‘discourses of identity’?

Those working in the field of critical discourse analysis (CDA) have 
emphasised that ‘discourse’ is ‘more than just language use: it is lan-
guage use, whether in speech or writing, seen as a type of social practice’ 
(Fairclough, 1992: 8). Gee (1999: 7–8) expands on the notion of lan-
guage use as social practice to assert that discourses are intimately bound 
up with identity, since discourses concern ‘how language is used “on 
site” to enact activity and identities’. Thus:

when we speak or write we always take a particular perspective on what 
the ‘world’ is like. This involves us in taking perspectives on what is 
‘normal’ and not; what is ‘acceptable’ and not; what is ‘right’ and not, 
what is ‘real’ and not; what is the ‘way things are’ and not; what is 
the ‘way things ought to be’ and not; what is ‘possible’ and not; what 
‘people like us’ or ‘people like them’ do and don’t; and so on (p. 2).

These perspectives on the world are reflected in the ways people narrate 
the stories of their lives, and ‘it is in narrative that we construct identi-
ties’ (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006: 130). Those working in the field of nar-
native theory have pointed to how individual narratives are themselves 
inextricable from social narratives; for Stephenson (2000: 117–18), ‘one 
way in which individuals strive to make sense of their lives is to try to 
relate their own story to a broader cultural or historical narrative’. A key 
point made by Somers and Gibson (1994: 73) is that these broader narra-
tives are, though, dependent on context: ‘The extent and nature of any 
given repertoire of narratives available for appropriation is always histor-
ically and culturally specific’. An inevitable result of such historical and 
cultural specificity is that in any cultural context certain narratives will 
be dominant, secondary or suppressed. The consequence is that ‘narra-
tive structures set certain limits over who we can be’ (Gergen, 1999: 70) 
and ‘those who cannot identify with the dominant narrative are likely 
to feel alienated and excluded’ (Stephenson, 2000: 118).

The notion that certain narratives come to be dominant in and across 
particular cultural contexts at particular times means that narrative 
analysis needs to address questions of ideology and power; questions