

Learning English

Coursebooks and the curse of celebrity

Opinion

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When we teach English as an international language, what are we also teaching? As language teachers we are in a curious and unique position. We do not have a fixed subject in the same way that the history teacher teaches history or the geography teacher teaches geography. The language teacher teaches grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, but these are all “how”. They are not “what”. Language teachers are cursed with no content, but also blessed because everything can be our content.

Is the “what” we teach culture? Language and cultural studies used to be seen as inseparable. If you learnt English you learned about British people, their way of life, their literature and cultural history. If you were studying American English then you would learn about the US. However, with the rise and recognition of English as an international language, we are faced with the reality that English is no longer the property of the British or the Americans. Some have even gone as far as to suggest that international English has no culture. So, what content do we use to present new language in context?

I believe that two kinds of content have risen to fill the gap that was once provided by cultural content from Britain or the US, and despite claims that international English could be devoid of culture, I think both are cultural. The first is a sort of international culture populated by invented people all travelling around, going to conferences, having fun at weekends, checking in and out of hotels, going to restaurants with international menus and having middle-class worries. This content is safe, it’s not confrontational and it’s almost unbearably bland.

The second kind of content is that of the world of celebrity. Smiling faces of actors such as Brad Pitt or Tom Cruise leap off the page. We teach the vocabulary of nationalities via their most photogenic stars (for example, “Maria Sharapova is Russian. She is from Russia”). We present the grammar of the present perfect by reading about the life and works of a contemporary musician or film director. This kind of content has been on the rise over the last 20 years.

Or at least it seems to be, judging by what is in our materials. I took a



Lindsay who? Hollywood actress Lindsay Lohan attracts photographers’ attention, but for how long? Chris Polk/AP

look at major international coursebooks published in the early 1990s. The average number of celebrities was two. I counted the number of celebrities in three or four international coursebooks from the latter part of this decade. The number had risen to an average of 28.

In a way this is not surprising. Modern materials will try to reflect modern life. Teachers want to feel up to date. Authors and publishers want material that will sell books. And boy, does celebrity sell in other fields. Celebrity sells perfumes, clothing labels, popular magazines, newspapers and television shows. Today’s celebrities are international, they are everywhere and they lead eye-catching lives. Some of them also do good acts, such as supporting charities and raising awareness about important issues. Don’t they make recognisable and motivating material for lessons?

Despite what we may think in the UK or North America, many “international” celebrities are not actually

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that well known. I’ve met many teachers from different countries who complain that they, or their students, do not know who some of these people are. For them it was just another pretty face smiling up from the page.

Celebrity can date quickly. One used to be able to depend on famous people looking more or less the same for a couple of years, but now they change their look every fortnight. If they aren’t changing their physical appearance they are most likely getting into some kind of trouble. As a coursebook writer, this point was brought home to me in 2005, the year that Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston got divorced. I wasn’t personally distressed at the break-up of such a nice-looking Hollywood couple, nor was I caught up in the whole Angelina Jolie angle. No, this event was of significance to me as a writer because that very same year a coursebook of mine was coming out that used Brad and Jennifer as an example of “a married couple”. Everything had to be changed and it was very stressful.

The fact that celebrities may not be known and can date quickly are two practical reasons against their inclusion in international materials. There is also a more ideological reason, and it’s simply that this kind of material does not conform to many

educators’ ideas of what education is about. It’s what gets English coursebooks criticised for being rapid and, as one fellow teacher remarked to me once, “so light that if I don’t hold on tightly it will just float away”. One could argue that the mere presence of celebrities and happy, comfortable people in our materials makes them part of a dissemination of global celebrity culture, a culture that offers us, in the words of Ellis Cashmore, professor of culture and media at Staffordshire University, England, “a distinctive vision, a beguiling one too: one in which there are few limits, an expanding range of opportunities and inexhaustible hope”.

I’m not saying that this kind of content can’t make for interesting lessons. It can. I’m not saying it can’t be motivational. Again, it can. But if we believe that education is about learning, discovering and becoming interested in new things that we didn’t know about before, then this subject matter short-changes us. If we believe that education is about thinking critically about the world we live in and making more sense of it then this, it’s time to get a bit more serious and move on. Let’s wise up, not dumb down.

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