Teachers' and learners' images for coursebooks

Ian McGrath

If, as has been widely claimed, our attitudes and beliefs are reflected in the language we use, it should be possible to gain some insight into teachers' views of English-language coursebooks from the metaphors they use to describe them. A small collection of teacher metaphors (and similes), drawn largely from Hong Kong, is presented and discussed. This is then compared with metaphors supplied by secondary school learners in the same context. The conclusion is drawn that there is value in teachers researching their learners' beliefs and attitudes—in relation to coursebooks and other aspects of the teaching-learning environment—and reflecting on and comparing these with their own. Metaphors may be a conveniently economical way of focusing such reflection.

Introduction

Coursebooks are a central element in teaching-learning encounters, not only in school settings but frequently also in tertiary-level service English contexts. They will tend to dictate what is taught, in what order and, to some extent, how as well as what learners learn. While one factor in their effectiveness will be their inherent suitability for the context, another will be the attitudes of teachers and learners. Since teachers' attitudes to coursebooks are likely to have an impact on how they use them, and learners' attitudes, and learning, will be affected by how teachers use them, it seems vital to seek to understand what these attitudes are. This objective prompted the study of teacher attitudes to coursebooks (as reflected in metaphors and similes) reported in this paper. The paper also discusses parallel data collected from language learners, which differs in important respects from the teacher data. One conclusion drawn is that if teachers are encouraged to investigate learners' attitudes and compare them with their own, the resulting awareness may be a spur to professional self-development.

Identifying metaphors

The preferred method for researching attitudes is the interview, which—compared to a questionnaire, for example—permits issues to be explored in greater depth. The real test of a research method, however, is its fitness for purpose, and for the purposes of the study described below, the decision was taken to employ a minimalistic form of data-collection: respondents were asked to complete in writing the stem 'A coursebook is …' using a metaphor or simile. This procedure was economical in terms of the time needed for administration; the standardized format also

allowed for easy comparison of responses. Moreover, stem-completion had been employed in the attitude studies of Marchant (1992), who elicited US teachers' and trainees' similes for teachers, learners and the classroom, and Cortazzi and Jin (1999), who used the same technique to elicit the metaphors of four rather diverse groups for learning, teaching (and 'the good teacher') and language.

Metaphors and education

An obvious starting-point for the interest in metaphors in the field of education is Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) seminal work, *Metaphors We Live By*. This drew attention to the significance of metaphor in everyday language use and within a decade of its publication educational researchers had begun to make claims in respect of teacher metaphors. For instance, Munby (1986: 201, cited in Thornbury 1991: 194) suggested that 'one fruitful way to begin to understand the substantive content of teachers' thinking is to attend carefully to the metaphors that appear when teachers express themselves'. And Marchant (op. cit.) refers to papers by Tobin and Ulerick (1989) and Tobin (1990) which offer evidence that teachers' classroom practices are consistent with the metaphors they use about teaching. Marchant himself (ibid.), as noted above, elicited similes, on the grounds of their greater transparency, for the words 'teacher', 'student' and 'classroom' from 102 undergraduate students in a teacher preparation programme at an unnamed midwestern US university, and 104 experienced teachers following masters programmes. Factor analysis revealed that respondents' similes could be grouped into eight 'interpretable' factors (e.g. AUTHORITY, CAREGIVING, PRODUCTION, CAPTIVES) and that there was some internal coherence (e.g. similes within the AUTHORITY construct included 'animal trainer' for teacher, 'wild animal' for student and 'jungle' for classroom). One of the suggestions made by Munby and Russell (1989: 1, cited in Marchant op. cit.: 34) is that 'it may be productive for all teachers to become students of metaphors, at least their own metaphors'.

Metaphors in ELT

Within the field of English language teacher education, as reflected in publications for trainers, teachers, and teacher trainees, this has been happening for some time. Woodward (1991) exemplifies and discusses metaphors for courses (and for the classroom, learner, teacher, trainee, and trainer); McGrath (2002: 8), in a book primarily aimed at teachers, includes a task on metaphors for coursebooks; and Ur (1996: 213–4, 223–4) makes metaphors for a lesson the subject of an activity for teacher trainees. An explicit rationale for such activities is provided by Thornbury (op. cit.) who, following Handal and Lauvas (1987) and Elbaz (1983), argues that teachers' images not only reflect their way of thinking about teaching and learning but also *influence* their practice. It is therefore important, Thornbury suggests, for teachers and teacher educators to 'get in touch' with these images so that 'persistent and persuasive metaphors' that might have a 'degenerate effect on conceptualizing, inhibiting the development of fresh insights' (p. 195), can be surfaced and examined. A two-stage approach is suggested, involving awareness-raising (with the data coming from, for example, teachers' discussions of lessons, questionnaires, and teaching practice diaries) and experimentation with new metaphors.

Ian McGrath

The value of metaphors	The assumptions are, then, that there is value in verbalizing attitudes and that metaphoric language is particularly revealing of the subconscious beliefs and attitudes that underlie consciously held opinions. As Martinez, Sauleda, and Huber (2001) put it, using their own metaphor: 'metaphors may function as stepping stones to a new vantage point from which a teacher can look at his or her own practice as an educator from a new perspective' (p. 974). Cortazzi and Jin (op. cit.: 161) make the further points that metaphors 'may *express the meaning more concisely* than a prolix non-metaphorical equivalent' (original emphasis) and, following Ricoeur (1978), 'capture multiple meanings in experience'. Metaphoric language can thus be seen as not simply an economical form of meaning-making but also a way of making sense of experience for oneself and others.

The present paper, which is oriented towards teacher development (TD) rather than teacher education, draws on and develops previous work in a number of ways. It focuses narrowly on metaphors for coursebooks; it provides evidence to support the argument that teachers should become students not only of their own metaphors but also those of their students; and it offers a detailed procedure for a TD workshop.

Images for coursebooks
The collection

In this section I present a selection from my personal collection of images (a mixture of metaphors and similes) for English language coursebooks. The collection, which has been assembled opportunistically over a two-year period, mainly in Hong Kong, consists of data from two sources: (1) approximately 75 teachers of English, mainly secondary school teachers of English in Hong Kong (2) several hundred secondary school pupils in Hong Kong. The latter were collected by the teachers of those pupils and, like those of the teachers, are used here with permission.

Respondents were supplied with a slip of paper on which the stem 'A coursebook is . . .' was given and asked to complete this in writing with a metaphor or simile which represented their own attitude to English-language coursebooks, adding a (written) explanation if they felt their image might not be wholly transparent.

Classification of the data

Some brief notes on how the data was classified may be helpful for those wishing to undertake similar research.

1 all images were listed
2 images appearing to be semantically related were grouped together
3 working categories were devised for each group (e.g. enlightenment, support (direction), source of nourishment, valued knowledge container, authority, source of anxiety and fear); images expressing mixed feelings were set on one side
4 the possibility of higher-order semantic relationships between the provisional categories was considered; as a result, some categories were retained (e.g. 'Authority', 'Source of Anxiety and Fear'), some were renamed (e.g. 'support (direction)' became 'Guidance'), and some more encompassing categories were created (e.g. 'enlightenment', 'source of nourishment', and 'valued knowledge container', together with 'information source', were subsumed under 'Resource')—some of the

initial provisional categorization is, however, still discernible in the horizontal lines within categories

5 scrutiny of the teacher categories led to the notion of a dependence–independence continuum; this is discussed below.

Theme	Instances				
Guidance	map	path	guideline	lighthouse	compass
Support	petrol	belt			
	railing	blind man's stick	anchor	scaffolding	teacher's parachute
Resource	oil in cooking	rice	cake ingredients	daily bread	
	supermarket	convenience store	handbag	umbrella	menu
	salad	music house	rainbow	ring for the finger	
	tool				
	stone	coal mine			
Constraint	road block	millstone	straitjacket		

TABLE 1
A thematic classification of teacher images for English-language coursebooks

Teacher images

In Table 1, teachers' images (the 'instances') have been categorized into four themes: Guidance, Support, Resource, and Constraint. Some images, such as 'a coursebook is a map' or 'a tool' were of course relatively simple to categorize, as Guidance and Resource, respectively. In other cases, the provision by the image-maker of a fuller context or a supplementary explanation has assisted in the attribution, as these examples from the category 'coursebook as Resource' will illustrate:

A textbook is like oil in cooking—*a useful base* ingredient.

Textbooks are like ladies' handbags because *we can take what we need from them* and ladies tend to take handbags wherever they go.

A textbook is the stone from which a sculpture will be made (*needing bits chopped off, added on and occasionally a little crushing*).

The categorization of images for which no explanation was available (e.g. 'a salad', 'a menu' and 'a ring for the finger'), has been inevitably arbitrary.

The themes have been arranged vertically in a rough order which reflects at the top, in the category of Guidance, the apparent acceptance by teachers of at least some degree of *control by* the textbook and—towards the bottom, at the level of Resource—a willingness by the teacher to *take control of* the textbook. While these first three categories express, to different degrees, a relatively positive attitude towards coursebooks, the final theme brings together a range of negative reactions to the constraints imposed by textbooks.

The subdivisions within themes, indicated by horizontal lines, reflect apparent differences of perception within these broad divisions. Had there been a larger number of instances, some of these differences might

Ian McGrath

have emerged as significant enough to argue for the creation of new categories.

While the above themes do seem to accommodate, with a little bit of pushing and squeezing here and there, many of the images proposed by teachers, there is a significant minority that do not lend themselves to this kind of uni-directional classification because they reflect mixed feelings, expressed through explicit comparisons and pro/con statements. Examples include:

> A coursebook is like a choker that can make you look good but can also make another feel suffocated.

> A coursebook is a map (and as such can be deceptive in its apparent simplicity of direction and explanation)

> A textbook is a thick wood, rich, you learn a lot, you see a lot [but] you get entangled, you get lost.

> A coursebook is a smokescreen [subsequently explained as a sop to the parents rather than a guide to what is actually done in class]

> A textbook is like a pair of shoes. It takes time to choose one that you feel comfortable to wear for a long time. A bad pair will kill you, give you blisters. A good one will give you confidence to run, to jump, to fly high.

Such pro-and-con images are not only intriguing, they also testify to the level of thought that can be stimulated by such an apparently simple task. (See Appendix for a suggested exploitation procedure.)

Learner images
Like the teacher images, those of the learners range from the predictable and/or transparent, such as:

- guide
- window to the world
- dumb teacher
- sleeping pills, and
- rubbish

through those which are less predictable and accessible only if an explanation is available (the explanations in brackets are those supplied by the pupils):

- a pair of glasses (which help me to see what the teacher is talking about more)
- a beggar (no one likes to approach it)
- a meteor (that makes you brilliant)
- [like] a glass of water (good for us and make us healthy)
- [like] milk (it nurtures our brains)
- toxic (like CO_2, N_2O, make me feel bored, sleepy, waste my time)
- supermarket (you can get everything there)
- flowers (good, beautiful, make me happy, like to see / bad, wilting, don't like to see)
- dogs (lovely)
- [like] junk food (we like them but they seem not very nutritious)

to the bizarre and impenetrable:

- a mouth of a well
- a child's stick
- a clumsy clown
- a merchant
- a football
- an island.

Among the most vivid are the following:

- an angry barking dog that frightens me in a language I don't understand
- a game that is too hard for me to play
- [like] white bread (which can allay my hunger . . . but is tasteless)

Authority	God's messenger	a bible	an elder	time machine	Superman	a great mind
Resource	window to the world	civilization	the sea of wisdom	a key	teacher	dumb teacher
	a bus dictionary	a motor newspaper	a library	a shrink of English	encyclopaedia	reference
	goldmine	a treasure	knowledge fountains	bottle (of chicken essence)	locker	supermarket
	glass of water fruit basket	milk a beauty	food my cup of			
	tool	money	tea career	key of exam	the eyes for my future	climbing ladder
Support	bridge	stepping stone	bricks	a wall	steel bar	pillow
	parents of mine	my mother	the partner of my life	my friend	a helper	a coach
Guidance	guide	compass	map	signpost		
Constraint	[like] a wall	a barrier	my school uniform			
	glass of water	annoying parent	ugly and terrible girlfriend			
	a stone	piece of rock	a [piece of] lead	heavy mass	mountain	
Boredom	sleeping pills	bed	toxic, like CO_2			
Worthlessness	rubbish bin	toilet paper	blank paper	nothing		
Source of anxiety and fear	a tripping stone	nightmares	lions and tigers	toothache	a devil	professional killer

TABLE 2
A thematic classification of learner images for English-language coursebooks

Ian McGrath

- [like] a strawberry (you can feel sweet but soal [= sour] at the same time—study can be stressful but also very successful)
- [like] my boyfriend, who I hate to see everyday, but I regret I can't see it during tests/exams
- an ugly and terrible girlfriend whom you dislike but have to contact with her
- a bee hive which has sweet honey and a lot of painful stings
- a headache that never gets better.

Table 2 is an attempt at categorization.

Indefinite articles and personal pronouns have been retained where it was felt that they contributed to the meaning, as have individualistic forms of expression (e.g. 'a shrink of English', 'a tripping stone'). Images used to represent mixed feelings (e.g. white bread, strawberry, beehive, my boyfriend, flowers), however, have again been excluded.

It will be noted that Table 2 differs from Table 1 in respect of format. The availability of a larger number of learner images offered a stronger justification for a more refined categorial system (resulting in eight categories rather than four) and fuller illustration (i.e. six columns rather than five). For purposes of illustration, in both tables the most frequently recurring images have been included, together with other images to indicate the range within the dataset. Where only a small number of examples are included for a specific category, it can be assumed that these represent the totality of instances in that set.

Horizontal lines again indicate possible differences of perception within themes. Within the Resource category, for instance, it would be possible to argue for at least three, and possibly as many as seven subdivisions, with possible labels including *Enlightenment/Means of access to learning* ('the sea of wisdom', 'dumb teacher'), *Valued container of knowledge* (e.g. 'goldmine') *and nourishment* ('milk') or *Tool* (access to 'money', good 'career', 'exam' success).

Although considerable thought has gone into the categorization in Tables 1 and 2, this remains speculative (in many cases there is no authority, in the form of an explicit teacher or learner interpretation) for the attribution of a specific metaphor to a theme. It is also arbitrary, in that in several cases a theme is expressed through yet another metaphor (e.g. nourishment, burden). Moreover, the themes themselves have been externally devised rather than generated by the image-makers. (But see procedure suggested in the Appendix, where teachers devise their own categories.)

Given the difficulty of categorization, why attempt to categorize? One reason is that it is a way of imposing order on the responses; another is that because the resulting categories are of wider application they provide more convenient reference points for individuals who wish to compare themselves with others. Beyond this, there is one further application of particular relevance for teacher development: teachers can compare their own views (at the level of thematic category) more easily with those of their learners.

Teacher and learner images compared	What is immediately apparent from a comparison of Tables 1 and 2, even allowing for the fact that there were far more learner respondents than teacher respondents, is that (a) the learner responses cover a much greater range—in the sense that they have been subdivided into more categories, and potentially more subcategories (b) whereas the teacher images for coursebooks are predominantly positive, with only one negative category (Constraint), learner disaffection spans four categories (including Constraint, itself potentially subdivisible, but also encompassing Boredom, Worthlessness and Anxiety/Fear).

Leaving aside the fact that the learner table, like that of the teachers, does not represent the whole picture in that, as illustrated above, there are learner respondents whose images express a tension between the positive and negative, and others whose images were uninterpretable, what other general conclusions might a teacher draw from a consideration of Table 2?

1 Positive responses: many learners seem to attach a great deal of importance to their coursebook; while this might not be so surprising in a context where learners have little or no access to English outside the classroom, this is hardly the case in Hong Kong, and teachers might wish to consider how to get learners to make use of other resources.
2 Negative responses: in some cases, these are extremely powerful; these might relate to the inappropriateness of the textbook (and therefore raise doubts about the process used to select this) or with the way in which the textbook is used.

There are, of course, specific features of any teacher-learning environment and it can be anticipated that these will be reflected both in the attitudes expressed and, to some extent, the source domains for respondents' images (this Hong Kong data, for instance, contains culturally-specific references to the need for a sauce to make chickens' feet more palatable and the use of bamboo in scaffolding). While the issue of cultural specificity and such questions as the relationship between learner metaphors and particular coursebooks are clearly of interest, these lie outside the scope of the present paper.

The differences between teacher and learner images evident in this analysis sound a loud warning bell. It is important for teachers to research the feelings towards coursebooks that exist within their own classrooms. The resulting awareness might stimulate the kind of awareness-shift and self-questioning that leads to attitude-change and ultimately self-directed professional development. (See Steps 9–11 in the Appendix.)

Conclusions	The importance of coursebooks in formal educational settings has been widely recognized, and certain potential differences between teachers' and learners' attitudes to coursebooks have been revealed by the comparison of teacher and learner metaphors presented earlier in this paper. While the evidence of a gap and the orientations within the teacher metaphors may not be particularly surprising, the nature and strength of many of the learner images is a striking finding. The images indicate just how significant coursebooks are for many learners and the strength of negative

feelings that they can inspire, feelings that may stem from the inherent unsuitability of the materials themselves or be a product of the way in which they are handled by teachers.

The aim of this paper has been to draw attention to the value of surfacing learners 'as well as teachers' attitudes to coursebooks, and the potential value of metaphors for this purpose. In the classroom setting, the expression of different views among learners may prompt discussion of the source of these views and their possible effect on learning; implications for learner training or for desired modifications in teacher practices may then emerge. Similarly, it is hoped that teachers will be prompted to reflect on their own metaphors and how these affect their use of a coursebook, as well as the relationship between their own metaphor and those of their students. The comparison of teacher and learner images may reveal a reassuringly high level of uniformity or it may lead to the realization that there are important differences of attitude or belief which demand some form of action. My own experience in working with teachers suggests that, whatever the outcomes of such a comparison, if this happens to be a teacher's first attempt to understand what their learners feel, to listen to learners' unique voices, this may trigger a new phase in self-development. Eliciting metaphors for coursebooks may prove to be just a beginning.

Final revised version received September 2004

References

Cortazzi, M. and **L. Jin.** 1999. 'Bridges to learning: metaphors of teaching, learning and language' in L. Cameron and G. Low (eds.). *Researching and Applying Metaphor.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 149–76.

Elbaz, P. 1983. *Teacher Thinking: A Study of Practical Knowledge.* London: Croom Helm.

Handal, G. and **P. Lauvas.** 1987. *Promoting Reflective Teaching.* Milton Keynes, Bucks: SRHE.

Lakoff, G. and **M. Johnson.** 1980. *Metaphors We Live By.* Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press.

Marchant, G. 1992. 'A teacher is like a . . . Using simile lists to explore personal metaphors'. *Language and Education* 6/1: 33–45.

Martinez, M., N. Sauleda, and **G. Huber.** 2001. 'Metaphors as blueprints of thinking about teaching and learning'. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 17/8: 965–7.

McGrath, I. 2002. *Materials Evaluation and Design for Language Teaching.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Munby, H. 1986. 'Metaphor in the thinking of teachers: an exploratory study'. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 18/2: 197–201.

Munby, H. and **T. Russell.** 1989. 'Metaphor in the study of teachers' professional knowledge'. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, Calif., March 1989.

Ricoeur, P. 1978. *The Rule of Metaphor.* Translated by R. Czerny. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Thornbury, S. 1991. 'Metaphors we work by'. *ELT Journal* 45/3: 193–200.

Tobin, K. 1990. 'Metaphors in the construction of teacher knowledge'. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Boston, Mass., April 1990.

Tobin, K. and **S. Ulerick.** 1989. 'An interpretation of high school science teaching based on metaphors and beliefs for specific roles'. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, Calif., March 1989.

Ur, P. 1996. *A Course in Language Teaching.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Woodward, T. 1991. *Models and Metaphors in Language Teacher Training.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The author

Ian McGrath holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics from the University of Edinburgh and is a Senior Lecturer in TESOL in the School of Education, University of Nottingham, where he is Programme Leader for the MA ELT. His interests lie in the fields

of programme and materials design and evaluation, including distance learning, with particular reference to teacher education, and he has edited a number of volumes for teacher educators, including *Learner Autonomy, Teacher Autonomy: Future Directions* (with B. Sinclair and T. Lamb, Longman 2000). His most recent publication is *Materials Evaluation and Design for Language Teaching* (Edinburgh University Press 2002). He is currently involved in developing e-learning materials for teachers of English in China.
Email: Ian.McGrath@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix
Eliciting images: suggestions for a teacher development (TD) activity

The following procedure is suggested for a teacher development group. Steps 9–10 would be equally appropriate for teachers working alone. A similar procedure can obviously be used with teachers or trainees involved in more formal teacher education programmes.

1 The group leader for this session asks participants to come up with a metaphor or simile (give examples if you think there might be any misunderstanding) that represents their feelings about coursebooks.

2 Individuals write up their metaphors/similes (without explanation) on a flipchart/the board, with their name in brackets.

3 Time is allowed for reading and questioning regarding any images that are less than transparent.

4 The group generates a set of categories into which all or most of the images can be fitted. This may lead to further questioning concerning images which initially seemed transparent. If this stage is done in subgroups and followed by reporting back, subgroups can be asked to present not only their categories but also any doubts they had in assigning specific images to categories; this is likely to lead to lively discussion with the image-generators.

5 Results from other groups of teachers (e.g. Table 1, above) might then be offered for comparison.

6 Comments are invited on the value of the exercise.

7 The group leader asks if participants know how their *students* feel about English-language coursebooks (and specifically the coursebook they are currently using). If there are any positive answers, ask what attitudes students seem to hold and how this information was obtained.

8 Present Table 2, above, and invite comments. (Although this could come after Step 10, below, it may be a helpful way of raising awareness of the range of possible attitudes.)

9 As a follow-up task, ask participants to get their students to complete the phrase 'An English coursebook is . . .' (with an explanation on the back) on a slip of paper and hand it in. (This assumes a certain level of English proficiency.)

10 Teachers collect the slips, categorize them, and reflect on (a) any differences between their own image and those of the students (b) whether students' images seem to relate primarily to the coursebook itself or to the way it is used in class (c) whether they see any implications for coursebook selection or use.

11 Group members present their findings and conclusions at the next meeting.