



# **Pragmatic Problems in Elementary Level ELT Coursebooks: Focus on dialogues**

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The aim of this paper is to provide a working analysis of elementary level English language coursebooks from the perspective of pragmatics. One of the problems foreign language teachers have with the coursebooks is related to the dialogues in terms of their pragmatic value. Believing that teachers, researchers, teacher trainers, and coursebook writers should develop ways of assessing the value of dialogues from the perspective of pragmatics, a standardized tool attempting to measure dialogues' social usability is prepared and applied during a course titled "Coursebook Assessment and Evaluation". This checklist makes use of Gricean pragmatics, popularly known as 'maxims of conversation.' In this paper, four dialogues are analyzed to show their communicative and pragmatic value. Preliminary findings show that the dialogues in these coursebooks are not adequate to model the dialogues that happen in daily social exchanges. The discussion section suggests some directions for future research, as well as for material writing and classroom practices which can promote a more accurate understanding of the pragmatic value of the dialogues in elementary level coursebooks.

## **1. Introduction**

Throughout the twentieth century, language teaching, like linguistics, used the sentence as the basic unit of analysis (Olshtain & Celce-Murcia 2001). Such language teaching practice resulted in an approach to language which is characterized by teaching language uses in a decontextualized manner, often by giving sample sentences that are grammatically relevant but semantically detached. However, more recent approaches to language learning and teaching, among which communicative language teaching is the most influential, have picked up discourse or text as the basic unit of analysis, causing a shift of focus in the teaching of foreign languages. In such a shift, the nature of coursebooks has dramatically changed. Coursebooks, in Olshtain & Celce-Murcia's (2001:708) words, "present texts, short or long, as a basis for both understanding and practicing language use within larger meaningful contexts", because of which "learners need to focus, therefore, on various discourse features within any specified language activity".

In such a shift, both the features of language activities but also what is expected of the language and the language learner has changed. This resulted in the individual learner's exposure to numerous bits and pieces of grammar,

vocabulary, techniques, strategies, skills, and knowledge and usage pieces which are taken in via conscious or unconscious learning. Now, coursebooks guide and characterize classroom discourse as they inform the teacher what, how, and when the content knowledge is to be taught, and even how learning is to be directed, measured and evaluated. Hence, in such a realm, the quality of all aspects of the coursebooks we use is important in our search for quality in foreign language education.

Much research sheds light on the dissatisfaction with the content of the coursebooks used at all levels, specifically in the field of English language teaching (henceforth ELT). Practitioners are substantially dissatisfied with how spoken texts are presented in coursebooks as print materials. As the review of relevant research shows, ELT textbooks rarely include adequate or comprehensible explanations of how conversation works in English. For Vellenga (2004), speech acts (actions with functions) in the textbooks are, for the most part, pragmatically inadequate since students are only occasionally given models of the speech acts with very little contextual information or explicit metapragmatic discussion. As this review of literature shows, the language of English language coursebooks must vigorously be studied to unearth the nature and quality of these coursebooks in terms of their value from the perspectives of pragmatics, linguistics and pedagogy. In this research, the focus is on dialogues in elementary level ELT coursebooks from a pragmatic perspective.

### 1.1 Pragmatics

Behavioral learning theory has not been able to articulate numerous aspects of knowledge and functions of communication especially when it comes to the rules that govern a communicative exchange. Answers to these problems can be found in the pragmatics oriented works of Austin, Grice, and Searle (Altınörs 2003: 72). Pragmatics, as clearly described by Yule (2004:127), is the study of “intended speaker meaning”. The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association<sup>1</sup> claims that a child may pronounce words clearly and may have a large vocabulary that she uses in long, grammatical sentences. Nevertheless, there might still arise communication problems, unless she has mastered the rules for appropriate social language known as pragmatics. Pragmatics involves three major communication skills:

- using language for different purposes such as greeting, informing, demanding, promising, and requesting,
- adapting or changing language according to the needs or expectations of a listener or situation - such as talking differently to a baby than to an adult, giving enough background information to an unfamiliar listener, talking differently in a classroom than on a playground,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.asha.org/public/speech/development/pragmatics.htm>

- following rules for conversations and narrative (e.g., telling stories, giving book reports, recounting events of the day); there are rules for taking turns in conversation, introducing topics of conversation, staying on the topic, rephrasing when misunderstood, and telling a story. Rules may vary depending on language and culture.

Pragmatics concerns the semantic value of any message. More and more, English language teachers are asked to develop an awareness of cross-cultural issues in communication which can be attained only through understanding of pragmatics (Dash 2004). As such, while interpreting a message, as Yule (2004) suggests, the following are the most fundamental keywords to be employed to extract the accurate meaning:

- *context*: the context in which a communicative act takes place is necessary to understand the meaning of this act. This includes the physical context such as the bank or the school and the linguistic context like the sets of other words preceding and following the expression used (co-text).
- *presupposition*: speakers continually design their linguistic messages on the basis of assumptions about what their hearers already know. In short, a speaker assumes that what is told is true and known by the hearer.
- *speech act*: in short, these are actions with functions. A linguistic form may function as request, command, question, and information (pp. 129-133).

Why is the knowledge of pragmatics important in language teaching practices situated in elementary schools? In Turkey's case, as it is in the majority of contexts where English is taught as a foreign language, exposure to English almost always happens through the help of coursebooks, especially for elementary level students. Hence, in elementary education, coursebooks are valuable materials whose qualities are fundamental to educational practice and pedagogy. In terms of the specifics of elementary level English courses, as noted by Yüksel (2001: 62), the objectives include mastering the knowledge of the content learned. The students ought to be trained to use this content in real life contexts while being able to understand the dialogues that fit into this level. As such, it is clearly stated in the curriculum that the students are expected to use what they learn in the lessons in their everyday communication. This objective, then, increases the importance of the dialogues in the educational material such as the coursebooks, through which such usage is taught.

It has been argued in literature that elementary level coursebooks contain decontextualized sentences that are given in chunks rather than in meaningful situations. Furthermore, because these coursebooks must contain concrete knowledge that is meaningful to the learner of this specific age group, language used in these coursebooks diverts from the language of the adults. However, this does not entail that children or young learners are unable to follow true

interactions although many coursebooks contain inadequate turn takings which is revealed by notions that are specific to pragmatics.

Because English as a Foreign Language students do not have a chance to speak English in its actual socio-cultural environment, they should be exposed to materials that prepare them to authentic language use. I therefore hold that classroom materials must contain language pieces that are error free and should be written in accordance with the target language as used in naturally occurring discourse. Hence, because pragmatics involves language use as a social act, language uses in elementary level coursebooks become an important source of study from the perspective of pragmatics. However, because many coursebooks on the Turkish book-shelves are written by non-native speakers and without getting adequate professional and corporate help, a coursebook often contains many erroneous uses of the target language, a serious problem which, again, should be studied from such an important perspective like pragmatics.

Grice studied the nature and quality of conversations in a functional manner. In 1975, Grice<sup>2</sup> proposed his cooperative principles related to the nature of conversation. As Nunn (2006) explains, the emphasis on ‘cooperation’ clearly signals the relevance of Gricean pragmatics to classroom learning and classroom interaction which can easily be considered in terms of the maxims of quantity and manner. However, Gricean pragmatics can easily be applied to many other aspects of foreign language teaching among which how conversations run and model language interaction and communication is the most important since students are exposed to them and make use of them more than any other material in print. The following conversational maxims outline the quality of a natural conversation that is observable in any social speech based interaction:

*Maxims of quality:* A contribution should be true:

- Do not say what you believe to be false;
- Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

*Maxims of quantity:* A contribution should be as informative as required for the current purposes of the exchange;

- Do not make your contribution more informative than it is required.

*Maxim of relevance:* A contribution should be relevant.

*Maxims of manner:* A contribution should be perspicuous (clearly expressed or presented):

- Avoid obscurity;
- Avoid ambiguity;

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<sup>2</sup>[http://www.uni-erfurt.de/sprachwissenschaft/personal/lehmann/Zitate/Grice\\_conversational\\_maxims.html](http://www.uni-erfurt.de/sprachwissenschaft/personal/lehmann/Zitate/Grice_conversational_maxims.html)

- Be brief;
- Be orderly.

## 2. Methods

First, the checklist adapted by the researcher in consideration of the subsegments of Grice's maxims is used by 90 pre-service English language teachers to get an opinion on the quality of the dialogues given in ELT coursebooks. Then, these teacher candidates are asked to select dialogues from coursebooks to provide the instructor/ researcher with detailed analysis of the dialogues. In the body of this paper, four sample dialogues are chosen randomly by the researcher from a pool of the most problematic dialogues analyzed by the candidates. The pragmatic analysis of the data is performed through reading of the candidates' reports to find the most problematic cases and close reading of the dialogues and constant questioning of the utterances given in relation to the aforementioned issues of co-text, speech acts, and presuppositions of these speakers.

### Research Questions

The following questions guided this research on the dialogues published and taught in the coursebooks that are used in Elementary schools in Turkey:

1. What is the communicative value of the dialogues as communicative acts?
2. Do these dialogues have potential value in representing natural speech patterns as can be found in native speakers' real life dialogues?

### Coursebooks

Enjoy English 5 (Sönmez & Yitim 2004) and Quick Step 6 (Genç, Oruç & Şeremet 2005) were accepted by the Ministry of Education on June 6, 2006, as coursebooks to be used in Turkish Elementary schools.<sup>3</sup> Although delivered to all students and teachers free of charge, the print quality of these coursebooks is debatable, and an impressionistic overview (Cunningsworth 1995) of them shows that there are many grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors that run throughout these coursebooks. Therefore, these coursebooks must be studied so as to inform the decision making processes that govern all phases of production and selection of these coursebooks as educational materials.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://ttkb.meb.gov.tr/secmeler/2006\\_2007derskitaplari\\_prgdegismeyen.pdf](http://ttkb.meb.gov.tr/secmeler/2006_2007derskitaplari_prgdegismeyen.pdf)

### 3. Findings

#### Problems with the dialogues

##### 3.1 Quantitative Results

What follows is a checklist prepared by the researcher by using Grice's maxims. Dialogues are analyzed by fourth year pre-service English language teachers using this checklist and it is believed that this checklist should be used, along with the others, to assess the value of dialogues as communicative materials. As Table 1 shows, each proposal given in this checklist is prepared to answer one of the four sub-sections of Grice's maxims. The pre-service English language teachers read each of the thirty reading passages and assessed the value of it by filling in the checklist. The numbers given in Table 1 shows the number of passages found to be including the description given.

Table 1: *The checklist based on Grice's maxims (evaluation of 30 reading passages)*

No	Does the contribution...	Yes	Partly	No
1	give incorrect information?	17	9	4
2	put the reader/ hearer in doubt or confusion?	19	5	6
3	include incomplete or untrue information?	5	19	6
4	cause ambiguity in its message?	20	8	2
5	have geographical, historical, logical, cultural or scientific errors?	3	2	25
6	give too much information much more than it is expected?	25	3	2
7	have a verbose and wordy outlook?	24	2	4
8	give too little information much less than it is expected?	2	17	11
9	have missing words or phrases?	-	1	29
10	cause break in the meaning making expected of a natural conversation?	12	10	8
11	give irrelevant information?	21	5	4
12	use indirect statements?	7	11	12
13	have an accurate order?	23	2	5
14	possess correct grammatical usage of English?	26	-	4
15	voice the speech patterns of native speakers of English?	-	1	29
16	voice the speech patterns of non-native speakers of English?	30	-	-
17	sound like it happens in an everyday situation?	3	2	25
18	sound like it is superfluous?	22	4	4
19	sound difficult to understand at the first hearing?	26	1	3
20	carry an (unintended) message especially in terms of its tone?	11	5	14

As students' evaluation of the passages show, out of 30 passages, all of the passages voice the speech patterns of non-native speakers of English, 25 of them gave too much information, 24 of them had a verbose and wordy outlook, 20 of them caused ambiguity in their message, and 22 of them sounded superfluous. Similarly, and 17 passages were found to give incorrect information. All these results signal the existence of pragmatic problems in the dialogues.

### 3.2 Qualitative Results

#### *Dialogue 1*

The dialogue by Sönmez and Yitim (2004: 16) is as follows:

- (1) A: Where are you from?  
 B: I'm from Washington. There are skyscrapers in Washington.  
 A: Are there cowboys?  
 B: Yes, there are.

The analysis of this dialogue reveals that:

- The dialogue is given in a confusing context since the visual material in which the speech balloons and the action are placed shows two skyscrapers in the background- which may be understood by the learners as the speakers are already in 'Washington.'
- There is unnatural use of the spoken language which makes it sound non-authentic. 'I'm from Washington,' should not be followed by 'There are skyscrapers in Washington,' since these two sentences are irrelevant. Such a disconnected pair of sentences, in the authentic usage, is unacceptable and worse, unheard except for those uttered by those individuals suffering from schizophrenia. Thus, it may be claimed that maxims of both relevance and quantity are violated.
- There is a mismatch between the aims of the lesson and the content of the dialogue as shown by the dialogue's partial grammar coverage. The aims of the lesson are stated as the teaching of 'there is' and 'there are' but the dialogue does not contain the use of 'there is' but includes sample sentences with 'there are'.
- There are geographical and scientific errors that may result in building misconceptions as can be seen in the sentences 'There are skyscrapers/cowboys in Washington.' Furthermore, it is not clear what the name of the place 'Washington' means since 'Washington' is a usage in Turkey meaning Washington D.C., the capital city of the U.S. However, in the rest of the world, 'D.C.' and 'Washington D.C.' are used to denote the capital whereas the single use of 'Washington' may as well mean Washington State. Surprisingly, neither of these states are full of skyscrapers or cowboys. Hence, this material causes ambiguity and if it means something to the students, must probably; this meaning is problematic and erroneous. Hence, it is obvious that in the construction of this dialogue, maxim of manner is violated.
- The dialogue, as a whole, is incoherent (semantically not meaningful, hence disturbing).



### *Dialogue 2*

This dialogue by Sönmez and Yitim (2004:51) is given within a colored and drawn visual material that is happening in front of a ‘Cafeteria.’

- (2) A: I’m hungry. What is for lunch?  
B: Salad, macaroni and apple.  
A: Oh, really? I don’t like macaroni.  
B: I like macaroni.

- The dialogue is happening in front of a ‘cafeteria’ a word used in American English rather than in British. However, in the American usage, the word ‘macaroni’ should have been replaced by ‘pasta’ since Americans do not use the word ‘macaroni’ in this way. Hence, in this dialogue, a blend of American and British usage is in the background, causing a difficulty in understanding the real meaning of the words used since the context is not perspicuous. Hence, it can be claimed that maxim of manner is violated in this dialogue.
- The last contribution ‘I like macaroni’, when used as a respond to ‘I don’t like macaroni’ translates into a confrontational meaning, suggesting that ‘It is your problem. I like macaroni.’ When used this way, speaker B sounds confrontational, worse, rude for the majority of native speakers of English. Thus, there either is a violation of maxim of relevance or quantity depending on the unknown and unrecognizable intent of speaker B.
- The most serious problem with this dialogue, however, is with its use of grammar. When speaker B names the food served at lunch, he says ‘Salad, macaroni, and apple.’ In such a dialogue in English, a count noun should either be preceded by the indefinite article ‘an’ or take the plural form. In this turn taking, contrary to the accepted grammar rules, ‘apple’ projects a grammatically incorrect usage, thus, modeling erroneous language use which will unfortunately be learned by students as it is. Because the contribution is not grammatically orderly, it can be claimed that the maxim of manner is violated in this dialogue.

### *Dialogue 3*

This dialogue by Genç, Oruç & Şeremet (2005:30) happens in front of an advertisement placed on a wall in front of which Yiğit and Helen are standing. Yiğit is holding two ‘tickets’ in his hand:

- (3) Yiğit: Helen, look! Are you free on Sunday?  
Helen: Sunday? Hmm... Yes, I am. Why?  
Yiğit: I have got two tickets for Sertab Erener’s concert.  
Helen: She is the winner of the European Song Contest, isn’t she?  
Yiğit: Yes, she is. She is short and pretty. She has got curly hair. She has got green eyes. She has got a great voice. She is in Northwood now for her new album. Please come with me to the concert.  
Helen: OK. It’s fantastic!

- There is no such thing as ‘European Song Contest.’ There is, however, Eurovision Song Contest’ which was won by Sertap Erener in the past. Clearly, the dialogue contains knowledge that is not correct and that can cause disturbance.
- Yiğit’s description of Sertap Erener is also meaningless in terms of how a conversation should flow naturally since Helen has informed Yiğit that she actually knows who Sertap Erener is.
- The last turn taking by Yiğit, as is the case in the first dialogue, is not socially acceptable since he gives too much information contrary to the fact that Sertap Erener is known by Helen and her picture is already placed on the poster. While violating the maxim of quantity and relevance, the dialogue also contains a punctuation error since a comma is required after the expression ‘OK,’ in order not to cause erroneous learning of punctuation marks.
- It can also be claimed that the dialogue violates maxims of manner for not being orderly and brief.

#### *Dialogue 4*

The dialogue by Sönmez and Yitim (2004:56) is as follows:

- (4) Kim: Do you like Superman?  
 Tommy: Yes, I do.  
 Kim: Do you like Fred Çakmaktaş?  
 Tommy: No, I don’t.

- Kim and Tommy are sitting in front of the TV set. In the dialogue, from the two characters ‘Superman’ is mentioned correctly in English, but ‘Fred Çakmaktaş’ should be voiced and written as ‘Fred Flintstone,’ as his original name goes. ‘Fred Çakmaktaş’ is a combination of the English name and the Turkish last name, and the students will naturally adopt it as his original name. It is also self-evident that Kim and Tommy are native speakers, so a native speaker of English who mentions Fred Çakmaktaş is rather awkward. Here, in this dialogue, cultural and linguistic confusion is in the foreground and learning these ‘assumed’ popular images becomes a misconception formation of cultural images related to the target culture. I purposefully use the word ‘assumed’ popular image since Fred Flintstone was a popular cartoon character in the past but not today, especially for elementary school students who have their own popular cartoon characters at present. As such, maxim of manner is violated in this dialogue for presenting turn takings which cause obscurity and ambiguity, and also maxims of quality for presenting false information such as ‘Çakmaktaş.’

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

As the analyses of these sample dialogues show, maxims of conversation are violated in all of the dialogues studied. The findings related to these dialogues show that there also are many grammar based, logical, and scientific mistakes and errors in primary level ELT coursebooks that are currently used in Turkish elementary schools. These pragmatically faulty constructions may:

- make dialogues rather difficult to comprehend.
- cause creating or fostering misconceptions about the target culture.
- model turn takings which sound rude or may change the tone of the intended meaning?
- expose the students to erroneous use of lexis that is not used in the target language as it is modeled in these dialogues.
- decrease the overall quality of the coursebooks, resulting in the believability and validity of the knowledge and language transmitted in these coursebooks.

As this study suggests, these dialogues written by Turkish writers to be used at elementary schools are inadequate from the perspective of pragmatics and communicative language teaching. The overall evaluation of these dialogues suggests that these dialogues cannot prepare elementary students to real life usage of the language both linguistically as well as culturally since they lack authenticity. Alptekin (1993), on the other hand, argues that writers write materials in line with their own culture rather than that of the learners', which eventually leads to a break down in the materials' intelligibility. Hence, it is seen in this study that using a checklist helped pre-service English language teachers as well as the researcher to assess the value of dialogues given in coursebooks in terms of their pragmatic and communicative value. Future applications and research should also include other forms of items that can be given in the checklist ranging from social, cultural, political, or any other messages that may cause breaks in the communication.

Pre-service English language teachers who used the checklist reported that using the checklist

- was new to them since they had never been given assessment tools that focus on dialogues from the perspective of pragmatics,
- made them see the dialogues in a critical way,
- caused disturbance because they had taken the meaning resting in the dialogues for granted and they hadn't considered them as erroneous materials,
- should also be filled by learners of English so that they are sensitized towards authentic use of the language as well.

Fundamental to all educational sciences is the notion and practice that students should not be exposed to incorrect and erroneous classroom materials. Because, as the examples taken from these coursebooks suggest, the coursebooks studied in this research are found to be erroneous in their language use, these coursebooks should be re-evaluated and re-published having completed its error correction. Until then, it is the teachers' duty to manage the negative effects of such educational materials. In the case of elementary school English language teachers, providing accurate and meaningful dialogues to their students is very important since their students are learning the basics of this content area which whose knowledge will be developed throughout their future studies at all levels of their education.

McDonough and Shaw (2003:77) articulate that when classroom teaching materials such as passages and dialogues are inauthentic, inappropriate for learners' age and intellectual level, or too formal and not representative of everyday speech, materials adaptation is necessary. Hence, teachers using English language coursebooks should try new ways of adapting materials to minimize the negative consequences brought forward by these dialogues. The proposed checklist should only be a form of assessment after which corrections in the dialogues are made through constant analyses of these classroom materials.

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