Grammar Instruction in ESL Coursebooks and in Second Language Acquisition Research: Convergences and Divergences

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This article presents a critical, descriptive analysis of the convergences and divergences between grammar instruction in English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) classrooms and in research-based recommendations found in instructed second language acquisition (ISLA) research. Using coursebooks as the representation of classroom grammar instruction, we analysed the grammar components of six popular, international, intermediate-level ESL/EFL materials. We then interpreted the analysis with reference to ISLA research and theory concerning the selection, presentation, and practice of language forms. Where there were divergences, we considered some of the classroom realities that have not been adequately addressed in ISLA research to date. The findings demonstrate that despite an apparent shift toward more interactive and learner-driven grammar lessons, coursebooks remain largely anchored in decontextualized presentation and controlled practice approaches to grammar instruction. It is hoped that the article will provide guidance to teachers who are working with coursebooks with respect to the use and adaptation of different types of grammar activities.

Cet article présente une analyse critique et descriptive des convergences et des divergences entre l'enseignement de la grammaire dans les classes d'anglais langue seconde/étrangère (ALS/ALE) et les recommandations fondées sur la recherche dans le domaine de l'acquisition d'une langue seconde appliquée à l'enseignement (ISLA). En utilisant les manuels pédagogiques comme représentation de l'enseignement de la grammaire en classe, nous avons analysé les composantes grammaticales de six matériels pédagogiques populaires, internationaux, de niveau intermédiaire pour l'apprentissage de l'ALS/ALE. Nous avons ensuite interprété l'analyse en nous référant à la recherche et à la théorie en ISLA concernant la sélection, la présentation et la pratique des formes linguistiques. En cas de divergence, nous avons pris en compte certaines réalités de la classe qui n'ont pas été suffisamment prises en compte dans la recherche sur l'ISLA à ce jour. Les résultats montrent qu'en dépit d'une évolution apparente vers des leçons de grammaire plus interactives et axées sur l'apprenant, les manuels restent largement ancrés dans des approches de présentation décontextualisée et de pratique contrôlée de l'enseignement de la grammaire. Nous espérons que cet article fournira des conseils aux enseignants qui utilisent des manuels en ce qui concerne l'utilisation et l'adaptation de différents types d'activités grammaticales.

Keywords: coursebooks, ESL/EFL, grammar instruction, instructed second language acquisition

Over the past 50 years, research in instructed second language acquisition (ISLA)[1] has deepened our knowledge of how second languages (L2s) are learned in classroom contexts. One key topic has been grammar instruction, defined here as any type of teaching whose goal is student grammatical development (e.g., Doughty & Long, 2003; R. Ellis, 2006; Keck & Kim, 2014; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). There is now a considerable body of empirical and theoretical literature that can inform decisions made about grammar teaching in instructed contexts (see Loewen, 2020, for an overview). However, how this scholarly work informs actual teaching practices is not clear. One means to understand this relationship is to consider the materials teachers use to provide grammar explanations and practice, defined here as the content found in commonly used ESL/EFL coursebooks[2] (Aski, 2003; Fernandez, 2011). Although some L2 teaching approaches de-emphasize grammar instruction (e.g., some forms of task-based language teaching; Long, 2014), it continues to play an important role in many language classrooms around the world (Jean & Simard, 2011; Schurz & Coumel, 2023). Classroom grammar instruction, like all issues related to L2 instruction, is to a certain degree context-dependent, but general trends in grammar instruction can be uncovered by analysing internationally available coursebooks.

Coursebooks are usually intended to be the basis of a general language course rather than being aimed at a specific language component or linguistic purpose. They focus, to differing degrees, on all four skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) and are often published in a multi-level, multi-skill series. They frequently form the backbone of the teaching curriculum (Burton, 2023; Jordan & Grey, 2019) and have been classified as the second most frequent source of classroom input after teacher talk (Meunier, 2012). They are also ubiquitous. Survey data collected at professional conferences revealed that 92% of attendees regularly used a coursebook (Tomlinson, 2010). A British Council survey further found that only 6% of instructors claimed they never used one (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2013). Of course, teachers will make context-dependent decisions concerning adaptations and supplementary activities, but the contents of coursebooks in terms of grammar instruction can provide useful information on how grammar instruction is provided in L2 classrooms from a context-neutral perspective. The findings from these analyses can then be discussed to understand convergences and divergences between classroom L2 grammar instruction and ISLA findings and recommendations.

Coursebook Grammar and ISLA Research

A small number of studies have analysed the treatment of a selection of grammatical features in coursebooks to understand the relationship between research recommendations and coursebook grammar instruction (Aski, 2003; Fernandez, 2011; Nitta & Gardner, 2005). Other studies have investigated grammar practice books (R. Ellis, 2002; Fortune, 1998). The findings from grammar practice books have largely been excluded in the present study due to the difficulty of integrating many ISLA research findings into this type of publication. For example, it is difficult to envisage how a grammar practice book could include an

[1] ISLA is a sub-field within second language acquisition. Research conducted within this paradigm, particularly prior to 2005 (Housen & Pierrard) may not have used this nomenclature.

[2] The term coursebook is used throughout this paper to refer to a book designed to be used as a main source of input in a general (not specific) L2 classroom. Some researchers have used the term textbook (D. Brown, 2010).

activity that could be completed for communicative purposes only without the students becoming aware of the grammar they are practicing, which is known as implicit grammar instruction (Keck & Kim, 2014). Perhaps more importantly, these books may be used for self-study, which would reflect individual practice rather than practice that is integrated into general classroom instruction.

Coursebook Research

Grammar instruction in coursebooks has been examined in three studies focusing on three different languages. Aski (2003) examined the treatment of two grammar points in seven beginner-level Italian coursebooks. Fernandez (2011) investigated one grammar point in six beginner-level Spanish coursebooks. Nitta and Gardner (2005) examined the treatment of three grammar points in nine intermediate-level English coursebooks.

Despite these varied contexts, the overall findings are quite similar. All the books followed a structural syllabus in which the grammar was presented and then practised in some way, similar to the well-known Present-Practice-Produce (PPP) approach (DeKeyser, 2007). In the presentation part, all books included grammar presentation sections that were deductive, where explicit information was provided to the learners which was designed to inform the following practice and production stages. Despite Nitta and Gardner (2005) identifying that six out of nine analysed books favoured an inductive presentation stage in which the grammar was elicited from the learners through guided questions, all presentation sections across the three studies usually presented grammar discretely using dialogues or individual sentences/short paragraphs contrived to demonstrate the grammar point in context. During the practice section, the emphasis was on producing the target language (output activities); less common were tasks that required a focus on the target forms to comprehend an oral or written text (input activities). For example, in the six textbooks analysed in Fernandez (2011), there were 43 input-based activities and 120 output-based activities. One of the textbooks accounted for 16 of the input-based activities, while all of the books included over 10 output-based activities. In addition, all three studies found that practice sections provided relatively few opportunities to produce language in free, spontaneous communication. Fernandez categorized only 25% of output-based activities as free. Aski (2003) categorized 14% of grammar practice activities as being communicative language practice.

The results were interpreted by the authors as demonstrating some integration of ISLA research findings insofar as some textbooks included input-based activities (Fernandez, 2011; Nitta & Gardner, 2005). Furthermore, despite relatively few opportunities for free communication, Fernandez (2011) concluded that meaningful interaction appeared to be a concern in some of the books. Nitta and Gardner (2005) reported that more coursebooks than not favoured inductive grammar presentation, with many of them including sections in which learners were asked to create their own form–meaning connections, which they termed consciousness-raising tasks.

The main observed divergence relates to opportunities for different types of practice. In all three studies, practice consisted largely of a progression from highly controlled to slightly freer activities requiring output. Despite some disagreement among researchers concerning the importance of including highly controlled practice activities (see Leaver et al., 2004; Wong & VanPatten, 2003) and some evidence suggesting that certain forms may benefit from some repetitive practice (Collins & Ruivivar, 2021), overall, such activities are deemed unnecessary for many language forms (Loewen, 2020). Furthermore, if one accepts the PPP approach as it aligns with Skill Acquisition Theory (DeKeyser, 2007), the final P requires that learners be provided with opportunities to use a language form in a spontaneous fashion for development, but these studies demonstrated that there was little to no opportunity for this within the grammar practice sections.

Remaining Issues

Based on overall recommendations for grammar instruction for promoting interlanguage development (Loewen, 2020), some topics have not been addressed in coursebook analyses. One is the degree to which presentation and practice opportunities may be feature-dependent, as the analyses have focused on specific features and not the full range of grammar represented in a particular coursebook. A second is the quantity and quality of interaction opportunities present for learners. A third relates to the importance of ensuring opportunities to both comprehend language input in which the grammar is used and produce language output containing the grammar. Finally, the use of contextualized language for the building of form–meaning connections has not been examined.

As the research has predetermined grammar forms for investigation (e.g. Aski, 2003, included two; Fernandez, 2011, included one; Nitta & Gardner, 2005, included three), the degree to which the observed results are feature-dependent rather than providing a general overview of the treatment of grammar remains unknown. This is a valid concern, given that not all grammar points are equally challenging for learners, and challenges vary based on the grammar. For example, perception difficulties linked to the regular past *-ed* morpheme may suggest that more input practice than output practice could be useful (Bell et al., 2015). Furthermore, pre-selection means that the different grammar points that receive grammar instruction across coursebooks have not been documented, despite research demonstrating that some language forms are picked up with no or little instruction (Burton, 2023); certain grammar points may receive more instructional attention than is warranted; and introduction of grammar points does not always coincide with their appearance in learner language (Biber & Reppen, 2002; Burton, 2023). Finally, this means that no information is available on the spacing of instruction, that is, whether the instruction of one grammar form occurs once (massed) or a number of times (distributed) within a coursebook. This information is needed due to the non-linear nature of L2 grammatical development (Loewen, 2020).

Despite the importance of interaction for L2 grammatical development (Behney & Gass, 2021), previous studies have not examined its role during grammar presentation and practice. We know that practice tends to be controlled, but it is important to understand whether interactional opportunities are provided.

Furthermore, even though the inclusion of an inductive presentation of grammar appears to have increased the likelihood that learners will have to comprehend language, rather than just produce it, it is unknown the extent to which the presentation and practice sections ask learners to demonstrate comprehension of language input in which the grammar is used, as previous research has not classified presentation sections in terms of input and output opportunities. Some research has demonstrated that learners can have issues comprehending language and that practice tends to be synonymous with output (DeKeyser, 2007; VanPatten, 2004).

Finally, the studies have investigated contextualization in terms of grammar presentation only to see whether language samples during presentation are at the sentence or discourse level in order to help learners create form–meaning connections. However, little is known about contextualization during language practice. In order for form–meaning connections to continue being learned and consolidated, practice is needed in a number of different meaningful contexts (Keck & Kim, 2014; Larsen-Freeman, 2013).

The Present Study

Based on the existing findings and under-researched areas reported above, we set out to describe grammar instruction through a comprehensive analysis of all the grammar sections in six coursebooks to address the following general research questions:

RQ 1: What grammar points are included across coursebooks?
RQ 2: How is grammar presented across coursebooks?
RQ 3: How is grammar practiced across coursebooks?

The results from this analysis then lead to a discussion of the convergences and divergences between coursebook grammar instruction and ISLA findings.

Method

Choice of Coursebooks

Six intermediate (as defined by the publisher) coursebooks (see Table 1) formed a corpus for analysis. In selecting the coursebooks, we focused on books that formed part of a series so we could choose the intermediate level, as it is at this point that learners normally have sufficient control over vocabulary to be able to focus on a range of grammatical features (R. Ellis, 2002). We also chose books that had communication as the main objective, as without this goal, one would not expect to see the integration of ISLA research findings, which has long acknowledged the importance of focus on meaning overall. The books included both British and American varieties of English, and they were widely available in ESL and EFL settings, which makes them representative of the kind of grammar instruction students might receive. Most of these series have newer versions and now include many online resources. However, the authors are the same, and the grammar sections in the coursebooks remain unchanged; therefore, newer versions have not been fully reanalysed. Furthermore, the online resources are often designed for self-practice (and frequently consist of fill-in-the-blank, decontextualized sentences).

Table 1

Coursebooks Selected for Analysis

1.	Cunningham, S., Moor, P., & Carr, J. C. (2004). *American cutting edge level 3.* Pearson Longman.
2.	Soars, J., & Soars, L. (2000). *American headway 2*. Oxford University Press.
3.	Forsyth, W. (2000). *Clockwise intermediate.* Oxford University Press.
4.	Oxenden, C., & Latham-Koenig, C. (2006). *English file intermediate.* Oxford University Press.
5.	Dellar, H., Walkley, A., & Hocking, D. (2004). *Innovations intermediate*. Thomson.
6.	Richards, J. C., Hull, J., & Proctor, S. (2005). *Interchange 2* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Grammar Content

The definition of *grammar* for the purposes of the study was dictated by information contained in the tables of contents either under an explicit "grammar" heading (five out of the six books) or with the use of grammatical metalanguage (*Question types: be/object/subject/reporting*; *Clockwise*, p. 2). These headings and metalanguage were grouped to answer the first research question (RQ1), which asked what grammar was included in the books. To address the second and third research questions (RQ2 and RQ3), the grammar sections from the tables of contents were identified and categorized as presenting grammar or practicing grammar.

Coding Categories

The coding scheme was adapted from existing coursebook research to fit the needs of this study, which was necessary due to this study's goal to describe all grammar sections and to investigate previously ignored topics (see above). To address RQ1 concerning grammar contents, a new scheme was created, as research has focused on preselected grammar features. In addition to identifying and quantifying the grammar points, we coded for syllabus type and for sections that recycled (termed *spacing*) previously instructed grammar points.

To address RQ2 and RQ3, a division was made between presentation and practice sections based on Nitta and Gardner's (2005) finding that the nine coursebooks they analysed all divided grammar in this fashion. In terms of presentation, we identified each activity within the section, defined here as any numbered/lettered part in which the students were instructed to do something. Each activity was subsequently coded using four categories. First, the presentation activity was coded as being deductive or inductive (Nitta & Gardner, 2005). Deductive meant that the grammar was presented to the students (e.g., through their reading or through the teacher explaining), while inductive meant that the students would be expected to use language samples to discover information. The second code was used to categorize whether metalinguistic information or rules were included (Fernandez, 2011). The third code was used to identify whether the language samples used in the presentation activities were contextualized (Fernandez, 2011). The final code was employed to understand whether the presentation activities asked for the grammar to be comprehended or produced. This final category has been investigated using the practice sections of coursebooks only (Fernandez, 2011). Even though one might expect the presentation sections to focus mainly on comprehending input, it is currently unknown whether this is true. Presentation sections are often identified as such in the books, but they include multiple activities, which may also require a certain amount of controlled output practice. It is important to understand this, as research has shown that practice sections rely on output (Fernandez, 2011), but there is a growing body of literature demonstrating that learners need to practice comprehending grammar (input practice) as well as producing it (output practice) (Collins, 2007; VanPatten et al., 2020). Coding the presentation sections demonstrates whether both input practice and output practice are occurring at the presentation stage.

In terms of practice, we coded all activities for whether they involved sentence-level (controlled) or discourse-level (free) practice and whether they focused on input or output practice (Fernandez, 2011). Due to its importance for language development, we also included interaction as a category based on the instructions provided (Behney & Gass, 2021; Philp et al., 2013).

Table 2

Categories for Coding

Included grammar (RQ1)	**Presentation (RQ2)**	**Practice (RQ3)**
1. Grammar points	1. Inductive or deductive	1. Interaction
2. Syllabus type	2. Explicit information	2. Controlled / free
3. Spacing	3. Contextualization of language samples	3. Input / output
	4. Input / output	

Coding Procedure

The coding procedure detailed below was followed to ensure uniformity. A presentation and practice sample from each coursebook was coded by both authors to verify the coding scheme. The consistency of the coding across raters demonstrated its low-inference nature, resulting in the decision that all subsequent coding could be conducted by one researcher (the first author). Each individual category was coded across the six books at the same time to ensure consistency.

RQ1: Grammar points. Each time grammar was included as a category in the content pages, it was counted. In five of the books, there was a *grammar* heading under each unit in the table of contents. In one book, *Clockwise*, the table of contents for each unit simply included a list of topics. Therefore, for this book, each topic that appeared to be referring to grammar was identified. These topics were then cross-checked within each unit as the book employed a specific layout for its grammar sections, despite the absence of the term *grammar* (and in contrast to the other activities within each unit that were labelled as Listening, Speaking, Reading, English in Use, or Speak Out).

Across the books, when more than one grammar point was identified within a topic (e.g. present perfect versus past simple [*English File*, p. 2]), we counted this as two separate features. When the books used one or multiple words rather than metalinguistic categories (e.g., *can, can't, have to, don't have to* [*Cutting Edge*, p. 2]; *might* [*American Headway*, p. vi]), the grammar was assigned a metalinguistic category (e.g., modals).

RQ1: Syllabus type. The grammar points included in the content pages were assigned to a syllabus type: structural, notional, and/or examples (R. Ellis, 2019; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). The distinction between a structural syllabus and a notional syllabus focuses on whether grammar is treated in terms of its form (structural, e.g., *present tenses*) or its semantic or functional categories (notional, e.g., *future intentions*). An example category was also included, as some headings used example sentences of the grammar (e.g., *What's Paris like?*). It was also possible for these three syllabi to be combined: structural + examples (e.g., *present perfect and past simple*: she has made over 17 albums, he has recorded 600 songs, *American Headway*, p. iv), structural + notional (e.g., *present tenses to describe changes [simple/continuous/perfect], Clockwise*, p. 2), structural + notional + examples (e.g. *gerund and infinitive patterns [I don't want + to/I'm not keen on + -ing/let's + infinitive etc.], making suggestions and responding, Clockwise*, p. 2).

RQ1: Spacing. We identified whether grammar points received instruction once (massed) or at different points in time (distributed). This information was gathered from the coding of the grammar points (detailed above). When a grammar point was repeated, we identified whether the focus was identical or different in terms of form and meaning. We also identified the inclusion and focus of all grammar review sections within the books.

RQ2: Deductive or inductive presentation. If the presentation activity began with explicit information about the grammar, it was labelled deductive. If it required the interpretation of grammar or if it only included examples without mentioning grammatical terms, it was labelled inductive.

RQ2: Explicit information. If the presentation activity provided explicit information and/or elicited it, it was labelled explicit. If no mention of grammar was included, it was implicit (i.e., it was not mentioned).

RQ2: Contextualization. If the presentation activity consisted of isolated sentences (decontextualized sentences [Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2013]; sentence-level grammar [McConachy & Hara, 2013]; discrete sentences [Fernandez, 2011]), regardless of whether the sentences related to an underlying theme (e.g., shopping), it was decontextualized. If it presented the grammar in connected discourse in the form of a written or aural text, it was contextualized.

RQ2 & RQ3: Input / output. If the presentation or practice activity required more than two novel items including the grammar to be said or written, it was categorized as focusing on output. This cut-off was motivated by the activities usually only providing approximately five input/output opportunities. The

need to produce orally or in writing three or more novel items, therefore, made the activity more focused on output than input. No analysis was included as to whether input referred to reading or listening, or whether output referred to writing or speaking.

RQ3: Interaction. Instructions before each practice activity were used to classify whether it required interaction. If the instructions asked for class, group, or pair work, it was coded as interactive, which corresponds to the coursebooks' stated beliefs about learning happening through interaction, communicative activities, and using language for meaning. A specific classification in terms of whether the interactive activities also included writing was not conducted.

RQ3: Controlled / free. A practice activity was classified as controlled if it involved practice with isolated sentences (e.g., fill-in-the-gap activities; matching sentence halves). It was free if it required input/output at the discourse level.

Table 3

Grammar Categories

Category	**Examples**
Tense/aspect	Future; time adverbials + present tense
Questions	Question tags; indirect questions
Comparatives and superlatives	Evaluations and comparisons with adjectives
Determiners	Quantifiers; articles and determiners
Words/phrases	Phrasal verbs; *what's it like?*; adverb placement
Modals	Modals of ability and possibility; obligation
Gerunds and infinitives	Verb patterns; use of *ing* form
Conditionals	Conditional sentences with if; 1st and 2nd conditionals
Relative clauses	Defining relative clauses; relative clauses with *when*
Passive	Passive forms (past, present, and future)
Reported speech	Direct speech vs. reported speech

Results

Grammar Contents (RQ1)

The first research question addressed the grammatical contents of the coursebooks. Our analysis found that the grammar points addressed in the coursebooks were very similar, albeit with slight terminological differences. There were 70 different points (i.e., different labels), with grammar being included from 20 to

35 times across the books. For the purposes of making this information accessible, we collapsed the 70 points into 11 broad categories, documented in Table 3 alongside examples (all examples use the metalanguage from the coursebooks). There were similarities across the books in the ordering of grammar points, which the table reflects.

In terms of syllabus type, the grammar was included in the content pages using three types of categorization: metalinguistic categories (structural), functional categories (notional), and/or examples. Table 4 details how each grammar focus was labelled. This was done mostly using metalinguistic categories (76% of the time, calculated by adding the final column in Table 4 for the four structural syllabus types).

Table 4

Grammar Topics and Classification: Structural, Notional, and/or Examples

Books[a]:	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	
Variables							**Overall**
Structural	20	0	7	14	18	19	78 (46%)
Structural with Examples	1	19	2	2	0	6	30 (18%)
Structural and Notional	2	0	5	1	0	4	12 (7%)
Structural/Notional/Examples	0	0	4	0	3	2	9 (5%)
Notional	2	2	0	0	0	1	5 (3%)
Notional with Examples	2	2	2	3	4	2	13 (8%)
Examples	5	7	0	1	10	1	24 (14%)

[a] Books: 1 = *American Cutting Edge*; 2 = *American Headway*; 3 = *Clockwise*; 4 = *English File*; 5 = *Innovations*; 6 = *Interchange*

In terms of the spacing of the grammar points, the vast majority consisted of a single focused presentation/practice section. Occasionally, the same grammar point was focused on twice within the same unit (e.g., *Cutting Edge*, Module 7 focused on the following two topics: present perfect and past simple with *for;* present perfect and past simple with other time words). The only grammar points that were included more than once were conditionals, tense/aspects, modals, and relative clauses. However, each time, a different form or meaning was targeted. For example, *English File* introduced *first conditional and future time clauses + when, until, etc* in Chapter 4A, the *second conditional* in Chapter 4B, and the *third conditional* in Chapter 7A. The only time the same form/meaning of a grammar point was revisited came under review sections that were included after completion of a certain number of modules/units/chapters within each book. The only exception was *Clockwise*, where the review section was at the back of the book. These sections focused on the vocabulary and grammar that had been covered in the units and used controlled, fill-in-the-blank exercises to revisit grammar. A notable exception was *Interchange*, which asked students to self-assess their capabilities to use the different grammar features that had been presented and practiced.

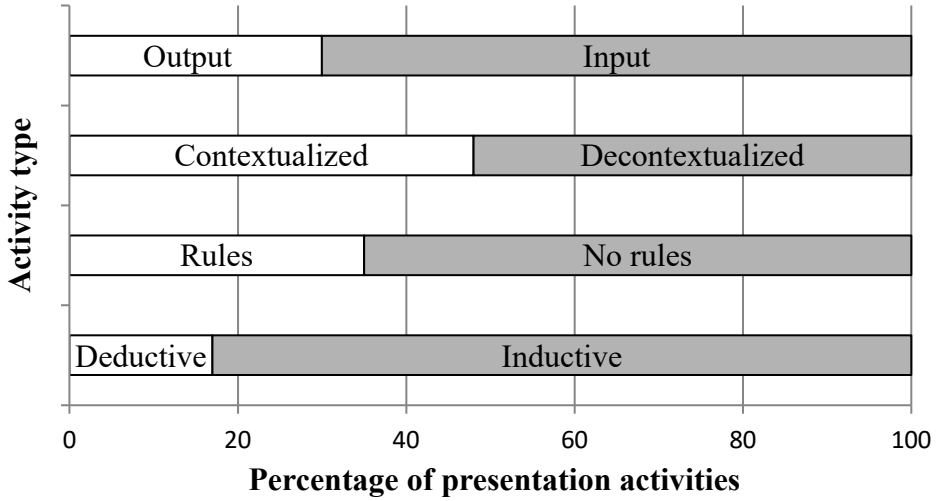
To respond to RQ1, the findings demonstrate that all books included an explicit grammar focus with similar features across the six books. They favoured a structural syllabus consisting of massed grammar instruction of one feature at a time.

Grammar Presentation (RQ2)

RQ2 asked how grammar was presented across the coursebooks. Figure 1 details the results for the four categories investigated in terms of the presentation of grammar.

Figure 1

Categorization of Presentation Activities Across Books (Presentation)



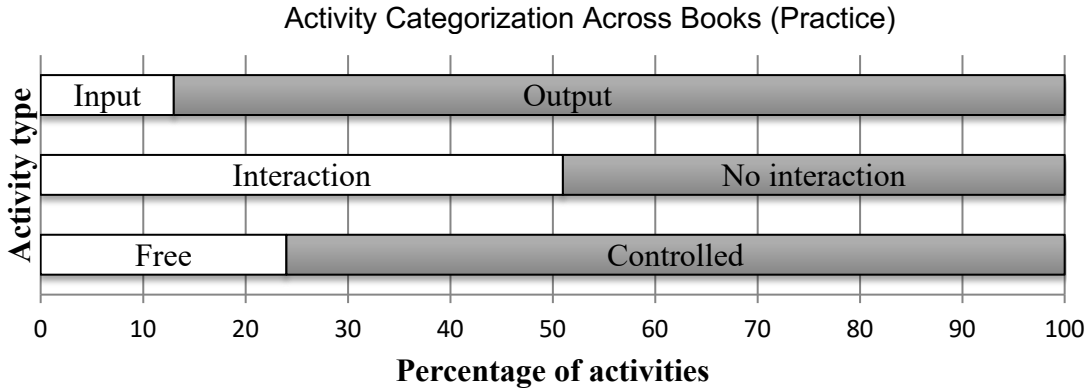
The analysis found that an inductive presentation was favoured over a deductive one. The majority of practice activities did not provide explicit information about the grammar, and language samples were contextualized almost half of the time. Nevertheless, as each presentation section usually contained more than one activity, the overall presentation section for each topic did include some explicit information and recourse to some decontextualized language. Finally, the majority of activities in the presentation section provided oral or textual input opportunities rather than output opportunities. Overall, in the presentation sections, learners were often asked to interact with the grammar in texts of different lengths before being asked guided questions to try to elicit explicit information about the grammar (inductive), or they were more rarely provided with information about the grammar (deductive). Examples of presentation sections can be found in the Appendix.

Grammar Practice (RQ 3)

RQ3 asked how grammar is practiced across the coursebooks. Figure 2 details the results for the three categories investigated in terms of practicing grammar.

The results showed that most activities were controlled, as the grammar either was provided in isolated sentences or required practice of isolated sentences. Practice was also largely output-based. Activities in which language containing the grammar needed to be comprehended aurally or textually (input-based) accounted for only 13% of the practice. In terms of interaction, based on the instructions in

Figure 2



the books, half called for pair, group, or whole-class work. An example of a controlled, interactive, output-based activity can be found in the Appendix.

Discussion

In this section, based on the reported results, we discuss divergences and convergences between context-neutral grammar instruction and ISLA research.

Grammar Contents

The analysis revealed that grammar is always included as an explicit category for instruction in the coursebooks surveyed. The content pages include similar grammar points in a comparable order across the coursebooks. They all follow a structural syllabus that overwhelmingly presents grammar points massed in one lesson (as opposed to being spaced throughout the book).

There is homogeneity across the books with respect to the selected grammar points and the order in which they are included. Furthermore, the reliance on fill-in-the-blank, controlled practice activities, with or without interaction (see Appendix), suggests a focus on a grammar point's form rather than its meaning or use, despite the fact that meaning and use present long-term acquisition challenges (Collins, 2007; Larsen-Freeman, 2001).

These findings raise a number of concerns based on past research. First, the homogeneity may be based more on material developers' intuitions than on empirical information about acquisitional needs or common usage (Burton, 2023; Dubin, 1995). It has been documented that there can be a dissociation between the frequency of certain grammatical forms in real language use and in coursebook use. Biber and Reppen (2002) found that practitioners believed that the progressive was the unmarked form in conversation; they supported this claim by demonstrating that four out of six investigated coursebooks introduced the progressive in the first chapter, three of them before the simple aspect. However, frequency data showed simple aspect verb phrases were over 20 times as common as progressive aspect verb phrases in conversation. Moreover, research into the acquisition order of English morphemes by English speakers and ESL/EFL learners demonstrates that the *-ing* morpheme is one of the first acquired, long before third person singular *-s* (he walk*s*) (R. Brown, 1973; Krashen, 1977), and it is also much more perceptually salient than the later-acquired simple past morpheme (Bell et al., 2015). It may be that *-ing* does not need to receive much explicit attention in the classroom as its form may be relatively easy to notice. However, certain

meanings of a form, including the progressive, may take years to acquire. Coursebook practice frequently required the insertion of a target form into a supplied context, which is of limited benefit in helping students understand what a form actually means and when it should be used (Larsen-Freeman, 2001). As Collins (2007) argues, practice creating contexts for supplied forms is of greater value for addressing meaning challenges.

The above discussion highlights the potential for frequency data to inform material developers' decisions regarding grammar. Indeed, a number of scholars have demonstrated the rationale and different approaches for using corpora to teach grammar (e.g., Keck & Kim, 2014; Johns, 1994; Timmis, 2005). If one accepts that coursebooks will continue to include individual grammar points (see below discussion with regard to syllabi), a research agenda is needed to understand which grammar points to include, which parts of grammar points in terms of form, meaning, and use to focus on, and at which points in the acquisition process. With the number of language corpora now available, in English at least, many useful insights with regard to this research agenda may be possible. For example, as irregular past verbs are frequent in input (and so will naturally be included in reading and listening texts within coursebooks and in teacher talk [Collins et al., 2009]) and emerge before regular past forms (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000), they may not need to be treated in the systematic fashion in which they tend to occur in the grammar sections within coursebooks (e.g., lists of verbs that need to be transformed into their irregular past tense form). Lightbown (1985) noted that "recommendations about *what* to teach are simply contradictory and leave both teacher and syllabus planner without the information necessary for making appropriate choices" (p. 181). Thirty years later, it does not appear that the field of ISLA has made much progress to address this issue, despite an increased understanding of why certain grammar points may be more difficult than others to acquire (Bulté & Housen, 2012; DeKeyser, 2005). Burton (2023) demonstrated this in terms of a linguistic canon that has been passed down through the ages with little innovation and no clear interest in using grammar contents to demarcate a coursebook from other ones.

The syllabi implicit in the table of contents of the coursebooks are largely structural, despite suggestions from the early 1970s advocating for an analytic syllabus in which semantic and functional categories rather than grammatical items are provided (R. Ellis, 2019). In the present study, it was found that functional categories are included only when the grammatical form is identified as having one main function. As such, the modal *should* was associated with advice/suggestions in all books. This aligns with the observation that "in a sense, however, the structural and notional syllabuses were not so different" (R. Ellis, 2019, p. 455). The divide between structural and notional syllabi for coursebooks may be purely terminological, as grammar was treated in the same way regardless of its classification. In other words, in classrooms that have a grammatical focus, the instruction of the functional category of *advice* (with the modal *should*) follows the same format as the instruction of the structural category of the *passive voice*.

The inclusion of a syllabus in which linguistic items are taught based on a structure-of-the-day approach runs contrary to research recommendations, as language forms are not acquired individually in a linear fashion (R. Ellis & Shintani, 2014; Loewen, 2020; Long, 2014). However, as form-focused instruction is deemed vital for overall accurate language use, especially for forms that are unlikely to develop through fluency practice alone (e.g., forms that are "blocked" due to learned attention; N. Ellis, 2022), there is a place for a language focus in L2 classrooms. R. Ellis (2019) suggests a modular curriculum in which two modules co-exist: a primary, task-based one and a secondary, structural one. The structural one, rather than being seen as a syllabus, should be seen as a checklist to avoid sequencing different grammatical items. However, how this can occur within a coursebook is difficult to envisage without some type of grammar targets being preselected for teaching. Perhaps research should turn to focusing on which grammar points to include and when, with the goal being to develop explicit knowledge. R. Ellis (2002) makes some suggestions for features to include based on learning problems that appear to be universal (for example, plural *-s*, third person *-s*, comparative adjectives). However, to our knowledge, these recommendations have yet to be empirically investigated in terms of both feasibility and learnability. Furthermore, these suggestions do not

deal with the timing of presentation/practice with different grammar points, a concern that, to date, has usually come only with the advice that grammar instruction should start when learners have sufficient control over vocabulary and sufficient fluency to be able to focus on a range of grammar points, possibly when they reach an intermediate level (R. Ellis, 2002, 2019).

Grammar points are also massed as opposed to distributed in the books. However, as the coursebooks form part of a series, many of the points are included in earlier or later volumes in the series. For example, the present simple in terms of both form and meaning receives focus in the selected coursebooks at all levels. From a theoretical perspective, distributing the grammar points would be recommended (Doughty & Williams, 1998; R. Ellis, 2006), as this better reflects how grammar is acquired; going from novice to mastery takes a long time, and development may be punctuated by backsliding, overuse, underuse, avoidance, and so on (Loewen, 2020). It is also consistent with the substantial literature on the superior effects of distributed spacing for the learning of other non-linguistic targets (Serrano, 2011). To date, however, the massed/distributed distinction has been examined in the ISLA literature more as a function of the distribution of instructional time and its impact on language learning in general, rather than on optimal distributions of practice time for the learning of discrete grammar points (Collins et al., 1999). Two studies that have explored this found that distributed practice conditions led to longer-term, more stable gains than massed distribution for semantic differences between tenses and syntax at the sentence and phrase levels (Bird, 2010; Miles, 2014). Research is needed to understand how grammar points are distributed across coursebook series and what form–function mappings are focused on when dealing with one grammar point. In the present study, only four grammar points were repeated, but each time for a different form–meaning mapping (e.g., first conditional and second conditional).

Grammar Presentation

Within the coursebooks, grammar presentation activities are far more likely to be inductive in nature than deductive. Within the presentation section, information about grammar rules is normally made explicit at a certain point. The grammar is presented in connected discourse (contextualized) half of the time, and the majority of the activities do not require output of the target grammar.

The preference for inductive grammar presentation activities documented in the books is in line with coursebook research. Nitta and Gardner (2005) investigated the instruction of three grammar points in nine coursebooks. Six of the books were reported as including mainly inductive presentation activities, one book included equal numbers of both types, and two books favoured deductive ones. Furthermore, in terms of theory, it is assumed that inductive presentation is more motivating to students. Despite conflicting research findings (see Glaser, 2013, for a review), an inductive presentation is believed to be preferable, as allowing the learner to uncover regularities should make the information more meaningful. Furthermore, inductively learned language may be more deeply processed. Jean (2005) found no differences in the accuracy with which deductively instructed learners and inductively instructed learners used the conditional form in French on a post-test. However, an analysis of learners' output showed that the inductive learners employed a larger number of verbs in the conditional than the deductive learners, who frequently employed just two verbs (*devoir* and *pouvoir*). Jean suggested that the inductive learners had learned more about the system than the deductive learners. An inductive presentation is also favoured from the perspective of constructivist educational principles (e.g., Tobias & Duffy, 2009), both because it is more motivating for learners and because of its potential to train learners to analyse language (R. Ellis, 2002), which can then help them to create explicit knowledge. Indeed, research by Toth et al. (2013) demonstrated that learners are able to induce rules, although they may need to use a first or more proficient language to do it.

Despite the apparent agreement between researchers and material developers concerning the potential importance of using an inductive presentation, the materials employed in research and coursebooks differ considerably. Erlam (2003) provided three 45-minute lessons on direct object pronouns in French. The deductive group received explicit information on the form before practicing it with the help of charts detailing the rules. The inductive group completed a number of input and output tasks that were designed for language use (rather than language as an object). This type of inductive presentation requires the learners to spend much more time analysing and understanding the grammar point than coursebook inductive activities do. In fact, throughout the books, the presentation sections can be completed in approximately five to ten minutes before practice begins. When grammar is presented in such an isolated and perfunctory fashion, the difference between providing information (deductive) and eliciting information (inductive) in terms of the potential for long-term effects on development is likely negated. Despite a preference for an inductive presentation and an apparent reflection of ISLA theory and research in coursebooks, the inductive activities in the books may lack the characteristics needed to make them more useful than deductive activities (e.g., time spent analysing, number of examples, contextualized input). This is thus a good example of where teachers may want to supplement or expand the coursebook grammar section.

Even though 60% of the presentation activities do not include rules, the use of more than one activity in a presentation section means that an explicit rule about the grammar is nearly always included. In addition, all the books include a large amount of metalanguage in these sections. The inclusion of rules suggests that knowing language rules helps language acquisition. However, it is widely documented that knowing a rule about a feature does not mean the feature will be correctly used (e.g., Green & Hecht, 1992), and it is also not clear whether rule knowledge helps long-term acquisition (Morgan-Short et al., 2012). Some research has found that teaching rules can hinder performance when compared to learners that do not receive rules (Alanen, 1995, Morgan-Short et al., 2012), although other studies have found the opposite or no difference (de Graaff, 1997; DeKeyser & Sokalski, 1996; Rosa & O'Neill, 1999). Even if rules can be helpful, it is also important to consider research that has shown that learners and teachers misunderstand metalanguage (Bloor, 1986; Trévise, 1996).

Despite the debatable utility of rule provision/elicitation and the frequent misunderstanding of metalanguage, all coursebooks include them in a presentation stage before practice. Is this due to a belief that grammar is learned starting with its rules? Or is it due to practical considerations: providing initial rules helps structure the book, or rules make the learners feel as though they have learned something? These are important questions to understand for future research purposes. If material developers include initial rules because they believe them to be helpful or necessary for future practice, it is important to compare materials in which rules are presented during or after practice. Current research into the timing of the provision of rules has not found that initial presentation is more beneficial than presentation during or after practice (Michaud & Ammar, 2022), and task-based research frequently advocates for a post-task focus on grammar (East, 2021). Furthermore, regardless of when rules are included, as they are omnipresent in both research and practice, it is important to understand how they can be written effectively (comprehensibly) in terms of wording and quantity of information to share if they are to be understood and helpful to language learners.

The findings of the present study show that grammar is presented in context half of the time. As each presentation section tends to include approximately three activities, learners typically read or hear the grammar in context in a written or aural text (see Appendix). The theoretical support behind contextualization stems from the view that language learning involves the creation of form–meaning connections, which is most likely to happen when language is comprehended and produced in genuine communicative situations (Doughty & Williams, 1998). Thus, the presentation sections including grammar within texts suggest that coursebook developers appear to be providing students with some opportunities to create form–meaning connections. Further research is needed to understand the importance of

contextualization when grammar points are presented explicitly (i.e., the learners know they are studying grammar) and when subsequent practice largely involves controlled practice where the grammar is employed using language that does not necessarily reflect authentic language use.

In line with previous findings (e.g. Nitta & Gardner, 2005), the majority of the presentation activities were input-based (aural or textual). This finding is consistent with ISLA research and theory that underscores the importance of providing students with input practice (Bell et al., 2015; VanPatten et al., 2020). However, it is also important to bear in mind that as the presentation sections tended to be shorter than the practice sections, and the practice sections provided largely output-based activities, overall, output-based activities are more common.

The above discussion in relation to the presentation of individual grammar points shows that there are still many areas in which answers are needed. Particularly of interest is to understand the time needed if an inductive presentation activity is to lead to deeper processing than a deductive one. Furthermore, more research is needed to help material developers decide whether to include rules and metalanguage, for which features, and, if so, using what language. It is also important to understand the utility and feasibility of teaching learners metalanguage to prepare them for the treatment of language as an object.

Grammar Practice

Controlled (isolated), output-based grammar practice activities are the most common, with interaction required half the time. Thus, if the instructions are followed, half would include speaking practice. The findings concerning the use of controlled or free activities are consistent with previous materials analyses (R. Ellis, 2002; Fernandez, 2011) which found that controlled activities were the norm (76%). In controlled activities, learners comprehend or produce the language feature in individual sentences with no meaningful target outcome. Furthermore, the individual sentences frequently do not share an underlying theme. Therefore, learners must spend time processing different vocabulary items for each sentence. Focusing on a theme and using frequent words should help free up attentional resources to construct form–meaning connections of the target feature (VanPatten, 2004). Despite a lack of research evidence demonstrating superior acquisition with free when compared to controlled language activities, free activities provide a clearer example of language use that can help learners create accurate form–meaning mappings. Coursebook authors may be reluctant to include free activities in the practice section as they wish to have as many practice items as possible in a short period of time. Clearly, gap-fill sentences allow for many more examples than discourse-level texts do. Research is needed to understand the relative benefits of exposure to fewer items in contextualized text when compared to repetitive practice with greater items in more isolated "drill-like" contexts—including which features or aspects of features might actually be enhanced by the latter (DeKeyser, 1998).

The finding that half of the practice activities require interaction appears to be in line with research demonstrating the importance of interaction for acquisition, as within each practice section, the language feature will be used in interaction at least once (as the practice sections include more than one activity). Furthermore, it is important to note that this number may vary considerably based on teacher preferences. Interaction was coded using the instructions in the coursebooks, so if no instructions were provided to interact, the activity was classified as *no interaction*. However, many of the activities classified as *no interaction* could easily be done in pairs/groups, and many of the interaction activities could also be done individually.

Despite the high number of activities apparently requiring interaction, the overall analysis demonstrated that many of the interactive activities were also controlled. This suggests a potential discrepancy in how interaction is defined in research and operationalized in the coursebooks, which all mention the importance of learning through interaction, communication, or meaningful language use.

Interaction in ISLA focuses on communication between two or more individuals in order to participate in a conversation or understand information. Long (1983) proposed that interaction permits speakers to modify their input in ways that can help learners acquire language. Furthermore, during interaction, learners may notice differences between their forms and their interlocutors', and their output may receive feedback (e.g., comprehension check, clarification request, error correction), which can help development. When problems occur, learners must also negotiate meaning. The importance of interaction is rooted in the potential for problems to arise. In conversations with no communication breakdowns, opportunities for learning are reduced (or at least only implicit learning may occur; N. Ellis, 2005). Useful interaction for grammatical development should therefore require the learners to construct meaning together through interpretation and negotiation before expressing their message (Savignon, 1991), preferably to complete an activity for a meaningful target outcome (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2005; Samuda & Bygate, 2008). However, much of the interaction in the coursebooks could not lead to a communication breakdown, as the learners do not construct knowledge together to arrive at a meaningful goal. In fact, many of the activities look like drills. For example, in *English File* (p. 30), an activity on comparative adjectives asked partners to compare some experiences using the provided adjectives:

> With a partner compare the experiences below using the **bold** adjectives
> 1 **safe, exciting, healthy -** travelling by motorbike; travelling by car; travelling by bike
> 2 **enjoyable, dangerous, relaxing -** travelling by yourself; travelling with friends; travelling with your family
> 3 **difficult, expensive -** learning to drive; learning to ride a bike; learning to ride a horse

The activity requires partners to work together, but output is actually a controlled drill. The learners should create approximately nine sentences that follow the pattern: noun phrase + copula verb *be* + (more) + adjective(*er*) + than + noun phrase. One could argue that working alone may be more beneficial, as each learner will have to produce the nine sentences. Furthermore, as the learners have been told to use the provided adjectives, any meaning breakdown would involve changing the noun phrases rather than the adjectives. If one learner said *travelling with your family is more dangerous than travelling by yourself*, the other learner may take issue, but the correction would not lead to *safer*. Rather, the two noun phrases would be switched. It would be useful for future research to test interactional practice activities that require meaning interpretation and negotiation with the types of interactional activities contained in coursebooks.

The majority of practice activities are output-based, which replicates previous findings (R. Ellis, 2002; Fernandez, 2011). However, in the ISLA research community, it has been demonstrated that learners can have difficulty comprehending input. Input-based instruction has been advocated by a number of researchers (Beaulieu et al., 2020; R. Ellis et al., 2020), as it provides leaners with the opportunity to notice a feature in the input, comprehend its meaning, and rehearse it in short-term memory. Research into processing instruction, a type of instruction that uses input activities that force learners to create a form-meaning connection for task completion, has also shown that this can be effective for acquisition. Input activities are included in the presentation sections of the coursebooks; however, as mentioned above, the shortness of these activities may not provide sufficient input for learners to comprehend meaning and rehearse the form in short-term memory. A further issue is that as output activities are easier for teachers to create (or to download from the internet) than input activities, coursebooks that provide more of the latter would be of real value. However, it is important to note that in the present study, the input-based activities were not classified in terms of whether they provided aural or textual input. Further research is needed to better understand the importance of providing input focus on oral language processing.

Conclusion

In this study, six coursebooks were analysed to provide information on the instruction of grammar. The results were then discussed in terms of ISLA research findings to understand where grammar instruction in classroom contexts and in research converge and diverge. Future research is important in all three examined topics: grammar contents, presentation, and practice. In terms of grammar contents, a syllabus is likely to include an accuracy focus as well as, or within, a fluency focus (R. Ellis, 2019; R. Ellis & Shintani, 2014). Thus, the likelihood of labelling grammar in the syllabus is high. It is therefore vital for research to address what grammar to include and at what point in the learning cycle. In terms of presentation, research is needed to understand the importance of presenting language samples in context and using an inductive presentation, bearing in mind the brevity of these presentation sections before practice begins. In terms of both presentation and practice, understanding the importance of integrating research-based input activities is necessary, as they are currently confined largely to the brief presentation sections. This suggests that students are given little opportunity to process the target grammar for the creation of authentic form–meaning connections, despite this being key for long-term development (VanPatten, 2004). Finally, in this study, the grammar contents of coursebooks were analysed without examining how they are used by teachers. Future research is needed to understand more about how teachers use these types of activities. Which activities are actually used, supplemented, or ignored? Are other online and offline resources also employed?

It is also important to acknowledge that the issues raised from the analysis of six integrated skills coursebooks written for an international audience may not be relevant to all English language teaching contexts. For example, such coursebooks are not suitable for adult ESL in Canada, where lesson planning is to be guided by the Canadian Language Benchmarks and the specific needs and interests of each teacher's students. Grammar that is to be taught should be not only contextualized thematically but also integrated into task-based lessons. Nonetheless, the issue of whether the present progressive, for example, should be taught before the simple present and in what way are questions that all ESL/EFL teachers have to address.

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Appendix: Presentation Sections and Practice

Presentation Sections

*Example of an input-based, decontextualized, deductive activity with explicit information (*Clockwise, *p. 55)*

2. Look at relative clauses 1 to 8 again. Which …?
- Have a relative pronoun?
- Don't have a relative pronoun?
- Need a relative pronoun to make sense?
- Don't need a relative pronoun?

Using relative clauses
Relative clauses always follow a main clause. They both need a subject.

Main clause	**Relative clause**
I remember people	… **who** talk to me.
I remember things	… **which** are important to me.
I remember things	… (which) **I** enjoy.
I remember people	… (who) **I** spend time with.

If the relative clause doesn't have its own subject, you must use a relative pronoun.

I remember people … **who** talk to me.
NOT … ~~I remember people talk to me.~~

BUT if the relative clause already has its own subject (pronoun or noun), you don't need to use a relative pronoun.

I remember things **I enjoy.** / **which I enjoy.**

*Example of an input-based, contextualized, inductive activity with no explicit information (*Headway, *p. 10)*

exports enjoy immigrants huge

This country has a fairly small population, just 16 million, but its area is **huge**. The people are mainly of European descent, but there are also aborigines and a lot of southeast Asian _____ . People live in towns on the coasts, not so much inland, because it is so hot. They live a lot of their lives outdoors, and _____ sports, swimming, and having barbecues. This country _____ wine and wool — it has more than 60 million sheep!

*Example of an input-based, decontextualized, inductive activity with explicit information (*Headway, *p. 11)*

GRAMMAR SPOT

1 What tense are all the verb forms in texts *a–c*? Why?

2 Look at the sentences. Which refers to *all the time*?

Which refers to *right now*?

She has three children.

She's having lunch.

Grammar Reference 2.1 p.140

Example of an output-based, contextualized, inductive presentation activity with no explicit information

1. Discuss the questions below.

What is your favorite movie?
Which of these do you enjoy?

- Horror movies
- Musicals
- Ganster movies
- Historical romances
- Detective stories

Do you enjoy old movies?
If so, which ones and why?

Practice

*Example of a controlled, interactive, output-based production activity (*English File, *p. 30)*

C With a partner compare the experiences below using the **bold** adjectives.

1 **safe**, **exciting**, **healthy**

travelling by motorbike
travelling by car
travelling by bike

2 **enjoyable**, **dangerous**, **relaxing**

travelling by yourself
travelling with friends
travelling with your family

3 **difficult**, **expensive**

learning to drive
learning to ride a bike
learning to ride a horse

*Example of a controlled, non-interactive, output-based activity (*Interchange, *p. 87)*

A Complete these sentences. Then compare with a partner.

1. Johnny Depp is a very _____ actor. (amaze)
2. I find animated films _____. (amuse)
3. I'm not _____ in science fiction movie. (interest)
4. I'm _____ by watching television. (bore)
5. I thought *Jurassic Park* was an _____ book. (excite)
6. I'm _____ by J.R.R Tolkien's novels. (fascinate)
7. It's _____ that horror movies are so popular. (surprise)

*Example of a controlled, non-interactive, input-based activity (*Cutting Edge, *p. 24)*

2. **a)** [3.4] Listen to Ellen talking about the British education system. What does she say about the things below? Use *can/can't/have to/ don't have to* in your answers.

- RE (Religious Education)
- PE (Physical Education)
- Math and English
- Geography and History
- Math GCSE* and college
- the age of fourteen
- the age of sixteen

*The exams that British students take at the age of 16 (General Certificate of Secondary Education)

Example of a free, interactive, output-based activity (Clockwise, p. 69)

9. In groups, practice giving advice,

1 On your own, write on a piece of paper three things you want from life that you haven't already got. Give the papers to another group.
2 Read the papers and agree on what advice you would give. Use at least two *-ing* forms.