



LUIZ OTÁVIO BARROS

JS: Luiz, thanks for agreeing to speak to us. First question: How did you get into coursebook writing?

LOB: I became a teacher in 1990, and way back then, to my coordinators' despair, I was already writing my own handouts (=photocopies!), flashcards and OHTs to supplement whichever coursebook I happened to be using at the time. Looking back, I think I was essentially taking a stab at doing something I'd always found intrinsically enjoyable and intellectually stimulating: creating stuff. A few years later, in my mid-twenties, I became an academic coordinator at a major binational center in Brazil. Part of my job involved developing in-house material, and that taught me how to focus on design, consistency and, more importantly, applicability beyond my own classes. In the early 2000s, I joined another binational center in São Paulo and eventually became responsible for course design and material development, which helped me hone my skills as a writer even more. In hindsight, it feels as if the twenty

something years I spent working as teacher, teacher educator, academic supervisor and course designer paved the way for the work that I do today, at age forty-six.

JS: You have made a huge contribution to an important change of paradigm - the idea that only native speakers can write international coursebooks. Was this an easy paradigm shift?

LOB: No, not at all. When I look back on my career, I can't help but wonder why it took me two decades to break into the international market, when, theoretically at least, I could have been doing what I'm currently doing in my thirties. Two (not mutually-exclusive) hypotheses: One, maybe I wasn't ready, period. Two, maybe the time had not yet come for that particular paradigm to be broken. And it's still an uphill struggle, I must confess. There seems to be a tacit, residual understanding in ELT that only native speakers can - and indeed should - write mainstream international



coursebooks. After all, virtually all the watershed, million-selling ELT classics of our time were written by native authors – the *Streamlines*, the *Interchanges*, the *Headways*. Also, publishers and authors want their titles to sell as well as possible, and, other things being equal, a last name like Smith is easier to market internationally than Barros, Nakamura or Bertrand... Or is it? The success I've had with my latest books seems to suggest otherwise.

JS: So do you think your courageous endeavor to write a mainstream international series targeted mostly at speakers of Portuguese and Spanish will start a trend towards more diversity in the publishing world?

LOB: To be fair, all the praise should go to Paul Seligson, who came up with the core concept behind the iD/iDentities series, and Richmond International, which was brave enough and smart enough to make it happen. And, I can't stress this enough, if Richmond hadn't taken a chance on local talent, it might have taken me even longer to break through the ever-elusive-but-no-longer-unbreakable glass ceiling of international publishing. Then, as fate would have it, a few years later I was invited to co-author two levels of Jim Scrivener's new series for young adults, *Personal Best*, and the rest is history. Whether Richmond's bold move will start a trend toward more diversity in the publishing world remains to be seen. I'm a bit skeptical, to be honest, but I'd love CUP, OUP, Pearson, Macmillan and Cengage to prove me wrong.

JS: Speaking of Jim Scrivener, are you an advocate of Demand High Teaching? Is this a trend or just a different way of looking at the roles of teachers and learners?

LOB: I have seen more than my fair share of pendulum swings in ELT, and I'm a big fan of Demand High Teaching precisely because it's *not* a trend or a new method. In the words of Scrivener and Underhill (2012):

"Demand High asks: Are our learners capable of more, much more? Have the tasks and techniques we use in class become rituals and ends in themselves? How can we stop 'covering material' and start focusing on the potential for deep learning? What small tweaks and adjustments can we make to shift the whole focus of our teaching towards getting that engine of learning going? Demand High is not a method and it is not anti any method. [...] We are simply suggesting adjustments to whatever it is you are already doing in class." (<https://demandhighelt.wordpress.com/>)

In other words, it seems that Demand High simply describes what good language teaching ought to look like, period. Which makes me wonder why the term has yet to gain wider currency and mainstream acceptance.

JS: Any hypotheses?

LOB: Demand-High teaching only makes sense conceptually if we look at its evil cousin, "demand low" teaching, and try to understand it. So, maybe the key question we're not asking is: Do teachers regard what they do in class as "demand low"? If so, do they see it as a problem? If the

answer to both questions is *no*, then there's no reason why they should embrace Demand High. In other words, maybe we're proposing a solution to a problem that, in the teachers' heads, doesn't really exist. So, unless we try to figure out what's at the heart of demand low teaching and take the bull - the complacency bull- by the horns, we might not be able to make a convincing case for Demand High.

JS: What do you think might be at the heart of "demand low" teaching?

LOB: I'll go out on a limb here and blame it mostly on four decades of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), especially on the dogmas from the first era (the mid 70s to early 80s). It goes without saying, of course, that CLT has encouraged us to look at the nature of language and the nature of language learning in different ways, and our profession is all the better for it. In the communicative era, we have arguably become more dynamic, engaging and interactive teachers. But, to our peril, we seem to have misinterpreted a number of general CLT guidelines, turned them into mantras and made them impervious to further scrutiny: "Step aside. Let students get on with their learning."

(But when should I step back in?)

"Accuracy matters less than intelligibility."

(Even in monolingual groups, where people can nearly always understand each other?)

"Don't provide corrective feedback during meaning-based activities." *(Even if the students are struggling to convey their own meanings?)*

"Watch your TTT. You're speaking way too much."

(TTT as in echoing students, clarifying, giving instructions...?)

"Avoid putting students on the spot."

(Right, because that's how the real world works?)

"Controlled oral practice? Booring."

(Sorry. Gap-filling is ok, I presume?)

"Hmm... Is this meaningful enough?"

(Meaningful as in fun, relevant or full of meaning?)

"Remember: You're a facilitator first and foremost."

(That sounds cool. What do I facilitate again?)

I'm being facetious to make a point, of course, but it seems that those of us trained (and, to some degree, taught) in the communicative era have internalized the notion that *minimal intervention* is one of the main yardsticks against which a good lesson should be measured. And this helps to explain why Demand High teaching, which is all about careful, systematic and principled teacher intervention, has become a thing in the first place. And, more importantly, why it shouldn't be taken for granted.

JS: In your plenary talk during the BRAZ-TESOL Convention this year, you talked about the "lacre" culture in the ELT community, which must have confused international participants. What is this, and what motivated you to bring up this issue?

LOB: The *lacre* section of my plenary did baffle a few participants, I know. The way I see it, the *lacre* is essentially an online social phenomenon fueled by our need to belong. Some of us spend a large part of our lives safe and snug



inside our social media bubbles, trying to build and foster relationships with other like-minded individuals. To fit in, we seem to be learning how to tap into the ethos of the digital communities we belong to - how to feel their pulse, so to speak. It's as if we're caught in a Black Mirror-esque sort of loop, constantly filtering, editing and cropping not only our photos, but our thoughts as well, so we can strengthen our ties with other members of the same echo chamber. This is what I meant by *lacrar* in my plenary.

JS: So you're saying we're becoming more reliant on external validation?

LOB: Yes, and in the process we're moving further and further away from our true selves. But here's the worst part: The *lacre* culture is so pervasive online that it seems reasonable to assume that it's slowly creeping its way into "real life", too, and this can undermine the work that we do. As teacher educators, we must resist the urge to *lacrar* at any cost. And by this I mean resist the urge to avoid complexity, avoid dissent and avoid the hard truths in order to get the easy nods, the easy smiles and the easy applause. Real professional growth only occurs in a state of mild discomfort, and I believe the *lacre* should take a backseat to contemplation, doubt and reflection. I can't shake the feeling that there was more critical thinking in our profession in the 1990s - early 2000s, long before critical thinking was a sexy ELT term, and the *lacre* culture is partly to blame for this, I believe.

JS: Why did you write the book - *The Only Academic Book You'll Ever Need*?

I first felt the need for a phrasebook like that in 1999, when I did my MA in Applied Linguistics at Lancaster University. Whenever I started a new assignment, I usually knew exactly what I wanted to say and had no trouble organizing my ideas. What I lacked was a wider repertoire of sentences like "A cursory glance at [...] reveals that [...]" or "[...] is beyond the scope of this paper." So, after each and every academic paper I read, I made a list of useful phrases and sentence "templates" that I could subsequently include in my own writing. For whatever reason, I never deleted that list, and between 2015 and 2016 I decided to expand it, carry out further research, write language tips and turn the whole thing into an Amazon-only book. Long story short, that little book, which once I feared nobody would be remotely interested in, has sold nearly 10,000 copies so far - most of which to native speakers of English.

JS: What advice would you give to non-native teachers who also want to feel empowered to get into uncharted waters, like you did?

LOB:

1. If you want to write material beyond the confines of the classroom, read about SLA (second language acquisition) theory - not just one book, but five. Or ten. But you must also, somehow paradoxically, be willing to ignore some of this theory if you want your coursebook to be sold across different markets and used by teachers from different

backgrounds. Remember: coursebook writing is essentially the art of the possible, and you must be willing to compromise - perhaps a little more often than you'd like to.

2. Keep in mind that material design is a skill in its own right. Just because you're a great teacher doesn't necessarily mean you can write good materials. There are a lot of specifics to learn - some on the job, some from your mentors and PLN (personal learning network).

3. Once you've landed a contract, learn how to use editorial feedback to help you grow. You will hear "This doesn't work" far more often than "This is really good." You will have to re-write all your lessons, usually more than once, until you end up with a final product that is as close to perfect as possible. Coursebook writing is process writing on steroids. If you're not open - *genuinely* open - to feedback and willing to put in lots of extra hours, don't even think about becoming an author.

4. Make yourself known. Start a Facebook page, build your PLN and create a blog showcasing some of the activities you've used or devised. Show the world what you can do. If you've got it, flaunt it!

5. Present at conferences - as many as you can, as often as possible. I got my first book deal in 2003 when someone from Pearson attended a talk I gave on task-based learning.

6. Last but not least, embrace your "non-nativeness", be proud of your journey and aware of your strengths. But don't become complacent about your English and keep in mind that there's always room for improvement no matter how proficient you think you are.

Don't ever settle for good enough. If you want your place in the sun, you must earn it. 

The interviewee

Luiz Otávio Barros (MA Hons in Applied Linguistics, Lancaster University) has been teaching, training teachers, designing language courses and writing ELT materials since 1990. Formerly academic coordinator at Cultura Inglesa São Paulo, where he was responsible for the advanced levels, as well as COTE, DOTE and DELTA tuition, head of research and development at Associação Alumni São Paulo, where he was in charge of the adult segment, and BRAZ-TESOL's second vice president, Luiz Otávio is co-author of Richmond's *English ID, Identities* and the new Young Adult course *Personal Best*, as well as series editor of *Access*, published by Richmond Brazil. He has also self-published *The Only Academic Phrasebook You'll Ever Need*, available on Amazon.

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