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# AN ANALYSIS OF A LAO COURSEBOOK

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Leona Lydia Kemmer  
3196886  
leona.kemmer@stud.ph-karlsruhe.de  
0157 88718783  
6th Semester

Prof. Dr. Martin  
Global English(es): TESOL in Asia  
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## **Introduction**

The enormous selection of coursebooks available on the market makes it hard to decide which coursebook fits the learners' needs in terms of the purpose of the course, learners' language proficiency, learners' learning styles and the aim of the materials.

Matters are complicated further by the reality that some books regarding different official matters, are compulsory for certain subjects in some federal states or countries.

In this paper I am going to present ways to choose and evaluate good coursebooks based on previous research. By name, I want to mention Neville Grant and Michael K. Legutke, Andreas Müller-Hartmann and Marita Schocker-v. Ditzfurth.

Furthermore, the coursebook "English for Lao Primary Schools – Student's Book 1" will be analysed in terms of 'The Latin alphabet' and 'The variety of conceptual formulations'.

With the chapter of 'How to enlarge the potential of the coursebook' I am going to give a brief overview of additional techniques which can be added to the work with the coursebook in order to make the language learning process as effective and enjoyable as possible.

For a better understanding of the educational system in Laos, I am going to start with an overview about the history of Laos in terms of its education system(s). Starting with the Colonialist time of the French from 1893-1953 and the independence of Laos in 1954. Going over to the time of two ruling parties during the Lao Civil War and connected with it the secret war of the United States of America from 1954- 1975. Finally, a brief outline of the time after the establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975.

## **The historical background of Laos- regarding the two educational systems**

As Laos is a Buddhist country and religious beliefs play a crucial role in the life of its citizens, education took place in the so called 'pagoga' schools in temples and monasteries (cf. Schultze, Michael 2013, 77) until the French colonial rulers formalized a countrywide public education system in 1915. Due to its low strategic value to the French, they did not put much of an effort into education. The outcome of it was that education and human resources were on a low level. Because their idea of education did not meet the needs of the population, there was only a small percentage who went to school. They were mostly established in urban areas and some district centres but not in the countryside, where most of the population was working in the agricultural sector. It follows from the above that a small urban elite was formed, mainly from the royal family and other bourgeois households (cf. Schultze, Michael 2013, 134-136).

During the 60 years of French ruling, students could only attend primary school until the first and only secondary school in the country was established in 1924. Until 1954, 120 students per year (subdivided into four classes) were able to receive secondary education in Vientiane. The curriculum was based on the French system which resulted in learning about French history, culture and language. As there was no possibility to higher education after graduating from secondary school, some Lao students went to Cambodia, Vietnam and even France to study at a college or university (cf. Zeck, Johannes 2017).

The influence of the French was minimal which explains that regarding to a governmental report in 1963, more than 75% of the Lao population has never been to a formal school (cf. Halpern, Joel & Tinsman, Marilyn C. 1966, 502). The number of Lao students who graduated from secondary school in 1945 added up to 10 students, three of them were part of the royal family (cf. Schultze, Michael 2013, 136).

Due to the military and political circumstances between the time of Laos' declaration of independence from France in 1954 and the Pathet Lao communist coup in 1975, two parallel education systems were established. On the one hand there was the school system established by the communist party "Pathet Lao" which can be translated as "Lao Nation" or "Land of the Lao", who were supported by the Soviet Union, North Vietnam and the People's Republic of China. On the other hand, there was the right winged Royal Lao Government Party (short RLG), supported by the United States of America<sup>1</sup> (cf. Zeck, Johannes 2017).

The Pathet Lao mostly controlled rural areas and mountains, populated by a third of Lao population, mainly ethnic minorities. Due to the free schooling programme of the communist party for everybody, there was a great improvement in the education sector controlled by the Pathet Lao. In comparison to the 11. 400 pupils from Laos who went to primary school during the French occupation in 1945, 36.200 children attended primary school in the area controlled by the Pathet Lao in 1964 (cf. Halpern, Joel & Tinsman, Marilyn C. 1966, 501-505).

Their aim was it to build up a basic education for everybody, wherein students can fall in love with their own country and feel the strength of unity, by introducing Lao as the first language of the citizens. The communist party formed two three-year education plans. The first one from 1967 focused on improving the primary education and literacy for children and adults. Non-formal learning centres were established- primary schools in every second village and lower secondary schools in each province.

The second project targeted the further improvement of the former plan. To take those matters further, higher education was set into focus. Even though the textbooks were translated from Vietnamese textbooks, the higher education system was reorganised and available in Laos for the first time.

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<sup>1</sup> The war against the communists in Laos is one of the proxy wars between East and West, with its great representatives, the USA and the Soviet Union during the cold war. Because the American Nation did not know anything about the war in Laos at first, it is also known as America's Secret War nowadays (Schultze, Michael 2013, 240).

The influence of Vietnam and the Soviet Union was not only visible in politics but also in the education of the Lao citizens. For communication with the supporters, Vietnamese and Russian was spoken as a second language in school. Some pupils even studied in communist states like China or even Eastern European countries (cf. Zeck, Johannes 2017).

All the efforts for a better educated Laos declined in 1971, due to the bombing of the US forces in order to stop the supply lines of the Vietnamese forces on the Ho-Chi Minh trail. 50.000 of civilians were killed<sup>2</sup>, thousands of people were turned into refugees (cf. Boland, Rosita 2017) and education had to take place in safer regions such as caves. Lessons could only be held from early in the morning until 9 o'clock for four hours a day until the students and teachers had to seek shelter again (cf. Zeck, Johannes 2017).

This barbarous routine continued for nine years from 1964 until 1973. The US forces dropped bombs every eight minutes on average for this duration of time which made Laos to the most heavily bombed country per capita in history (cf. Boland, Rosita 2017).

In spite of everything, the achievement of the Pathet Lao was remarkable. Basic education was offered to all ethnic minorities who were excluded from the French education system as well as the RLG. Lower secondary and higher education was available and the literacy rate increased (cf. Zeck, Johannes 2017).

In the first years after the declaration of Lao independence the education system of the Royal Lao Government looked nearly the same as the French system. Most of the secondary teachers came from France, French was still the first language and the French culture held good for the elite of Laos. Only in 1962 did the education system of the RLG adapt their programme to an education fitting the needs of its population, at least on paper. Unfortunately, most of the students were still part of the Lao elite (cf. Chomsky, Noam 1972, 94- 95). Due to the

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<sup>2</sup> and because 80 million of the 270 million cluster munition bomblets did not explode yet, around 300 citizens per year, with a 40 percentage of children, are still getting badly injured or killed since 1973 (cf. Boland, Rosita 2017).

concentration on a “Laoization”, French textbooks were translated into Lao and their biggest supporter and financier, USAID (the official development agency of the USA) in cooperation with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), decided to abolish the French elite system. From now on the education did not rely on the French, and the influence of the USA grew (cf. Halpern, Joel & Tinsman, Marilyn C. 1966, 503). With the financial help of the USAID, 4.700 classrooms were built until 1973, the adult literacy rate increased, a new secondary school system was established and the numbers of students doubled from 15% to 30%. Inspired by the Pathet Lao, the aim of the RLG was it to create a basic education for everybody fitting the lifestyle and needs of its citizens (cf. Zeck, Johannes 2017).

All in all, both education plans helped to decrease the illiterate rate and let the number of school-attending children grow. The Pathet Lao in particular, made education reachable and profitable for ethnic minorities and therefor gain support of the majority of the Lao citizens. The RLG on the other hand lost its stronghold, trust and support in the country because the USAID stopped providing money and goods after they left the country entirely in 1975 so that the RLG could not continue the way they did before. In that same year, Laos and with it the education system was reunited by a peaceful coup of the Pathet Lao and the proclamation of the "People's Democratic Republic" (cf. Zeck, Johannes 2017).

The status of education nowadays has increased but there are still a lot of disparities. The literacy rate is increasing. In 2000 the literacy rate was 60%, 74% of men and only 48% of women. There is also a high inequality between urban and rural people<sup>3</sup> and a huge difference according the ethnic groups of Laos<sup>4</sup> (cf. Sisouphanthong, Bounthavy, Taillard, Christian 2000, 60). In comparison to that, according to studies of UNESCO, the literary rate of 2015 for Laos as a

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<sup>3</sup> 85% of town dwellers in comparison with 55% of rural dwellers.

<sup>4</sup> 86% of the Lao, 60% of the Khmu, 46% of the Hmong. Those are only the most advantaged of the three main ethnolinguistic families.

whole increased to 84,66%<sup>5</sup> (cf. World Bank 2019) of which 89,96% were literate men and 79,39% were women (cf. Countryeconomy.com 2015).

In 2000 the percentage of people who finished primary school in the whole country of Laos was 11%, 4% have completed junior secondary school, 2% senior secondary school and 2% of the population reached higher education<sup>6</sup>. One of the reasons for this alarming kind of progress were the consequences of war. Many of the most educated people fled the country in 1975 in order to live a life without having to fear for their life because of the massive US bombings from 1964 to 1973. Whereas most of the population did not have the financial means to leave the country.

The isolation of many ethnic groups in the mountains in terms of a delay in the upgrading of the road network is part of the low education rate of Laos (cf. Sisouphanthong, Bounthavy, Taillard, Christian 2000, 60).

The lack of financial resources makes it even more difficult to enable affordable access to education for both, boys and girls, children from rural and urban areas and rich and poor. It is therefore not surprising that the gaps of education between those sections are widening.

To make matters worse the literacy rate of past years shows that there are fewer literate women than men. The reasons for this trend are diverse. Some ethnic groups do not consider education for girls essential or profitable. Factors like poverty, costs for school uniforms, books and other school implements, traditional beliefs, the burden of household chores and early marriage and pregnancy are the most significant to mention (cf. Hays, Jeffrey 2008).

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<sup>5</sup> The numbers are based on the following: "Adult (15+) literacy rate (%). Total is the percentage of the population age 15 and above who can, with understanding, read and write a short, simple statement on their everyday life. Generally, 'literacy' also encompasses 'numeracy', the ability to make simple arithmetic calculations. This indicator is calculated by dividing the number of literates aged 15 years and over by the corresponding age group population and multiplying the result by 100." (World Bank 2019)



The forecast that “the number of primary school aged children is expected to continue growing at a rapid rate” (UNICEF 2015, 4) can be added to the list of very fortunate developments in education.

All in all, there are still a lot of challenges to face such as poverty, the insufficient extension of universal primary schools, the low level of literacy and numeracy and teacher quality caused by different circumstances (UNICEF 2015, 6-7).

The creation of a coursebook for English is a step further for achieving universal education in Laos.

Hereinafter I am going to analyse the English coursebook for Lao students of grade three. In order to do so, I am going to start with a brief insight of how to choose and analyse a coursebook.

## **Analysis of the Lao coursebook**

### **Choosing and analysing a coursebook**

The great variety of coursebooks available for every grade can be overwhelming, without any knowledge even overcharging. Which often leads to taking the one coursebook which everybody else is using or the media is selling as the perfect one. This hasty reaction often results in dissatisfaction reflecting the lesson and its outcome for both, the teacher and students. Even if it is the case that one is bounded to the decision of one’s authorities, the teacher him/herself is responsible of what do make out of it.

There are a lot of guides from different authors which help you to decide which coursebook to choose. I am going to point out the three stages of evaluation after Neville Grant.

The three stages are (Grant, Neville 1990, 119f):

1.) **Initial evaluation:** This advice comes in handy for all those people who do not want to waste time on observing a coursebook too closely and forejudge a book because it looks different than the one's he or she is used to. Take a step back from this perception and decide biased if the certain book is worth looking at in more detail. The well-chosen acronym CATALYST helps to make this decision as following.<sup>7</sup>

- Is the book **Communicative**? Does it contribute to an active communication of the students?
- Does the book fit your **Aims** and objectives?
- Is the book **Teachable**? Is it easy to use and well organized?
- Does the book have **Available Add-ons** like additional material like worksheets, word cards, CD's, a teachers book etc. you can work with?
- Is the **Level** appropriate for your students?
- What is **Your** overall **impression** of this book in particular?
- Do you think it meets the **Students interest**? Does it have any *impact*<sup>8</sup> on the students?
- Has the book been **Tried and tested** in a real-life classroom situation? From whom and what where their results?

It also helps to get a second opinion on what you decided, ask fellow colleagues or other qualified employees

2.) **Detailed evaluation:** After applying the CATALYST test, it is useful to ask oneself the following questions when choosing a coursebook in terms of finding a coursebook one is

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<sup>7</sup> A similar catalogue of questions for deciding which coursebook to choose, can be find in chapter eleven in (Legutke, Michael K. et. al. 2014).

<sup>8</sup> This term is used and defined as having “a noticeable effect on learners; that is when the learners ‘curiosity, interest and attention are attracted [through novelty, variety, attractive presentation and appealing content (cf. Tomlinson, Brian in Legutke, Michael K. et. al. 2014, 115)]. If this is achieved there is a better chance that some of the language in the materials will be taken in for processing” by Tomlinson, Brian in (Legutke, Michael K. et. al. 2014, 115).

comfortable with or evaluating a coursebook in order to make the most out of it (Grant, Neville 1990, 119):

- 1.) Does it fit? (it should suit the needs, interests and abilities of your students, yours and the syllabus) (Grant, Neville 1990, 118)
- 2.) If it fits, how well does it fit – and how does it compare with others that also fit?
- 3.) Later, when you had used it for some time: Does it still fit?

For a thorough examination and valid comparison, it is advisable to go through this procedure with at least two coursebooks

- 3.) **In-use evaluation:** To make sure “that the teacher is the master, and not the slave, of the textbook” it is important to evaluate the textbook further while using it. If a coursebook is working for you, depends on your interests, ways of teaching and of course your students. As already mentioned before, it can be helpful to talk about it with colleagues from time to time.

Legutke, Müller-Hartmann and Schocker-v. Ditzfurth enlarged this catalogue of criteria for a good coursebook with the quality of activities, the quality of the language used in activities and the quality of the teacher’s guide (cf. Legutke, Michael K. et. al. 2014, 114).

Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that there is not “the perfect coursebook” but there are certainly books who rather fit your and the needs of your students than others.

As the English coursebooks in Lao are compulsory for the teachers, it is still important to consider evaluation points like the ones from above while using it. Taking those guidelines into account I am now going to focus on two different criteria. Making sure that one is using a

coursebook which suits the needs of Lao students in their first year of learning English in grade three.<sup>9</sup>

Before I am going to analyse difficulties of having to write and read not only in another language but script, I am starting to give a brief overview of the Lao coursebook series for English.

### **The Lao coursebooks for English**

In the introduction of the coursebook for grade three, the 'Research Institute for Educational Sciences' points out that English is part of the curriculum in primary schools since the academic year of 2009/2010. This results in the new policy from the Ministry of Education on behalf of the reform of general education from 11 to 12 years. A team, formed by members of the 'Foreign Language Research and Resource Centre' as part of the 'Research Institute for Educational Sciences' and the 'Faculty of Letters at the National University of Laos', created three coursebooks and teacher guides for learning English in primary school. They were financially supported by the Lao Government; those books are compulsory from grade three to grade five.

The creators were inspired by English books from other countries and the illustration based learning which is stressed in those books and adapted to the content of Lao circumstances.

The aim of this learning aid is to build up a basic knowledge of English including the four main skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing. The students should be able to benefit from what they learned and exert their knowledge on further studies.

The Research Institute for Educational Sciences admits that due to time pressure of the creators, a few mistakes could not be avoided (cf. Phimsipasom, Khamphanh & Keovilay Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bouasavanh et al. 2009, Introduction).

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<sup>9</sup> As a guideline I used the list of Prof. Dr Martin "How to choose a good coursebook"

Although Lao is the official language in Laos and is spoken by around half of its population, the country has a huge variety of 86 documented different languages and therefore several scripts (cf. Kiprop, Joseph 2017). Considering that Lao is there for not the first language and English the third language for half of the population, it is not surprising that having to read and write in yet a whole new script is causing a lot of difficulties.

## The Latin alphabet

Probably the most difficult issue of learning English for Lao students is the Latin alphabet. It is not only the different sounds of the English phonics which are very hard to pronounce if they are not existent in the language(s) you are speaking but the very different script of Latin letters. This is aggravated by the fact that there small and capital letters and block letters and cursive handwriting to distinguish from.

On the first page of each chapter, the students are exposed to two main letters which will be awaiting them in the following chapter. Each chapter is subdivided into two sections, section A (with the first letter) and section B (with the second letter). The letters are written down in its capital and small form. The script of the whole book is written in block letters. Which might be easier for the students to copy, at least that is what one from the Western countries would think. Regarding the script of the Lao language in comparison to the English language, one can perceive more similarities with the cursive handwriting of a letter than the

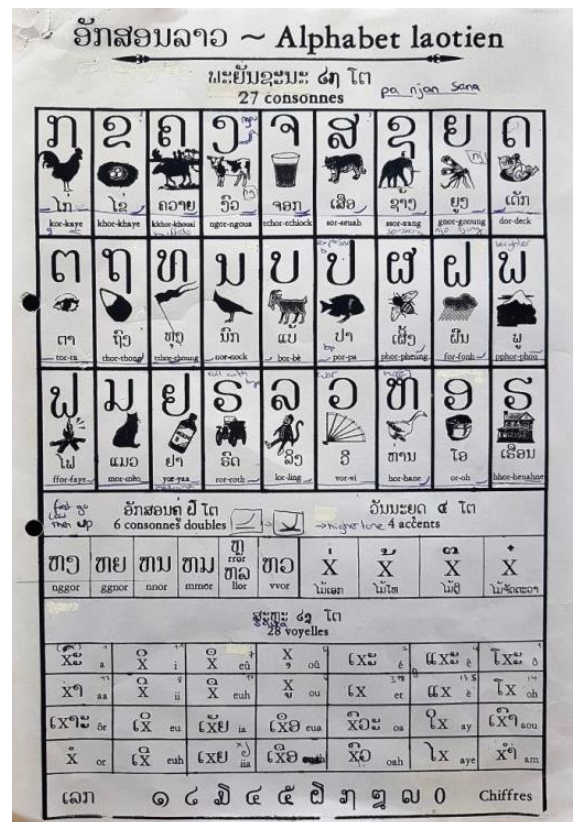


Image 1: Lao alphabet

block letters. Looking at the Lao script one could even say that the cursive handwriting might be easier to get used to for Lao children.

Comparing the two scripts, it is probably very hard for the students to identify the Latin letters and copy them. As they are used to a totally different typeface, the students' writing progress is more reminiscent of drawing the letters rather than writing them.

Even if they get the hang of it, they must learn that there is a small and a capital version of each letter and the students must be shown when to use with version. One could say that the rules in English for using capital letters is quite easy, but those children are not used to capital letters at all. On top of it, the actual writing of the letters requires a high motoric and sensible skill from the children, leaving alone the recognition and correct use of each letter.

As the Lao coursebooks and teachers put a lot of emphasize on the writing and reading progress, there is probably a lot of pressure on the children for writing correctly which could lead to demotivation in terms of not being able to copy the letters properly. The challenging but very important role of the teacher is, to keep up the student's motivation for learning English even though the difficulties are obvious.

It's not only the letters which are already written down in English and in the Latin alphabet but also the instructions and some words which they are supposed to look at, listen to and repeat. One reason for that is probably that the writers of the book thought that by exposing the students to the Latin alphabet as often as possible, it is easier to get used to it and learn it by heart. It is a reasonable deliberation but on the other hand a lot to take in, even overcoming for a student who has never seen this type of writing before. This again could be counted as a demotivating factor.

Next to the three words, starting with the same letter, are pictures showing the meaning of each word. This helps the students to understand what the unknown word means. However, the students have to connect the picture with the meaning in Lao and again with the new language of English in its spoken and written form. Those thinking processes demand a lot of the students.

On top of this, the words could have been chosen more thoughtfully. As you can see in the picture, the words starting with an “a” in chapter one are:

ant /ænt/ apple /'æp.əl/ arm /ɑ:m/ or in AmE /ɑ:rm/
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Due to the rules of the phonetic alphabet, the grapheme /a/ has more than one phoneme.

This makes it even more difficult for the students to understand that all three words begin with the first letter of the Latin alphabet. Looking at the phonemes of the English language this phenomenon occurs with almost every grapheme of English.

Thinking of the aims from the Lao government, the focus does not lie on a perfect English

pronunciation but on a basic knowledge of English, which the students can work on in their future. Due to this and the limited coverage of a paper, I am not going to analyse the importance of (a) good pronunciation (role model). Taking the aims of the government into account and also the fact that English is the 3<sup>rd</sup> language for many students, the suggestion of UNICEF sounds sensible

Given that it is likely most students in Lao PDR will take at least three to four years to begin to start reading independently in Lao, it is recommended that learning to read in English is delayed until secondary school. Students can start learning to speak English in primary school, but it would be preferable for them to have consolidated their understanding of how to read in Lao before they start learning how to read in English. There were comments that many children currently become confused as they are

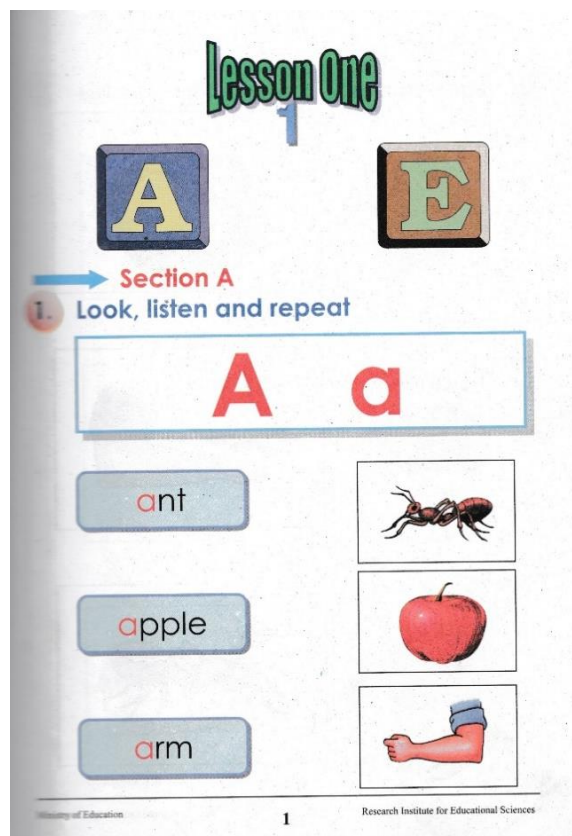


Image 2: excerpt of 'English For Lao Primary Schools Student's Book 1', 1

simultaneously learning to read in two different languages. Students need to first learn how to read in one language, then they can transfer these skills to learning to read other languages.

If a needs-based language program is adopted, students in the sentences class could possibly start learning to read in English (UNICEF 2015, 79).

Nevertheless, it is of great importance that the students practise what the teacher is teaching.

“Competence in the foreign language is not achieved by instructing the children *about* the new language, but by doing tasks and activities *in* it.” (Legutke, Michael K. et. al. 2014, 114)

When learning a new language, active communication is the most natural and a very likely method, leading to success.

As there are not only communication activities but different types of conceptual formulations, I am going to look at them in more detail in the following.

### **The variety of conceptual formulations**

First of all, I want to define the four most common kinds of conceptual formulations in course books.

**Tasks** “can be defined as classroom activities [...but] not all activities that take place in a classroom will qualify as 'tasks'” (Cameron, Lynne in Legutke, Michael K. et. al. 2014, 33). According to Cameron’s concept of learner- and learning-centeredness good tasks are characterized by having coherence and unity for learners (topic, activity and/or outcome), meaning and purpose for learners and clear language learning goals. Furthermore, they should have a beginning and end as well as invite the students to get involved actively. Another important aspect of a good task is to encourage students to deal with challenging tasks without being afraid of making mistakes, build up their confidence in active language learning without losing sight of their limited foreign language skills. The active, playful and creative participation of the learners is an important criterion of tasks (cf. Legutke, Michael K. et. al. 2014, 33).



## **Drills**

are more or less mechanical exercises in which the students practise the sounds or grammar of the language, without having to think much, until (in theory) the language becomes automatic. A drill helps the learner to master some of the basic forms of the language with a reasonable degree of accuracy, before using it to communicate. The most obvious example of a drill is simple repetition (cf. Grant 1990, 35).

The Cambridge Dictionary defines **Exercises** as “an action or actions intended to improve something or make something happen“ (Cambridge Dictionary “exercises”). In relation to coursebooks it says that it’s “a short piece of written work that you do to practise something you are learning“ (Cambridge Dictionary “exercises”).

Nunan defines **Activities** as something “which is in some way derived from the input and which sets out what the learners are to do in relation to the input” (Nunan, David in Legutke, Michael K. et. al. 2014, 35).

A subcategory of this term are communicative activities. They are essential for new language learners and follow the principal of 'learning to communicate by communicating'. Those activities focus on the actual use of a language which means fluency is more important than accuracy. The role of the teacher during such activities differs from the one they take within the drills; the teacher is facilitating the communication of the students by holding back even though there will be students making mistakes. The important point is that the children will gain confidence and competence in using the language independently (cf. Grant 1990, 37).

Based on the definitions above, I am going to analyse the course book in terms of the different kinds of conceptual formulation used for learning English in Laos.

By roughly skimming the coursebook, the use of drills is striking one’s eye. The students are often asked to 'look, listen and repeat', to 'look and say' or to 'look and write'. The aims of those conceptual formulations are mechanical practises of the English sounds and words without

thinking too much about what they really mean while focussing on accuracy rather than fluency. Those repetitions are intended to make the students learn and speak a few words without having to learn about coherences before they are communicating. As they are simply repeating after the teacher without any knowledge about the phonemes and graphemes of the English language, the teacher has the important role of pronouncing the words correctly. Furthermore, he or she should feel obliged to impart the correlations between written and spoken language. Otherwise the point of drills fails their intention of preparing the students for real communication by practising their accuracy in pronunciation.

Copying the single letters and later words reminds one of the first lines of the process of learning to read and write in German in schools of Germany. When learning to read and write the actual practise of doing exactly that, is inevitable. Nevertheless, one should consider that being able to copy letters does not mean he or she understands what he or she is doing. It does not mean that they can even say out loud what they are 'writing', they do not know which phoneme matches which grapheme and will not be able to use this 'knowledge' (if you count copying of nearly unknown letters as knowledge) in another context. One should ask oneself if having fun while learning a new language, being able to start communicating in this new language and motivation for learning more about it would be a more reasonable goal than being able to talk or copy after someone without understanding what the practise is about. The conceptual formulation of 'Let's talk' is not that easy to match one of the defined terms. If it is interpreted as practising what is said in the speech bubbles like in the picture below. It can be seen as an exercise for practising pronunciation, reading, listening and small chunks of a conversation. Because the children will not be able to read what is written down in the first chapter, the teacher will probably read it out to them and then they have to repeat it. This again could be seen as a drill in which they basically just repeat what is said.

4. Look and write



5. Let's talk



Ministry of Education 4 Research Institute for Educational Sciences

Image 3: excerpt of 'English For Lao Primary Schools Student's Book 1', 4

If you understand it to be done in pairs it could be seen as a different form of exercise. The emphasis again lays on practising pronunciation, reading, listening and small chunks of a conversation. Performing this exercise in pairs, gives the students the chance to have a conversation in a kind of real-life situation in which they are allowed to make mistakes without having to fear any consequences. This kind of exercise also allows the teacher to take a break from standing in front of the class and having the chance of walking around the classroom to really listen to what the students are already able to say and interfere

when the students have problems. It is more time intense as repeating it altogether, but it pays off.

Taking this kind of exercise to another level would mean turning it into a communicative activity or task. After doing the exercise described above, the teacher could extend it so that the students get together in small groups or pairs and adapt the context to their own circumstances.

In terms of the picture above, they can stand together and introduce themselves to the others.

The 'Let's talk' activities in the following chapters include chunks like:

- "What is your name?"
- "How are you?" and as a response "I am fine."
- "What is it?" and as a response "It is a/an..."
- "How old are you?" and as a response "I am ... years old."

Those are chunks which they can 'easily' adapt to their lives. It makes the learning more understandable, reachable and fun.

Considering that those formats focus on fluency, the students actually use language and they (hopefully) gain confidence and language competence, they would make good (communicative) activities for the English classroom in Laos.

Looking at the criteria for tasks, one could also let those formulations count as tasks.

As tasks are a kind of activity which involves the students actively in a playful and creative way, having coherence and unity for learners and a clear language learning goal.

Towards the end of the book the conceptual formulations are slightly changing from the format of a lot of drills to a more task, exercise and activity base. There are pages of revision with different kinds of formats, including listening comprehension exercises to improve listening and reading skills. As well as exercises in which the children

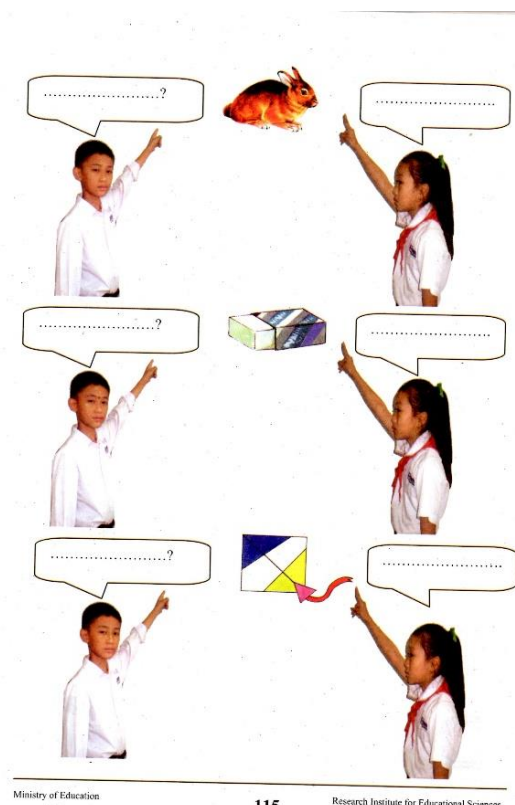


Image 5: excerpt of 'English For Lao Primary Schools Student's Book 1', 115

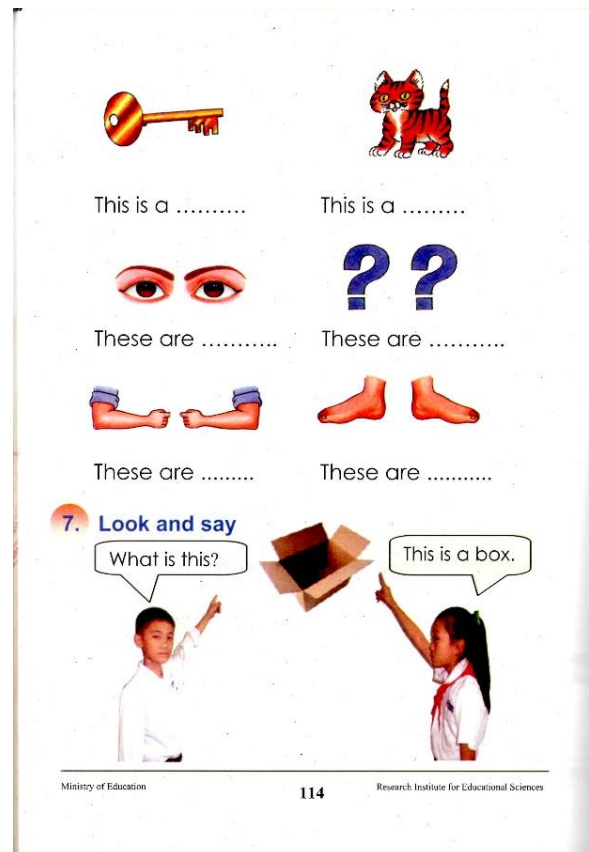


Image 4: excerpt of 'English For Lao Primary Schools Student's Book 1', 114

have to match English words with pictures or in another exercise, they have to match Lao words with English words. There are some exercises in which they have to look at the printed picture and write down what “this is” or “what these are”.

There are a few exercises which can be taken as tandem-work in which the students work on their own at first by filling out one of the speech bubbles. Then getting together with a partner and acting out what they wrote down. To take this task-based activity further, the pairs can now point at an object in the classroom while asking the other partner “What is this?”/ “What are these?” and the partner is responding with “This is a/an...”/ “These are...”.

This kind of task can be adapted to a few other exercises of this book.

In this coursebook are three songs (“What’s your name?”, “1,2, green and blue” and “Head, shoulders, fingers, toes”) to be found. Those songs can function as a warm-up, settling or steering exercise or even activity depending how the teacher is interpreting it.

To sum up the findings regarding the different types of conceptual formulations, it can be said that most of them are based on the principal of listening and repetition. So, most of the formulations are drills, the students listen to the teacher and repeat what he or she said without having to think about content or context. The second most represented formulations are exercises in which certain skills are practised. Tasks and activities are underrepresented. While using this coursebook those results should be considered.

As the book is already giving a guideline for what the children are meant to learn, it is important to adapt those suggestions in order to fit the needs of the students. Having a repertoire of other activities, drills, tasks and exercises will help to make the most out of the coursebook while making the lessons more interesting.

## **How to enlarge the potential of the coursebook**

First, it is useful to have a coursebook when teaching a class.

As already mentioned before, it is not only important to have a coursebook but to use it with deliberation. Another important point is to see the coursebook at it is meant to be seen, as a

helper and guide but nothing else. There might be some pages or chapters which do not fit the content, context or style of your individual teaching. Being flexible and creating own material or using already existing material and guides make the lesson more diverse and interesting. Another crucial factor is motivation. “Motivation is vital for success in language learning. Being a learner is not always easy; it requires effort at all ages. When children are motivated, they build up self-confidence and self-esteem, which stimulates and in turn remotivates [sic!]. Motivation helps children resist other attractions and encourages them to focus” (Dunn, Opal 2014, 60).

Using games in the classroom is an effective and often underestimated method. As Bruce stated, “Play is the highest form of learning and helps children to apply what they learn in an integrated way” (Bruce, Tina in Dunn, Opal 2014, 17).

There are various reasons why games should be used in the English classroom. Besides the fact that children enjoy playing games, games provide excellent opportunities for improving pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. Playing games makes the children feel comfortable and safe, games are motivating and the most natural and relaxing way for children to learn. Shy learners can be motivated to speak and children do not feel they are getting stressed by a new task (cf. Martin, Isabel *Basics and Games*, 15-16).

Depending on the level of the learners, the content and context of the curriculum, the following games can be adapted to the circumstances of the particular class.<sup>10</sup>

- “The Mingle”
- “Catch the fly”
- “Fruit salad”
- “What is missing?”

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<sup>10</sup> The listed games are chosen under the aspect of being easily adaptable to the circumstances of the classroom and available material in Laos.

- ...

If children listen to certain chunks repeatedly and even more so if those word combinations follow a rhythmic pattern it is easier for them to recognize and remember them. Thus, a great way of practising and consolidating vocabulary and chunks are (action) rhymes and songs. This technique trains the ability for rhythm and melody, it helps to develop concentration and memory, they improve pronunciation as well as vocabulary and grammar and can help to establish a positive mind-set (Martin, Isabel WS 2016/2017, TEFL session 7).

Examples for such songs are:

- “Head and shoulders”
- “If you are happy”
- “Itsy Bitsy spider”
- “A Roosta Sha”
- “Form the orange”
- ...

Using picture books, storytelling, a hand puppet, story-acting and Total Body Response - activities (short TPR) in addition to the coursebook in the lessons, are also very effective techniques which enable the students to learn in a motivating and fun atmosphere.

Creating one’s own material is also a great help for making the content more attractive, authentic and understandable. Using flashcards and pictures cards is also very convenient because they can be used over and over again. A context-fitting blackboard panel can help to underline the meaning of what the teacher is teaching.

## Conclusion

“Misstraut gelegentlich euren Schulbüchern! Sie sind nicht auf dem Berge Sinai entstanden, meistens nicht einmal auf verständige Art und Weise, sondern aus alten Schulbüchern, die aus alten Schulbüchern entstanden sind, die aus alten Schulbüchern entstanden sind, die aus alten Schulbüchern entstanden sind“ (Kästner, Erich 1999, 17)

Nonetheless coursebooks are useful when it comes to planning and structuring lessons and they can give the learners a sense of system and cohesion (cf. Legutke, Michael K. et. al. 2014, 113). The coursebook „often takes on a quasi-mystical role of authority in the East Asian classroom, constraining both the course content, and being seen as having the final say in all questions about the topic of study” (Williams, Clay H. 2017, 80). Not only in East Asia but almost everywhere are teachers to be found who “painstakingly do all the texts, activities, tasks and exercises etc. with their classes and who become extremely worried if they miss a footnote” (cf. Legutke, Michael K. et. al. 2014, 113).

Thinking that not using a coursebook at all and relying only on your own material for solving the problem of straightjacket teaching is not the solution here. Besides the fact that it is extremely costly in terms of time, there are good coursebooks which can be seen as a solid basis for teaching and can be individually adapted for the needs of every class. It is important to keep in mind that the choice of coursebook will have a considerable influence of how you teach and what the students are learning.

A good coursebook alone does not guarantee a learner-centred approach and therefore success in learning a new language. “Good practise in teaching [...] seems [...] to require some flexibility in approach, in order to [...] cater for each individual child’s actual environment, interests and needs and to exploit unpredictable opportunities as they arise“ (Edelenbos, Peter et al. in Legutke, Michael K. et. al. 2014, 114). Consequent and confident teachers who are able to meet their students’ needs by choosing and adapting tasks and material wisely are needed to work successfully with a coursebook (cf. Legutke, Michael K. et. al. 2014, 114).



It is important to take the history of Laos education system(s) and the current situation into account when accessing the coursebook for learning English in Laos. At first it is to say that having a coursebook makes teaching a lot easier for the teachers. The quality of the exercises, tasks and activities can be enlarged by others and additional material. Taking the formulated goals of the government and the Latin alphabet as one of the most difficult problems for Lao students into account, it would be worth thinking about changing the focus of the book. Communicative activities instead of drills, writing and thoughtless repetition.

Next, it would be attractive for me to attend English lessons in Laos to see how the teachers are using the coursebook. Asking both, students and teachers what they want to learn/teach and what they are actually learning and how they react to different approaches of learning the new language.

Probably the most crucial points of making sure that the students are actually getting something out of the lessons, is the education of teachers and the high dropout rate of the students which has to be reduced. As UNICEF already mentioned this point in its analysis in cooperation with other projects and governmental institutions, the situation of Lao education is taken seriously and will be improved further. Nevertheless, thinking about the history of this country, it is a fortunate progress they are pursuing right now and the past years as well.

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<http://www.thelaosexperience.com/2017/09/17/education-in-laos-part-ii/>  
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Image 1: Unterweger, Jasmin (2018): *Diving into the unknown*  
<http://www.thelaosexperience.com/2018/10/27/lao-language-savannakhet-university/>  
(accessed August 12, 2019)

Image 2: Phimsipasom, Khamphanh & Keovilay Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bouasavanh et al. (2009). *English for Lao Primary Schools Student's Book 1*. Vientiane Capital: Ministry of Education and Research Institute for Educational Science, 1

Image 3: Phimsipasom, Khamphanh & Keovilay Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bouasavanh et al. (2009). *English for Lao Primary Schools Student's Book 1*. Vientiane Capital: Ministry of Education and Research Institute for Educational Science, 4

Image 4: Phimsipasom, Khamphanh & Keovilay Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bouasavanh et al. (2009). *English for Lao Primary Schools Student's Book 1*. Vientiane Capital: Ministry of Education and Research Institute for Educational Science, 114

Image 5: Phimsipasom, Khamphanh & Keovilay Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bouasavanh et al. (2009). *English for Lao Primary Schools Student's Book 1*. Vientiane Capital: Ministry of Education and Research Institute for Educational Science, 115

Image Laos Emblem: *Go Laos Tours-See Laos your way*  
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Isabel, Martin (WS 2016/2017): TEFL *How to choose a good coursebook*

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