

Evaluating textbooks

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Summary:

The objective of the present work is to show some practical ideas to evaluate textbooks. Ideas from several authors will be presented and some useful check lists will be provided so that teachers can help themselves to evaluate their textbooks to see if they fit their needs. Furthermore, some frameworks will be given in order to support the practical ideas given by the presenter. It intends to help language teachers to choose the best textbook for their context.

The importance of textbooks

Textbooks have become an important teaching tool in many language teaching-learning situations in different contexts all over the world. They have become the main support for language teachers especially for novice teachers who sometimes learn to teach with the teacher's manual. Textbooks are so relevant in the language teaching practice that careful selection of them has to be done. This choice might affect many teachers and students because any mistake on it might hinder teaching and learning. Changing a course book in any institution is not easy for several reasons. One of them is that teachers get used to them, and change is difficult to accept. Another one is that new lesson plans and materials have to be developed even though the publisher offers teacher's guides and some other components such as recordings and tests, they have to be adapted to the particular context. The textbook that is chosen needs to be

adequate for the level of students. Then, a good evaluation of the book is necessary before adopting a new one.

How to evaluate a textbook

One possible option is to use the checklist provided by the experts. They are usually very detailed and pay attention to all important issues such as the methodology, the language content, the assessment, the activities, the components of the course book, etc. Another excellent option is to make your own list of the things you are looking for.

Next, part of the checklist of the book *Evaluating and selecting EFL Teaching Materials* by Alan Cunningsworth is presented as an example.

- Language content**
- 2.1.** What aspects of the language system are taught? To what extent is the material based upon or organized around the teaching of:
- a) language form
 - b) language function
 - c) patterns of communicative interaction?
- 2.2.** Which aspects of language form are taught?
- a) phonology (production of individual sounds, stress, rhythm, intonation)
 - b) grammar
 - i) morphology
 - ii) syntax
 - c) vocabulary (Lexis)
 - d) discourse (sequence of sentences forming a unified whole)
- 2.4.** What kind of English is taught?
- a) dialect
 - American English.
 - b) style
 - i) *formal* –
 - ii) *neutral* –
 - iii) *informal* –
 - c) medium
 - i) written-
 - ii) spoken -
- 2.5.** What language skills are taught?
- a) receptive
 - i) written (reading)
 - ii) spoken (listening)
 - b) productive
 - i) written (writing)
 - ii) spoken (speaking)
 - c) integration of skills
 - d) *no translation activities are included.*
- 4.3. Comment on the presentation and practice on new Lexis (vocabulary)**
- (a) How is new Lexis presented (e.g. in word lists, with visual, in a text) ?
 - (b) How is the meaning of new Lexis taught(e.g. through context, through explanation, by translation, through the use of semantic relations e.g. synonymy, hyponym)?
 - (c) Is the new Lexis recycled adequately?
 - (d) What is the amount of new lexis taught in each unit, text, etc? (This can be expressed as a percentage of new Lexis in relation to familiar Lexis)
- Supporting materials**
- 6.1. Does the course material include the following? If so evaluate usefulness in each case.
- (a) visual material
 - (b) recorded material
 - (c) examples of authentic language
 - (d) a teacher's book
 - (e) an index of grammar items, functions, etc.
 - (f) material ????
 - (g) recorded material
 - (h) A vocabulary list (preferably indicating in which unit each word is first used)
- 6.2. Are there any materials for testing?
- 6.2.1. If so, are there materials for
- (a) entry testing (diagnostic testing)
 - (b) progress testing
 - (c) achievement testing?
- Are there any suggestions for informal continuous assessment?

The next is an example of the checklist prepared by the Language School of Universidad Autónoma de Baja California when selecting a new textbook in the 90's for its English courses. The checklist for each level was developed by a group of teachers.

Grammar for level 1

- ✓ Present simple
- ✓ Present progressive
- ✓ Frequency adverbs
- ✓ Can/ can't
- ✓ Simple past
- ✓ Articles
- ✓ Some/ any
- ✓

Communicative functions:

Everyday activities such as:

- Asking and giving information
- Explaining
- Complaining
- Apologizing
- Arguing
- Agreeing and disagreeing
- Expressing preferences, opinions and emotions
- Predicting
- Comparing

Communicative strategies such as:

- Using gap fillers
- Turn taking
- Interrupting
- Beginning and ending a conversation
- Using appropriate vocabulary
- Paraphrasing
- Using appropriate pronunciation patterns

Reading comprehension

- Getting the main idea
- Identify Facts, opinions and details
- Inferring
- Predicting
- Discriminating
- Summarizing
- Using the dictionary
- Deducing meaning of words

The structure of texts is simple and easy to follow.

Writing

- Writing a report
- Writing a summary
- Writing: a) messages
b) letters
c) notes
- Describing: a) situations
b) feelings
c) places
- Biographies
- Short stories
- Well-structured paragraphs (main ideas, supporting ideas and conclusion)

Using:

- Appropriate vocabulary
- Capital letters
- Punctuation

Paying attention to coherence and cohesion

Listening comprehension

- Getting specific information and main ideas
- Inferring

Things to consider when evaluating

There are some things that have to be considered before choosing a textbook. First, we have to pay attention to the type of students that attend the school. It is important to know their age, the economical status and their educational background. It is also relevant to know the school policies and its objectives because the approach behind the book has to fit in that community. Something else that is very relevant before making the choice is the teachers' profile. It is important to know if they have received language teaching training, if they have experience, if they have experience with the type of students they will have, etc. It is also important to know about the availability of equipment in the school.

Who can evaluate

When evaluating textbooks, teachers are the ones who must evaluate them because they will implement them in the classroom. It is them who have to feel comfortable with the course books by making a careful revision of them. However, it is the authorities who usually choose the textbooks and the teachers have to use them whether they like them or not. If teachers participated in this process it will be easier to make changes in an institution. Publishers can also help a lot because they know their products and can explain all the approach behind the book in more detail.

Recommendations

When choosing a course book it is advisable to pilot it before adopting it. An instrument to pilot books is necessary such as an expert checklist or your own list of needs. The next is an example of a piloting procedure used at the Language School of UABC.

1. Use a placement test provided by the Publisher at the beginning and the end of the piloting
2. Make a short assessment at the end of each unit
3. Make a final assessment
4. Use all or most of the components of the program: student book, workbook, recordings, video, video workbook, bonus pack, the electronic web page.

Conclusion

Choosing a textbook is not an easy task and has to be done carefully. Some of the recommendations presented in this talk are the following: Pilot the books with some groups before adopting them, include teachers in the selection of the book, change of books will be easier, use checklists to evaluate the textbooks, and use a clear procedure to pilot the course books. For some examples of the formats that can be used for the piloting see appendix 1.

References:

Cunningsworth, A. (1988). *Evaluating and selecting EFL Teaching Materials*. London: Heinemann

Tomlinson, B. (1998). *Materials Development in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Appendix 1

PILOTING TEXTBOOKS

Teacher's name: _____
Unit number. _____ Unit Title: _____

Answer the following questions:

How long did it take you to complete the unit (hours)?

Which exercises did you do in the class?

Did you experience any particular problems with any exercise? If so, describe.

Which exercises were most successful/ enjoyable? Why?

Were there enough activities for the students to fully understand and practice the structure/vocabulary and functions of the lesson clearly?

Yes _____ NO _____

What components did you use in the unit?

Student's book _____ Workbook: _____ Teacher's Guide _____ Video: _____ Video workbook _____
Video Teacher's guide: _____ Bonus Pack: _____ Care Pack: _____ Cassette: _____

How long did you use each of the components in the lesson (mins. approx.):

Student's book _____ Workbook: _____ Video: _____ Video workbook _____ Bonus
Pack: _____ Cassette: _____

Is the level of the material appropriate for your students? Please comment.

What is your opinion of the organization of the material?

Was there sufficient balance of skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) in this unit ?

Yes _____ No: _____

What is the emphasis given to each skill and language area?

_____ % Listening _____ % Speaking
_____ % Reading _____ % Writing
_____ % Grammar _____ % Vocabulary
_____ % Pronunciation

Do you think this unit was successful _____ acceptable _____ not successful: _____?

Why: _____

What were your student's opinions about the unit (You may ask your students to answer this question)?

Thank you for your comments

Adapted and taken from Tomlinson B. (1998) Materials Development in Language Teaching. CUP
and MOVE UP evaluation sheet 1999

**Piloting Textbooks
Final evaluation**

In general was the level of the material appropriate for your students? Please comment.

Is the syllabus appropriate for your needs at this level, in terms of coverage and organization? Would you recommend any changes?

What is your opinion of the organization of the material in the student's book (in topics, units, parts of units, culture matters, revision and evaluation).

Was there sufficient balance of skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) in this unit ?

Yes ___ No: ___

What is the emphasis given to each skill and language area?

___% Listening ___% Speaking
___% Reading ___% Writing
___% Grammar ___% Vocabulary
___% Pronunciation

Did you find the material easy/ O.K./ difficult to work with as a teacher? Please comment.

Was there sufficient/too much/not enough material? Please comment.

What components did you use in the unit?

Student's book ___ Workbook: ___ Teacher's Guide ___ Video: ___ Video workbook ___

Video Teacher's guide: ___ Bonus Pack: ___ Care Pack: ___ Cassette: ___

Do you have any comment about them?

Do you think the learners have made acceptable progress in their learning while using the material? Please comment.

Do you think the learners develop the skills and language areas the author of the book claims?

How does it compare to *New Interchange*?

What is your general impression of this book?