

Textbook and teaching materials evaluation: A Top-down understanding

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Abstract

Textbook evaluation and selection is not an easy activity. It asks for time, energy, experience, expertise and many other internal and external things. It involves many people especially those who are in charge of making decision. Textbook evaluation is a very important part of the professional activities of the teachers. The decision is usually made democratically. Autocratic decision is quick but risky. So, the whole process is a team effort. This article shows how a technique can be followed to select textbooks in such a way that everyone involved can contribute. It shows different criteria of selection as well as a structured form of selection and evaluation. It also shows how selection criteria can be established and weighted, and how textbooks can be selected using these criteria. A meaningful comparison/contrast between explicit and intuitive decision is also presented in this article.

Keywords: Textbook evaluation, decision making, teaching materials,

Introduction

Textbooks and other related materials are integrative parts of teaching and learning English as a second language as well as a foreign language. Textbooks are meant to be standard pieces of work. Textbooks and materials are mainly used by students as well as by teachers for the study of a subject. Learners use a textbook for learning facts and methods about a certain subject. Textbooks and related materials are often designed with exercises for testing learners' competence and performance. These exercises are often meant to highlight those areas of learning that are to be improved. Sometimes are textbooks are practice based only, sometimes they are designed to give the learners extra practice especially before an examination. Roughly we find two versions of textbooks and materials. They are printed version and electronic one.

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It is a very important and professional activity for all English language teachers to select or design effective textbooks and materials. In different contexts the option of choosing teaching materials vary from totally free to extremely circumscribed as seen by McDonough and Shaw (2013). Selection of teaching materials is better not to be an autocratic decision. It should follow the insights of all teachers involved in dealing with it. Such unanimous decision is usually taken on the basis of some features good teaching materials should and should not be constituted of. Each individual carries an unclear notion of a model of what should be there in a good material and what not, on the back of their mind. Forrester (2010) calls this fuzzy, or 'mind' model. This is an unstated model we all carry in our heads. Forrester goes on to say that 'explicit' models, which are stated in some forms, are better than 'mind' models because 'explicit' models can be observed openly by others. 'Mind' model is subject to changing constantly at the time of discussion about the selection of teaching materials. It is also difficult to be guessed.

Criteria and approaches for textbook evaluation

ELT materials evaluation is not a simple process. ELT materials are mainly adopted from a wide range of internationally published materials. It can also be developed locally. Designing materials appropriate for each course is more preferable to adopting those from an international market. It is a complex task which requires expertise, time and team work. It has to follow a very systematic process of goal setting, needs analysis, determining contents and exercises (McGrath, 2006; 2016). The whole process needs adequate time and energy. It's not an overnight activity or decision. Moreover, material designing is supposed to be a team work. The team has to be made up of educationists, linguists, psychologists, script writers and some other personnel.

Adopting internationally published ELT materials also asks for careful evaluation and data-driven, disciplined decision making. Contextual needs analysis paves the paths of collecting data (Kostka & Bunning, 2016). The material should be interesting for them and satisfying their needs. As Grant (2007:10) states:

The reasons why students are learning English will determine our choice of course books and methods. However, our choice of books and methods will also depend not just on the reasons why our students are learning English, but the way they learn it.

International publications of ELT materials are usually developed taking into consideration the broad spectrum of learners. A very sensible and well-designed criteria are required for choosing the most suitable one for the learners in a particular context. The evaluation criteria involve both global as well as local items to be used. It must be

as comprehensive as possible within the given time and resources. There should be a representation of culture and gender components as well as the relevance of content, topics and linguistic items to the students' background knowledge, personalities and needs (Litz, 2005, Richards, 2001). It is a blended effort that takes into account the relative merits from a wide range of features (Rea-Dickins & Germaine 2002, McDonough & Shaw 2013). Pedagogical considerations include different factors like methodology, age appropriateness, cultural suitability, exercises, personal involvement etc. The validity and appropriateness of the teaching materials are to be proved in the classroom. The materials that were proved to be appropriate for a specific group of learners few years ago, might not be appropriate now after two or three years.

For textbook evaluation, Harmer (2006) talks about some general criteria such as content of the text, methodology, aims of the teaching program, specific needs of the teachers and how much the textbook fulfill these needs. Some of the EFL/ESL textbooks are designed in developed and rich countries. They are used in many under-developed countries with less developed economies. Apart from socio-cultural and socio-economic bias, these textbooks are way too costly too. So accessibility and availability are two other things that must be considered in evaluating textbooks.

Approaches to textbook selection moves from a general to specific details. The first step is to begin with examining the curriculum of the program to know about the general goals and objectives. It is very important to judge whether the objectives of the textbooks comply with the objectives of the course or not. Celce-Murcia and McIntosh (2009) describe some preliminary information prior to textbook selection about the background information of the students, course syllabus and institutional data by which about five to ten relevant textbook should be selected. Stage of textbook selection can be shown in three steps. First, an investigation is required to go through the introduction, table of contents, the text, the glossary or index of the primarily selected textbooks. It gives an idea about the overall purpose, organization, materials and methods of presentation about the textbook. Second, an analytic strategy ensuring a suitable match between two or three of the primarily selected textbooks and the course or program objective as a whole. Finally, the judgment is made about the qualitative and quantitative content of those textbooks selected at the second stage in order to decide the most appropriate one.

McDonough and Shaw (2013) analyzed textbooks in a two-stage model. First stage is an external evaluation. It is for judging whether the textbooks' introduction, contents and coverage are suitable for the course or not. The second stage is an internal evaluation analytically done for comprehending the information about the contents of the textbook. Tucker (2015) also introduced two types of criteria: internal criteria which are language-related and external criteria which give a broader view of the book. This

model of evaluation has three components. The first one asks for a compliance with the basic linguistic, psychological and pedagogical principles. The second component judges the merit of the textbook. The third is actually a visual chart showing some objective opinions of the evaluators about the textbook. It hypothetically makes a model ideal for facilitating a quick and easy display of the evaluators' judgment. Ansary & Babaii, (2003) states:

To select a textbook, one should define his own preferred criteria in order to evaluate a textbook or make choices. To make choices, one either accepts a particular textbook with some reservations or rejects it as in appropriate (p.45).

Alibakhshi (2007) mentioned some necessary strategies for material adaptation that include eliminating unnecessary contents, considering learners' individual differences, merging the contents with the learners' cultural values, reducing learners' stress and anxiety etc.

Vickers (2006) presents the process of decision making from a different perspective. His 'reality decision' suggests deciding something from an objective point of view; e.g. 'Book X is written by A'. Vickers' 'action decision' is at play when a solution to some questions is sought concerning what should be done; e.g. 'Book X is better than Book Y'. Finally, his 'value decision' is usually taken at the last stage of decision making that signifies the decision as the best solution; e.g. 'The materials in Book X is the best'. In textbook selection, it is to be conceded that there is no set truths.

Simons (2016) focuses on goals in terms of sustainability. His 'maximizing decision' attempts to get maximum possible return. It ignores long-term benefit. By contrast, Simons' 'optimizing decision' targets the long-term return as maximum as possible. It ignores short-term results. Another policy of decision making stated by him shows that the target return is to be determined by the ability and willingness for making the effort. It is mainly effort-based that focuses on the practical process and isn't bothered by return-maximization in terms of short, medium or long periods.

Algie (2006) shows many ways of choosing a course book. The use of 'professional judgment and expertise' is absolutely important since it is what is required throughout the decision making process as a whole. At one extreme end, the quick judgmental decision is based on instinct and intuition which are not very explicit. The difficult thing is that it is not very easy to make people understand the rationale or the underlying principles of such decision because of its unstructured nature. Hence, such decision is difficult to be defended. This kind of decision is often quick and autocratic that might ignore some serious issues. At the other extreme end, decisions might be highly structured, precise, and explicit that is supported by complex mathematical. This

type of decision making policy is understandable only by the highly trained professionals and hence, it is beyond the competence of many others to refute. Therefore, it can be said that decision making process should be structured, explicit, precise, and wise. It can start simply from open voting. A good decision is often a consensus.

Sheldon (2008: 245) thinks that materials evaluation is basically an activity which refers to a broadly accurate process and isn't intended to be strictly accurate or reliable for every situation. He believes that formulating 'a definite yardstick' is nearly impossible. However, McDonough and Shaw (2013: 53) prefers providing 'some model for hard-pressed teachers/course planners that will be brief, practical to use and yet comprehensive in its coverage of criteria'. The process is transparent and leads to clear decision to be used by individuals or groups. It maintains explicitness blended with professional judgment.

Pro forma process of materials evaluation: a suggestion

A pro forma process can be followed for making decision in materials evaluation. It identifies all criteria explicitly. First, we need to select few textbooks from which one/two textbooks will be finally selected. The primary selection of textbooks will be done by the teachers concerned. The selection cannot be right or wrong. It can only be agreed or disagreed by a group of concerned teachers. Second, we need to determine some essential features expected from the textbook. These features can include level of learners (beginners, pre-intermediate, intermediate, advanced etc.), type of method (communicative, grammar-translation, mixed etc.), and cost (e.g. less than BDT 100). The total number of essential criteria can be more. Third, few desirable features are to be determined at this step. These features are desirable but not essential. These might include contents' validity (level of compliance with the learners' socio-cultural, socio-economic contexts), range and variety of exercises, DVD/CD for extra practice, teacher's book for less experienced teachers etc. These desirable features might include many other things.

Essential features are to be considered equally important. If any of the primarily selected textbooks fails to serve the purpose of the essential features, it will be discarded without a second thought. However, the weight of the desirable features may vary. Once again, it is the sole authority of the teachers concerned with textbook evaluation to tag those desirable features with their specific weights. For example, content validity 8 or teacher's book 3. Values and weighting cannot be right or wrong, they can only be agreed or disagreed by a particular group of teachers dealing with the activity of textbook evaluation.

The next step is very simple logical and mathematical multiplication & deduction. For example, both Book X and Book Y meet the essential features but Book X gets fewer values in desirable features than Book Y gets. This is how Book Y will be given preference to Book X. If there is a tie, an addition feature can solve the problem. This additional feature is not a part of those essential or desirable features. But it can break the tie (if found) between two options of textbook. Suppose, there is tie between Book X and Book Y as far as their essential and desirable features' weight and values are concerned. However, Book X has a more colorful and attractive layout than Book Y does. In this way, when all things are equal, an additional feature can determine the selection of the textbook.

However, there might be some 'risk' factors (e.g. availability) associated with textbook evaluation decision. If the consequences of the risk are very serious, it will not be wise to run the risk even when the probability of occurrence is relatively low. Compared to this situation, when the consequences of the risk is not serious but the probability of the occurrence of the consequences is very high, it won't be very unwise to run the risk and stick to the unanimous decision made.

Unstructured vs. Pro forma process of textbook evaluation:

The pro forma process narrated here has several advantages over unstructured ways of selecting teaching materials. Because of its explicitness, the pro forma process is both defensible as well as refutable. It is very clear in the presentation of its logic. There is nearly no chance of creating any confusion. It is true that unstructured and intuitive process is quicker than the pro forma process; but it should be remembered that quick and hasty decisions run the risks of probable and serious consequences.

Conclusion

This paper indicates a structured process of making decision in materials evaluation in language teaching. The multiple-stage-system for materials evaluation directs the attention of the teachers to the context related factors. It also raises the awareness of the English teachers about the role of both teachers and learners. This approach is less risky and practical. Since there are numerous ELT materials on the market, it is not practical to evaluate each and every in detail. Hence, the system and the screening (quick evaluation) checklist speeds up disqualifying the inappropriate ones and saves enough time to focus on the qualified ones in depth. In effect, it can be used whenever a judgment in action is being made between identified alternatives. Professional judgment remains a central responsibility in deciding which features are essential; which

desirable; what weight and score to give; what the risks are; and how we score their seriousness and probability weightings. The final judgment is on whether or not to accept the decision provided by the process. 'Intuitive' judgment once again is at play. If strong intuition asks for disregarding the decision, we can go through the whole process once again. However, democratically made judgment is usually very open, inclusive and risk-free.

However, the judgment will have been reached openly and hence more democratically, with all the benefits of accrued wisdom brought into the decision-making process. The fact that so many judgments are still required is evidence that these matters should not be treated lightly and need to be spelled out fully and publicly.

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