Evaluating and Adapting ELT Materials: Its importance and Implications

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Abstract

ELT course books create a range of responses, but are frequently seen by teachers as necessary evils. There seems to be 'course books credibility gap' (Grenall, 1984) because of contradictions and potential conflicts of interest in their creation, commercial exploitation and public assessment, selection and ultimate classroom use, ELT books are seen frequently as poor compromises between what is educationally desirable on the one hand and financially viable on the other. Because of that, McDonough and Shaw (2003) state that there are some circumstances that require educators to evaluate their materials. This paper discusses the reasons of adapting and evaluating ELT materials and steps of doing it. It answers the question of what is evaluated, why it is done, who does it, how many types of evaluation there are, and what approaches and tools are used. Then, it also discusses the term adapting and how to do it.

Key words: ELT Course books, Materials evaluation, Materials development

INTRODUCTION

Recent years, there is a dramatic increase in the use of commercial foreign course-book products as core teaching materials. In many cases, the approaches taken and the methods advocated in these materials are accepted willingly by the teachers without any critics regardless of their teaching context. Teachers in some contexts also do not have choices and are forced to 'teach the book' and implement methodologies that they may not agree with. However, in both cases, there is a huge risk of not doing what is best to execute learning. To avoid this possibility, a more critical treatment towards language learning materials is needed. In this study, we will discuss ways in which these materials might be adapted for particular learners.

As we know that textbooks and instruction materials are important components in ESL/EFL classroom. Vellegna (2004) and Hutchinson and Torres (1994) suggest that textbook is an almost universal element of ELT. Talking about materials, Tomlinson (2001) defines material as anything that can be used as a medium in learning languages; one of which is through a course book. Even though course book in ELT is optional, but the use of course book in ELT is still common today.

According to Ur (1996) the term 'course book' means a textbook of which the teacher and, usually, each student has a copy, and which is in principle to be followed systematically as the basis for a language course. Based on the fact, we can relate that numerous copies of course book are used and sold, many project in producing course book also flourished.

Providing the materials into the English language teaching surely include some processes namely: Production, Evaluation and Adaptation. These three processes link into one unity to provide a supportive material to ELT, but most of educators stop at the production process without even considering further evaluation and adaptation of materials.

McDonough and Shaw (2003) state that there are some circumstances that require educators to evaluate their materials. They are when the educators have some options to develop their materials and when the educators are using others' people works (it means that

the educators do not have a free option in developing the materials). Even though the fact that 'educators have freedom to choose the materials for evaluation and adaptation or not' is still controversial, evaluating and adapting materials are still necessary.

Once material evaluation begins to take place in educator's mind, it is important to make sure that they execute the successful evaluation. The role of course book in ELT classroom is evidently important, just as teacher and learners does (Rea-Dikins and Germaine, 1992; Richards, 2001; McDonough and Shaw, 2003). It is important to put the course book in the right context to perform a successful evaluation. According to Anasary and Babaai (2002), one of the leading causes of an unsuccessful evaluation is when the educators are unable to acknowledge one's specific teaching situation. Some analytical and detailed explanations of the importance of the evaluation and adaptation and how both of them are executed in the real learning process will be explained below.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Defining materials evaluation

Materials evaluation has been defined by Tomlinson (2003, p. 15) as "a procedure that involves measuring the value (or potential value) of a set of learning materials". An evaluation tremendously focuses on the needs of the users of the materials and makes subjective judgements about their effects (Tomlinson, 2003). An evaluation might include some questions such as 'Do the reading texts sufficiently engage learners?' which elicit responses containing a necessarily subjective value judgement.

What is evaluated?

It is important to know exactly what is being evaluated in order to arrive at useful conclusions. In order to clarify the type of teaching materials needed for teaching purposes to the publishers, Allwright (1981, pp. 6-10) focuses on *goal, content, method and guidance*. Inventory approach proposed by Dubin and Olshtain (1986) includes integration of (i) grammar and notion, (ii) themes and topics and (iii) communicative and sociocultural functions. Chambers (1997) includes pedagogical factors (e.g., suitability for the age group, cultural appropriateness, methodology, level quality, number, and type of exercises, teacher's book, variety, pace, personal involvement, and problem- solving) and construct validity (i.e., how far is the book useful to a particular group or not), and makes inquiry into whose view the materials express. Linguistic issue constitutes that bases of McGrath's (2002) checklist in which he discusses about two dimensions of evaluation: micro dimension (approach) and macro dimension (stages of teaching) and three levels of analysis: what the book says about itself, task analysis from extract, underlying aims versus stated aims. In his 'first glace evaluation', he takes into consideration learning contexts and learner needs, content, design, language content, subject matter, and practical considerations.

Rudby (2003) discusses in his dynamic form of evaluation where some features are deeply concerned e.g. inner circle: features residing overtly in the texts, tasks and activities, and outer circle, more in-depth, subjective form of evaluation. He also includes pedagogical validity (theoretical assumptions against changing needs), psychological validity (how to learn), and process and content validity.

Therefore while doing materials evaluation one can include different features of a course book ranging from the technical validity to linguistic, pedagogical, psychological, content, and even process validity in order to get a

complete holistic picture about the material.

Why materials evaluation?

In order to know whether materials are effective for learners to meet objectives and their language needs, the evaluation of materials is necessary. If the objectives are not met, evaluation is required to identify the problems and gaps and to suggest recommendations accordingly. As Sheldon (1988, pp. 239-240) states that "often materials are found to please one group of users e.g., learners but not all e.g., teachers. Since materials are used by different groups of users, it is necessary to provide the needs and expectations of all while using these materials". Evaluation provides an awareness of a book's content from which evaluators can identify the particular strengths and weaknesses of textbooks which are already in use. Tomlinson (2003c) states that materials evaluation is a procedure that involves measuring the value (or potential value) of a set of learning materials.

In the relevant field of study there are various kinds of evaluation. For designing new materials, or adapting the old or outdated ones, updating them, for suiting them into the changing setting of use and developmental nature of learners. Therefore evaluation becomes an agent of change (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994). It ultimately supports teachers to make optimum use of a book's strong points, and to know the weaknesses of certain exercises, tasks, and even the texts themselves. Thus, it can be said that textbook evaluation can have a significant impact on the development and professional development of the teacher.

As no textbook or set of materials is likely to be perfect, and are always in a state of flux to meet the expectations and tempo of the world, evaluation is the only help that could be given for the learners.

Who evaluates the materials?

Evaluation can be done by teacher-analyst (and can be used by others) (Littlejohn, 1998, p. 195), by teachers, students, materials writers, and by all stakeholders of materials (Chambers, 1997, p. 34; Sheldon, 1988, p. 241). However, evaluation done by one person or group may not serve the purpose of all (Allwright, 1981).

Using more evaluators is suggested and preferred by McGrath (2002), Chambers (1997) and Tomlinson (2003a). In order to arrive at a more unbiased and inclusive evaluation can be done by all stakeholders.

Types of evaluation

There are several types of materials evaluation that exist in this field of study. There can be different types of evaluation based on differences in purposes, evaluators, modality and time (Tomlinson, 2001, p.23). There can be three types of evaluation: Pre-use, while-use and post-use (McGrath, 2002; Tomlinson, 2003a). According to Tomlinson (2003a) pre-use evaluation is likely to be impressionistic, predictive and context-free; while-use evaluation can capture immediate effect but fails to capture durable outcome, and finally post-use evaluation can make an elaborate report in terms of learners, teachers, short term and term achievements though it is less administered and requires time and expertise.

Predictive and retrospective evaluations also used and suggested by McDonough and Shaw (1993/ 2003) and Ellis (1997). Ellis's (1997) retrospective evaluation is carried out through empirical evaluation where learners' diaries, workbooks, daily notes, continual assessment are taken into consideration. Post-use evaluation needs pre-use evaluation report for the sake of comparison and supplementation (Tomlinson, 2003a), to conduct

evaluation in these phases might be better; yet it is found that only one type is used in evaluation e.g., pre-use evaluation (Littlejohn, 1998; Rudby, 2003), impressionistic evaluation (Flinders, 2005). As Rudby (2003) argued, evaluation can have different perspectives (e.g., prospective, ongoing, and/or retrospective) and can be multidimensional (e.g., external and/or internal, static and/or dynamic).

Evaluation can be designed and administered according to dependence on the purposes, evaluators, modality, time, and scale (broad or narrow e.g., a course book for a semester at a school or a course book for the entire nation).

Approaches and tools for evaluation

There are different types of tools that have been used for materials evaluation e.g., questionnaire, checklist, pro forma, etc. Cunningsworth (1984) uses checklist with a combination of multiple choice questions and yes/no questions, and open-ended questions. After that Cunningsworth (1995) in his checklist uses only yes/no questions. Sheldon's (1988) checklist is based on factual details and assessment criteria. In his pro forma Chambers (1997) introduced eight stages as subheadings and later on rated and weighted them. Both open and close statements used by McGrath (2002), Rudby (2003) uses questions under the heading of general criterion.

Tool of evaluation can be designed and redesigned by evaluator according to purpose, type evaluation and other related factors. Hence, any innovation about the tools of evaluation with proper justification is acceptable, as long as the tools used to identify what they are intended to identify.

McDonough & Shaw's evaluation checklist

McDonough and Shaw (1993) provide a flexible two-stage model for the comprehensive evaluation of course-books. A brief external evaluation includes criteria which gives an overview of the organizational foundation of the course-book, 'as stated explicitly by the author/publisher' through the cover, introduction and table of contents statements. Following this is an in-depth internal investigation of the course-book, "to see how far the materials in question match up to what the author claims as well as to the aims and objectives of a given teaching program (McDonough and Shaw 1993, p. 64)". Unique in their coverage of criteria, their 22-point framework is designed both for teachers looking to select a course-book, a predictive evaluation, as well as for those teachers looking to identify strengths and weaknesses in course-books already used in their working context, a retrospective evaluation.

Their model "distinguishes the purpose behind the evaluation- be it to keep up-to-date with current developments or to adopt/select materials for a given course." The advantages and disadvantages of checklists have been pointed out by several writers. Not only can checklists be systematic and comprehensive, they are also cost and time effective, and the results are easy to understand, replicate and compare (McGrath, 2002). On the other hand, pre-existing checklists can become dated and the criteria used may not be transparent or based on assumptions shared by everyone (McGrath, 2002). Sheldon (1988) has also written how considerable modification of any set of culturally restricted criteria is necessary to make them applicable to most local contexts.

Issues related to Criteria

The principles of evaluation based on learning play an important role in decisions about criteria. Some debates appeared arguing about the appropriateness and clarity criteria, and this argument is still the most demanding

areas in materials evaluation. It is mostly because even if criteria are chosen, one cannot say which is more important and which is not. Therefore, Ur (1999) left the issues of importance of criteria to be determined by evaluators who must reach into some issues. McGrath (2002) refers to Tomlinson's (1999) classification of criteria i.e., media-specific, content specific, age specific and local criteria. The agreement regarding that issue of criteria reached that there are no universal criteria about the materials evaluation (Sheldon, 1998; Rudby, 2003: 44; Tomlinson, 3002a: 27; McDonough & Shaw, 2003). Hence, the issue of setting criteria can also include that purposes of evaluation.

Adaptation
What is adaptation?

It is widely known that adaptation is a process and teacher's competence in managing that process is an important factor. According to McDonough et al. (2013), adapting is a process of matching what we have to work with (external criteria) and what the materials offer (internal criteria) in order to maximize the appropriateness of teaching materials in a context, and the starting point of the process is the realization, through an evaluation, that materials may not be fit for their intended purpose. Learners' characteristics, class sizes, technology and other resources, and the physical environment come under 'external criteria', while 'internal criteria' refers to proficiency level, choice of topics, skills covered, and sequential order of exercises. Teachers may not always in position to select the materials they use in their classroom, but how much of those materials will be used, and how much of what is used will be modified and decided by them.

Rationale for Adaptation

Most experts agree, however, that heavy dependence on a single course-book is damaging the students' needs. The general view among current researchers supports the opportunity for choice, in accordance with student's learning needs and interest. Informal, teacher-made materials with a specific group of students in mind will always assist professional, published materials (Stern, 1992). Additionally, in discussing what is 'available to be learned' in the classroom, as well as to what is 'taught', Allwright (1981) emphasizes that 'content' (potential intake) is not predictable. It is, rather, something that emerges because of the interactive nature of classroom events (Allwright, 1981)". Although a course-book may assist in some way, it cannot determine the over-all content of a language program. Additionally, to those teachers who have no input toward the materials used in their teaching context, there may be no distinction between syllabus, methodology and the course-book used. All may be intertwined into an officially approved publication from which personal creativity is void.

Cunningsworth (1995) provides four interrelated disadvantages to an approach which is heavily dependent on a single course-book. Firstly, there can be a lack of variety in teaching procedures. Secondly, innovations toward individual student's needs are reduced. Thirdly, spontaneity and flexibility are diminished. Fourthly, there can be a lack of creativity in teaching techniques and language use. Cunningsworth (1995) states, "Heavy dependence on course-books is far from ideal as it reduces the importance of the individual contributions that good teachers make at all levels in the learning process". A well-designed course-book which allows for adaptation and a certain degree of learner spontaneity is generally regarded as the most visible tool in the balanced teacher/learner relationship. At best they should provide only a framework for which this interaction and

improvisation occurs (O'Neill, 1982; Cunningsworth, 1995). As the aims of the course-book should correspond as closely as possible to the teacher's own methodology, it is of great importance that teachers evaluate course-books in terms of their ability to realize these aims. Due to the recent growth of materials in the ESL publishing industry, guidelines are necessary to raise teachers' awareness to various course-book designs. Rather than criticizing instructors who are handcuffed to a certain text, relevant evaluation criteria should instruct teachers how to best select course-books that fit their certain needs. (Garinger, 2001)

Techniques for Adaptation

There are some techniques offerred by McDonough and Shaw (1993) and Cunningsworth (1995) that may be used when adapting materials to 'fit' a specific class. They are *Adding (extending and expanding), Deleting (subtracting and abridging), Simplifying, Reordering* and *Replacing material*.

Adding

Adding means that the teacher is supplementing the existing materials and providing more material. It can be done through *extending* or *expanding*.

a. Extending
In this technique, the teacher extends the activity by supplying more of the same type of material, thus making a quantitative change in the material. For example, an activity may practice a particular grammar point by asking the learner to complete a sentence with the missing verb in the correct form, such as the simple past. The material may have ten questions, so the teacher can add or provide five more questions.

b. Expanding
Expanding classroom material is different from extending it. It adds something different to the materials, the change is qualitative. For instance, the teacher adds an activity or series of activities that deal with the phonetics of the past simple to a material that discusses simple past without considering phonetic issue.

Deleting

Deleting can be both quantitatively (*subtracting*) and qualitatively (*abridging*). In subtracting, a teacher can decide to do five of the questions practising the simple past tense instead of ten in the material. On the other hand, in abridging, the teacher may decide that focusing on pronunciation may inhibit the learners' fluency and decide not to do any of the pronunciation exercise in the material.

Simplifying

Simplifying means make the material simpler. It can be done by rewording instructions or text in order to make them more accessible to learners, or simplifying a complex activity to make it more manageable for learners and teachers.

Reordering

In reordering, the teacher has dedcided that it makes more pedagogic sense to sequence activities differently. An example is beginning with a general discussion before looking at reading passage rather than using reading as a basis for discussion.

Replacing material

When replacing material a teacher may decide that a more appropriate visual or text may serve an activity better than the ones presented in the published material.

A teacher may replace an illustration for one that students could identify with more closely or use information concerning a popular figure with whom the students are familiar rather than the one presented in the published materials. In addition, teacher may also decide to replace a whole activity, depending on the goals of a particular class or lesson. For example, a reading activity may be replaced with a listening activity.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Since there is no single course book that can provide adequately all the needs of the learners from varied language backgrounds, they should, therefore, be exposed to be enrichment supplementary reading textbooks. It is recommended in this paper that teachers should only provide a guide to the learners and make the textbooks learner-centered and understand the principles and psychology of a foreign language acquisition and utilize the method and approaches of presenting the content of the book wisely.

The materials evaluation process should continue while they are being used, as well as after each implementation period so that they do not become stale with regard to the particular curriculum involved (Brown, 1995).

- The content and structure of a syllabus is related to the objectives of the learner or of society (Corder, 1973) and these can be better determined by the teachers instructing the particular classes and authorities at universities rather than dark room authors who serve "international ELT publishing industry" (Ranalli, 2003).
- With both advantages and disadvantages, the course-book stereotype should not be seen as an international industry because it can never represent the guarantee of a complete uniformity at school in an authentic context.
- The course-book evaluation of English teachers may prove to be just a beginning for resource development process.
- The process of resource and course-book development could support and facilitate teaching and learning process by meeting the needs of the learners and developing the teaching capability of the teachers.

In ESP, a teacher always aims to fulfil the needs of learners, and textbooks that accommodate all of these needs and objectives are rare. Therefore, a teacher may use supplementary materials to support the core textbook.

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