

# ***Developing criteria for textbook evaluation***

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*This article shows how criteria can be developed for evaluating English language textbooks. It presents a scheme for evaluation which can be used to draw up a checklist of items relevant to second (or foreign) language teaching. Instructions for using the checklist are given as a way of suggesting how teachers can evolve their own criteria for different situations.*

In situations where there is a shortage of trained teachers, language teaching is very closely tied to the textbook. This does not mean, of course, that the method demonstrated in the textbook is always faithfully reflected in the method as practised by the teacher. It is ironical that those teachers who rely most heavily on the textbook are the ones least qualified to interpret its intentions or evaluate its content and method. The textbook can be a tyrant to the teacher who, in his or her preoccupation with covering the syllabus, feels constrained to teach every item in exactly the same sequence and context in which it is presented by the textbook writer.

Any textbook should be used judiciously, since it cannot cater equally to the requirements of every classroom setting. In bilingual and multilingual situations, there are special limitations on the amount of English language teaching that can be done via the textbook. The textbook can present examples of common difficulties, but there are problems specific to different language groups which are left for the teacher to deal with. It is also likely that a textbook will outlast its relevance because of changes in the language policy of the community for which it was written.

The question of relevance lies at the heart of this article. My purpose is to suggest a method by which teachers can develop criteria for evaluating textbooks used in teaching English as a second (or foreign) language. The suggested framework for evaluation takes into consideration firstly a number of assumptions about second language teaching; and secondly linguistic, pedagogical, and technical criteria related to these assumptions. I then suggest how evaluative statements can be generated from this framework, and how such statements can be weighted to suit a particular language teaching environment or educational level.

## ***Scheme for evaluation***

The evaluative scheme (Fig. 1) relates assumptions about teaching a second language to a set of linguistic, pedagogical, general, and technical criteria. These are the four assumptions on which the scheme is based.

## ***Up-to-date methodology***

The ESL (English as a second language) textbook should be consistent with the psychological and linguistic principles underlying current, accepted methods of second-language teaching. But textbook writers should not jump aboard the bandwagon of innovation for the sake of it.

Fig. 1. Scheme for evaluating ESL/EFL textbooks

	Criteria for evaluation						
	Linguistic/Pedagogical						
Basic assumptions	General	Speech	Grammar	Vocabulary	Reading	Writing	Technical
Up-to-date methodology of L2 teaching							
Guidance for non-native speakers of English							
Needs of learners							
Relevance to socio-cultural environment							

**Guidance for non-native teachers** The textbook should provide appropriate guidance for the teacher of English who is not a native speaker of English. The untrained, or partially trained, teacher who does not possess native-like control over all aspects of English should not be left in any doubt concerning the procedures proposed by the textbook. Otherwise, he or she may, for example, teach only the meanings of the minimal pair 'live/leave', completely ignoring the writer's intention that these items should be used for pronunciation practice.

**Needs of second-language learners** Catering to the needs of the second-language learner can be a complex task in a multilingual setting. ESL textbook writers have their work cut out when pupils in the same class speak many different mother tongues, and when English is not the second, but the third (or even the fourth) language. Also to be reckoned with is the distinction which in some cases has to be made between English as a *subject* and English as a *medium of instruction*.

**Relevance to the socio-cultural environment** There are second-language problems in learning vocabulary and syntax that arise from differences between the cultures associated with the target language and the mother tongue. In certain grey areas of usage, acceptability may best be determined by reference to socio-cultural norms. ESL textbook writers need to be sensitive to shifts in usage that are due to the worldwide spread of English.

In Figure 1, the criteria under the heading 'Linguistic/Pedagogical' involve techniques of textbook presentation as well as selection and organization of skills, and aspects of the language to be taught. Whether a textbook is written for first or second-language speakers, it has to be assessed in terms of the following criteria:

- the completeness and appropriateness of the items presented;
- the activities suggested for practising the items selected;
- the sequencing of vocabulary, particularly the functional load, rate and manner of entry and re-entry;
- the relevance of its contexts and situations, and so on (cf. Tucker 1975).

These criteria are derived from a combination of the linguistic and pedagogical components of language teaching analysis (cf. Halliday *et al.* 1964:207–22 and Mackey 1965). 'General' criteria embrace global considerations of methodology, the needs of the learner, the teacher, and the community. 'Technical' criteria are concerned with the quality of editing and publishing; the availability of supplementary materials; cost and dura-

bility of the text; authenticity of language and style of the writer, etc.

The scheme can be adapted to suit particular contexts. For example, our assumptions about the non-native teacher, the needs of the learner, and the socio-cultural environment cannot be the same in Nigeria as in Malaysia, where English is a second language but not the language of instruction. Indeed, the approach to English language teaching in Malaysia cannot be the same now as it used to be up until 1969, when Bahasa Malay became the language of instruction. The different purposes for which English is used must be reflected in the selection, gradation, presentation, and testing of language items.

### **Checklist of items**

The scheme for evaluation can be used to draw up a checklist of items. Each cell in Fig. 1 would generate principles relevant to a particular criterion or assumption. For example, the cell relating 'reading' with Assumption 3 'Needs of L2 Learners' would produce a principle such as: 'Reading passages should be relevant to the mother-tongue experiences of the pupils'. The following seven principles derive from the cells relating Assumption 2 'Guidance for non-native teachers' with general, linguistic/ pedagogical, and technical criteria.

The ESL textbook should:

- 1 give introductory guidance on the presentation of language items and skills (GENERAL)
- 2 suggest aids for the teaching of pronunciation: e.g. phonetic system (SPEECH)
- 3 offer meaningful situations and a variety of techniques for teaching structural units (GRAMMAR)
- 4 distinguish the different purposes and skills involved in the teaching of vocabulary (VOCABULARY)
- 5 provide guidance on the initial presentation of passages for reading comprehension (READING)
- 6 demonstrate the various devices for controlling and guiding content and expression in composition exercises (WRITING)
- 7 contain appropriate pictures, diagrams, tables, etc. (TECHNICAL).

The 'Sample checklist for evaluation' (Appendix) is not meant to be exhaustive. Items on it, grouped for convenience under logical headings, were generated in the same way, and teachers can evolve their own sets of criteria for different educational levels or language teaching situations. The column for weighting on the left of the checklist, and the columns for rating on the right, can be used for adapting evaluative items to suit the particular demands of the teaching situation.

Weighting can be indicated by numbers or letters (e.g. A: *very useful*; B: *quite useful*; C: *fairly useful*; D: *not so useful*). The weighting of individual items or groups of items depends upon the level of the pupils (primary or secondary) and the objectives of the curriculum. The evaluation of a primary textbook would emphasize technical criteria such as choice of typeface, colourful illustrations, and the use of aids like workbooks. In a context where English is a medium of instruction, an important criterion would be that textbooks should provide balanced and systematic training in all language skills.

The numbers given in the righthand columns indicate the extent to which a given textbook satisfies each criterion on the checklist (4: *to the greatest extent*; 3: *to a large extent*; 2: *to some extent*; 1: *just barely*; 0: *not at all*). These numerical ratings can be used for absolute or comparative evaluations of textbooks. If the weighting of items is also graded by number, these grades can be multiplied by the rating and used for more comprehensive evaluations.

In developing their own criteria, the importance which teachers attach to the various issues involved in English language teaching will naturally differ. Some teachers might, for example, insist that ESL textbook writers take account of 'local' varieties of English. Others might be more concerned with the ways in which language materials are presented. In the final analysis, the teacher need not rely only on his or her individual judgement concerning the validity of criteria or a checklist: these can be discussed or developed collectively by colleagues in an English Department.

**Conclusion** The teacher takes over where the textbook leaves off, and he or she must be able to assess its strengths and weaknesses. English language teachers-in-training need to be acquainted with the principles of textbook evaluation. They can be given practice in analysing textbooks in order to find out whether the organization of materials is consistent with the objectives of a given English language curriculum. When trainee teachers examine the selection of items of speech, grammar, and vocabulary in a textbook, and evaluate the way it presents reading and writing activities, they are at the same time improving their competence in the language and honing their skills as teachers.

The textbook is a tool, and the teacher must know not only how to use it, but how useful it can be. Finding out will involve distinguishing between method in the use of printed materials, and method in face-to-face teaching. It will involve using discretion in adapting textual materials to the needs and interests of pupils, choosing only those materials and methods which are based on sound linguistic and pedagogical principles. The textbook will continue to play an important role, but it will not be a tyrant. □

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#### Notes on sample checklist (see Appendix)

- The scheme used for generating evaluative criteria is capable of producing a great many more items than those included in this sample checklist.
- Numerical values can be used in the left-hand column for weighting items according to their usefulness in a particular second-language context, or at a particular educational level.
- The numerical ratings in the right-hand columns can be used for evaluating and comparing individual textbooks, or textbooks considered as a series.
- Sets of criteria can be evolved for comparative evaluations by multiplying the *weighting* of each item by the *rating* on each item.

## Appendix

### Sample checklist for evaluation

Title of textbook: .....		Rating				
Weight	This textbook:	4	3	2	1	0
	<b>GENERAL</b>					
	takes into account currently accepted methods of ESL/EFL teaching					
	gives guidance in the presentation of language items					
	caters for individual differences in home language background					
	relates content to the learners' culture and environment					
	<b>SPEECH</b>					
	is based on a contrastive analysis of English and L1 sound systems					
	suggests ways of demonstrating and practising speech items					
	includes speech situations relevant to the pupils' background					
	allows for variation in the accents of non-native speakers of English					
	<b>GRAMMAR</b>					
	stresses communicative competence in teaching structural items					
	provides adequate models featuring the structures to be taught					
	shows clearly the kinds of responses required in drills (e.g. substitution)					
	selects structures with regard to differences between L1 and L2 cultures					
	<b>VOCABULARY</b>					
	selects vocabulary on the basis of frequency, functional load, etc.					
	distinguishes between receptive and productive skills in vocabulary teaching					
	presents vocabulary in appropriate contexts and situations					
	focuses on problems of usage related to social background					
	<b>READING</b>					
	offers exercises for understanding of plain sense and implied meaning					
	relates reading passages to the learners' background					
	selects passages within the vocabulary range of the pupils					
	selects passages reflecting a variety of styles of contemporary English					
	<b>WRITING</b>					
	relates written work to structures and vocabulary practised orally					
	gives practice in controlled and guided composition in the early stages					
	relates written work to the pupils' age, interests, and environment					
	demonstrates techniques for handling aspects of composition teaching					
	<b>TECHNICAL</b>					
	is up-to-date in the technical aspects of textbook production and design					
	shows quality in editing and publishing (cover, typeface, illustrations, etc.)					
	is durable, and not too expensive					
	has authenticity in language and style of writing					