

# Think globally and act locally - Textbooks

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## **Abstract**

Coursebooks still lie at the heart of English language teaching and the number of them is increasing dramatically every year. In spite of an array of published material available, it can be an extremely challenging task to choose the right material. And this particularly applies to a novice teacher. Given the fact that the vast majority of current teaching and learning materials are primarily intended and produced for the global market, the commercial materials cannot cater for such variables as different types of learners of various backgrounds, origins, interests, levels of proficiency. As a result, we, teachers, are forced to make informed judgments about the choice of materials. Additionally, we are almost invariably made to question the extent to which we should adapt the materials. In the light of the environmental slogan *think globally and act locally*, the paper sets out to make a contribution to this topical and everyday issue, and attempts to look at some considerations in order to make our teaching more student-centred, effective as well as more enjoyable.

## **Keywords**

choosing learning and teaching materials, learners, teachers, evaluation

## **Introduction**

Following Tsipakides (211, p. 758), the material selection is a critical process which may ultimately have a tremendous effect on learner's engagement, motivation to learn, and their language performance. On the one hand, classroom materials can help the needs of teachers and learners; on the other, they can hinder the learner's progress if chosen inadequately. Broadly speaking, materials can be defined as "anything which can be used to facilitate the learning of a language" (Tomlison, 2001, p. 66), and thus shape much of what happens in the classroom. As a visit to any bookstore will reveal, there is an array of international coursebooks and other teaching and learning materials available on the market these days, trying to meet both pedagogical and commercial demands in particular. Indeed, despite the impact of technology, very few teachers enter a classroom without a course book today. As a matter of fact, this goes for all types of educational institutions (primary schools, secondary schools, colleges, universities, language schools). In short, using a course book plays a prominent role and it is probably the most common way of teaching today (see e.g. Hutchinson & Torrens, 1994; Cunningsworth, 1995). In other words, coursebooks still lie at the core of English language teaching, and as noted by Sheldon (1988, p. 237), represent for both the teachers and students "the visible heart" of any ELT programme. In line with Tribble (2003, p. 11) practical teaching materials can be roughly divided into three groups with respect to three target groups or classes of learners. They are coursebooks intended for those learning English for business or professional purposes; for those students with academic or study needs; and for those students preparing for international EFL examinations, e.g. Cambridge Examinations.

Regarding the quality of EFL books, while it can be argued that the quality has improved dramatically in recent years, the process of selecting an appropriate material has not become

any easier; on the contrary. Given the fact that the vast majority of current teaching and learning materials are primarily intended and produced for the global market, the commercial materials cannot cater for such variables as different types of learners of various backgrounds, their learning styles, needs and wants, origins, interests, levels of proficiency, objectives, attitudes, aptitudes and cultural norms (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 1). That is, many teacher and learner factors need to be taken account of before selecting the right coursebook (McGrath, 2001, pp. 19-21). Consequently, teachers are inevitably forced to make informed judgments about the choice of materials and question the extent to which they should adapt the materials as no material can be regarded as ideal and every situation is unique. For example, the role of and access to English may vary wildly. In fact, in some contexts coursebooks may provide the only exposure to the target language. To illustrate, as English is a foreign (not second) language in the Czech Republic or Slovakia, materials, particularly coursebooks, are an indispensable tool in exposing students to the English language. Or as put by McDonough “for many learners, they contain the only samples of the language they are exposed to ...” (2002, p. 118).

### **The Merits and Challenges of Coursebooks**

As mentioned in the introductory part, choosing the right material can be an extremely challenging task. This particularly true of a novice teacher for whom a coursebook may serve as a form of teaching training. For instance, attention can be drawn to the principles and theories about language learning and teaching mirrored in a coursebook. For other more experienced teachers and situations, coursebooks may serve as the basis for the content of the lessons. Alternatively, it may provide a supplement for the teacher’s instructions (Richards, 2012, p. 1). Similarly, it must be noted that attitudes towards coursebooks may differ considerable and can be seen by some teachers as “necessary evils” (Sheldon, 1988, p. 237). As a consequence, the reliance upon a coursebook may be varied. According to McGrath (2001) teachers using coursebooks can be placed along a continuum, ranging from those who teach the books to those who use it as a map or springboard in order to develop their own syllabus with a wide range of their own self-made learning materials (2002, p. 8). Still, decisions regarding textbook selection will have an impact on teachers, students and the overall classroom dynamics.

Having said that, scholars tend to acknowledge the value of coursebooks (see e.g. Harmer, 2001; Cunningsworth 1995; Ur, 1996) and point out to different roles and undeniable benefits of coursebooks in the teaching and learning process. To name a few, they can be used as a resource of presentation material, a source of activities for practice and communicative interaction, a reference book (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation), a syllabus, a resource for self-directed learning or self-access, and support for less experienced teachers (Cunningsworth 1995, p. 7). In a similar vein, Ur (1996, p.184) argues in favour of using a coursebooks giving a list of seven general categories (framework - the teacher and learners know where they are going and what is coming next, so that there is a sense of structure and progress); syllabus - if followed systematically a course book can serve as a syllabus; ready-made texts and tasks - by providing these material the course books save time for the teacher; economy - a course book is cheaper than alternative materials like kits, sets of photocopied papers or computer software; convenience - a course book is light and easy to carry around; guidance - a course book can be a useful guidance for inexperienced teachers; autonomy - the learner can be more independent with a coursebook.

Aside from the considerable advantages of coursebooks and materials touched upon above, it is widely believed by researchers and theorists that heavy reliance upon a coursebook may equally have such negative impact as a lack of variety in teaching processes, a reduced range

of response to student needs and problems, a lack of spontaneity, a reduced level of creativity in language technique and language use (see e.g. Nunan, 1991; Richards, 1991; Cunningsworth, 1995; Ur, 1996). Likewise materials are criticized for their cultural or social biases, e.g. sexism, stereotyping (e.g. Renner, 1997). Another negative effect of the use of coursebooks frequently commented upon is the fact that materials may contain inauthentic language. Though the issue of authenticity is far from resolved, it is argued that it is easier to learn from real examples of the language (McDonough, 2002, p. 4). Keeping in mind several benefits and challenges of coursebooks, teachers tend to be directly involved in the process of a coursebook evaluation. It is for this reason that teachers need to be well-acquainted with evaluation models in order to make their teaching most effective.

### **Critical process**

The ability to evaluate teaching materials effectively is an important professional activity for all EFL teachers. Yet it is a complex and multifaceted task. In agreement with (Brown & Rodgers, 2002; cited in Raseks et al. 2010, p. 450) there are at least three major benefits of material evaluation research: First, it is necessary for educational planning. Second, it uses both qualitative and quantitative research techniques. Third, the results can be immediately applied in school reality. Evaluation can be defined differently depending on the subject matter and applied methodology, for instance. Generally, it means the systematic gathering of information for purposes of decision making. To reiterate, it suggests a considerable amount of decision making and is therefore quite subjective. Despite a high number of studies dealing with evaluating English textbooks, they are nonetheless perceived as inadequate (AbdelWahab, 2013, p. 55). While reasons for a material, particularly a coursebook, evaluation can be many and varied, evaluation is a universally accepted as an integral part of teaching and learning, and is advocated by researchers (e.g. Sheldon, 1988; Cunningsworth, 1995; Ur, 1996). In fact, the selection of a coursebook also “signals an executive educational decision in which there is considerable professional, financial and even political investment (Sheldon, 1988, p. 237).

In the light of this, over the past three decades various textbook evaluation models have been developed with a view to evaluating EFL/ESL materials (e.g. Sheldon, 1988; Cunningsworth, 1996; Ur, 1996). One of the reasons why materials tend to be evaluated is to find their strengths as well as challenges. Additionally, in evaluating materials Mukundan (2006, p. 175) underscores the importance of considerations of “the expected language learning outcomes” that result from using the materials. Another practical reason why materials need to be evaluated is to check whether or not they are suitable for the learners, their styles, needs (see e.g. Richards, 2007). In line with Ellis (1997) there are three basic methods of textbook evaluation which can be carried out in different stages of the course (pre-use, in-use and post-use or retrospective evaluation). In this connection Ellis (1997) makes a distinction between a predictive evaluation which aims at the choice of materials to be used prior to the course, and a retrospective evaluation (impressionistic or empirical – see below) which examines the materials that have been used. According to Ellis (1997, p. 36) there are in principle two ways of conducting the *predictive evaluation*. One is to rely upon expertise found in professional scientific reviews, or the teacher can carry out their own predictive evaluation. It is equally possible to carry out both types of predictive evaluation. But materials, especially coursebooks, need to be evaluated at every stage of the course in order to find their weaknesses (Zohrabi, 2011, p. 216).

Coursebooks are traditionally evaluated *impressionistically* and/or use other instruments, especially checklists. The general impression is gained by reading the blurb, the content pages and subsequently includes skimming the coursebook in order to get a general overview of the textbook. As a rule, this method is deemed insufficient and is frequently combined with

other methods, e.g. checklists. For example, Cunningsworth (1995) and Ellis (2004), whose checklists are now well-established, make a claim that textbook evaluation should go beyond impressionistic assessments which cannot identify significant omissions or weaknesses. More specifically, Cunningsworth (1995, p. 1) suggests an approach which is made up of two stages. Prior to taking the *impressionistic overview* the aims and objectives of the program are to be considered, first. Second, it will analyze the learning and teaching situation (Cunningsworth, 1995, p. 5). Before evaluating a material, information needs to be gathered on the role of the material in the program (e.g. if the material will provide the core of the program, or if it will be one of the many materials that will be used); the teachers in the program (e.g. their experience, level of training), the learners in the program (e.g. if the students will use the material in class and at home). In order not to get overwhelmed by the number of materials and to narrow down the focus, a quick impressionistic overview is taken focusing upon general layout and visuals. This strategy, it is hoped, will eliminate the unsatisfactory books and can lead to a selection of 2-5 titles.

The second stage includes an *in-depth evaluation* which tends to be centered on a checklist of key indicators. Typically, the in-depth approach is characterized by its active nature whereas the impressionistic overview is more receptive. Likewise McDonough & Shaw (2003) and others (e.g. Ellis, 1997; Cunningsworth, 1995) propose a combination of both *external* and *internal* types of evaluation for the ensuing choice of the most suitable coursebook for adoption. While external evaluation concentrates on the information provided from outside, e.g. cover, introduction, table of contents, in-depth internal evaluation addresses and questions the claims made by the publishers, typically using a checklist. In fact, a checklist is believed to account for a more comprehensive and sophisticated evaluation. Checklist may be qualitative as well as quantitative. Drawing on Mukundan & Ahour (2010) and their review of the textbook evaluation checklists, the vast majority of checklists are qualitative, frequently using open-ended questions, often with no empirical evidence in support of their construct validity. Though the number and types of questions may vary wildly depending on the way they address the priorities of the materials, authors are almost invariably striving for comprehensiveness. The use of a checklist can subsequently lead to a more systematic and thorough examination of potential textbooks. Sheldon (1988), for example, provides an extensive checklist of 53 questions organized under 17 categories. Cunningsworth (1995, p. 2) stresses the importance of a “manageable list” of items. He developed a checklist of 45 items taking into consideration such criteria as aims, design, language content, skills, and methodology, including practical considerations, e.g. cost. By contrast, Ur (1996) offers a more general checklist that consists of 19 items and does not address various sub-skills. In summary, most well-established checklists encompass such criteria as physical attributes of a textbook, the way skills, sub-skills and functions.

In agreement with Mukundan et al. (2011, p. 22) the use of checklists poses several not uncommon problems for the teacher. To start with, checklists may be misleading as the authors sometimes make use of ambiguous terminology. Besides, in an attempt for comprehensiveness the number of items is frequently overwhelming and thus time-consuming. Wen-Cheng (2011, p. 91) notes that in the process of evaluating textbooks, some educators ask so many questions that they are never able to complete the process. In sum, the checklists are impractical, and it is probably for this reason that most language learning materials evaluation rests upon the subjectivity and impressionistic judgment of evaluators. Similarly, Garinger holds (2002, p. 2) in practice the process of evaluation is often based on personal preference and may be affected by factors unrelated to pedagogy. This subjective aspect concurs with other researchers e.g. Ellis (1997), Cunningsworth (1995), Sheldon (1988). For instance, a claim is made that teachers have no time to conduct material research or evaluation (see e.g. Gatehouse 2001).

## Conclusion

An effective coursebook evaluation cannot be limited to assessing the coursebook as it is commonly a part of the entire pack or set along with e.g. a teacher's book, workbook, activity book, cassettes/CDs, tests, videos, internet support. Moreover, as touched upon above, the learner's and teacher's points of view cannot be disregarded including the learning/teaching situation. Finally, no coursebook or set of materials is likely to be ideal. In line with Cunningsworth (1995) it is important to recall that every learning/teaching situation is unique and is dependant upon several factors, e.g. the dynamics of the classrooms, personalities involved, constraints imposed by the syllabuses, the availability of resources, the expectations and motivation of the students. Taking the learners aboard, for example, all classes are mixed ability to one extent or another and the chosen coursebook will probably need supplementing in a number of areas. Still, it seems that a coursebook in any form will continue to play a crucial role in language teaching and provide a resource for the teacher as well as the pupil. Most importantly, teachers need to be able to evaluate the materials in relation to a specified context of learning.

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