Universal Characteristics of EFL/ESL Textbooks: A Step Towards Systematic Textbook Evaluation

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Abstract

We would like to outline here what we perceive to be a summary of common-core characteristics of standard EFL/ESL textbooks. This is the result of an attempt to indirectly discover whether or not a de facto consensus exists at all over what makes a good standard EFL/ESL textbook. This is in fact a good-faith, though invidious, effort to (a) look for some theory-neutral, universal, and broad consensus-reached characteristics of EFL/ESL textbooks, and (b) draw up some guidelines for the generation as well as systematic evaluation of EFL/ESL textbooks. What we offer here is based on a close scrutiny of a corpus of 10 EFL/ESL textbook reviews plus 10 EFL/ESL textbook evaluation checklists conveniently sampled.

No one is really certain whether these characteristics are actually operative in all EFL/ESL textbooks. Note also that not all the characteristics described here would be present and simultaneously adhered to in each and every textbook. The elements presented, we hope, may come together to make textbooks prime examples of what Brown (1993) calls "canonizing discourse." They might lead to the development of universal textbook-evaluation schemes which may be used in EFL/ESL departments to record in-house textbook assessments or, on a more modest level of optimism, to a revamped standard format for EFL/ESL textbook review.

Introduction

It is ironical that those teachers who rely most heavily on the textbooks are the ones least qualified to interpret its intentions or evaluate its content and method (Williams, 1983, p.251).

How necessary is a textbook? The answer to this question depends on the teachers' own teaching style, the resources available to them, the accepted standards of teaching in every language school, etc. However, there seems to exist, in toto, three options open to teachers as regards the use or nonuse of a particular textbook in a language classroom:

- (1) teachers need textbooks,
- (2) they do not need them, and
- (3) they select them and supplement some other materials to perfect them.

No textbook is perfect. Therefore, teachers should have the option of assigning supplementary materials based on their own specific needs in their own specific teaching situation.

- The arguments for using a textbook are:
    - a textbook is a framework which regulates and times the programs,
    - in the eyes of learners, no textbook means no purpose,
    - without a textbook, learners think their learning is not taken seriously,
    - in many situations, a textbook can serve as a syllabus,

- a textbook provides ready-made teaching texts and learning tasks,
   - a textbook is a cheap way of providing learning materials,
   - a learner without a textbook is out of focus and teacher-dependent, and perhaps most important of all,
   - for novice teachers a textbook means security, guidance, and support.
- The counter-arguments are:
   - if every group of students has different needs, no one textbook can be a response to all differing needs,
   - topics in a textbook may not be relevant for and interesting to all,
   - a textbook is confining, i.e., it inhibits teachers' creativity,
   - a textbook of necessity sets prearranged sequence and structure that may not be realistic and situation-friendly,
   - textbooks have their own rationale, and as such they cannot by their nature cater for a variety of levels, every type of learning styles, and every category of learning strategies that often exist in the class, and most important of all, perhaps,
   - teachers may find themselves as mediators with no free hand and slave, in fact, to others' judgments about what is good and what is not (cf. Ur, 1996, pp. 183-195).

In general, EFL/ESL textbooks have brought with them a range of reactions. Responses often fluctuate between these two extremes. One position is that they are valid, useful, and labor-saving tools. The other position holds that they are "masses of rubbish skillfully marketed" (Brumfit, 1980, p.30). During the last three decades, these reactions have essentially been based on ad hoc textbook evaluation checklists. And the shaky theoretical basis of such checklists and the subjectivity of judgements have often been a source of disappointment.

Checklist Approach to Textbook Evaluation

Any textbook should be used judiciously, since it cannot cater equally to the requirements of every classroom setting (Williams, 1983, p.251).

As teachers, many of us have had the responsibility of evaluating textbooks. Often, we have not been confident about what to base our judgements on, how to qualify our decisions, and how to report the results of our assessment. It seems to us that to date textbook selection has been made in haste and with a lack of systematically applied criteria.

Teachers, students, and administers are all consumers of textbooks. All these groups, of course, may have conflicting views about what a good/standard textbook is. However, the question is where they can turn to for reliable advice on how to make an informed decision and select a suitable textbook. The literature on textbook selection and/or textbook evaluation procedure is vast. Various scholars have suggested different ways to help teachers become more systematic and objective in their approach (cf. Chastain, 1971; Tucker, 1975; Candlin & Breen, 1979; Daoud & Celce-Murcia, 1979; Williams, 1983; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Sheldon, 1988; Skierso, 1991; Ur, 1996; Littlejohn, 1996; to name but a few). They have often offered checklists based on supposedly generalizable criteria. These sometimes detailed check-sheets use a variety of methods to assess how well a particular textbook under scrutiny measures up.

To evaluate the merits or demerits of such checklist approaches to the textbook evaluation process and for comparison purposes, two samples are offered here: Allen Tucker's 1975 system for evaluating beginning EFL/ESL textbooks and, after a gap of 21 years, Penny Ur's 1996 criteria for EFL/ESL coursebook assessment.

Tucker (1975, pp. 355-360) introduces a system which has three components:

- a set of criteria claimed to be "consistent with the basic linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical principles" (p. 355),
- a rating scheme which provides a method for judging the comparative weightings of a textbook's merits, and

- a chart/graph which provides a visual comparison between the evaluator's opinion of the book and a hypothetical ideal model, hence facilitating a quick and easy display of the evaluator's judgment.

Two types of criteria are introduced in this scheme: internal criteria which are language-related and external criteria which give a broader view of the book (see appendix 1). Under the pronunciation criterion, the presentation of pronunciation requires attention to (1) completeness of presentation which refers to the coverage of sounds and suprasegmentals, (2) appropriateness of presentation which concerns whether or not students are from a single language background, whether or not students are kids or adults, and all this affecting the type of presentation, and (3) adequacy of practices which deals with both the quality and quantity of practice. By quality what is meant is practice in a context, i.e., sounds practiced in words, words in sentences, etc.

Under grammar criterion, (1) adequacy of pattern inventory deals with how much of the structure should be presented and how well it is presented, (2) appropriate sequencing refers to the organization of presentation, that is to say, simple sentence patterns should come first, introduction of new structures must rest on already-mastered simpler patterns, etc., and (3) adequacy of drills and of practice refers to judgments about how readily students can discern a form and about how much practice is required to guarantee this adequacy.

Twenty-one years later, Ur (1996, p.186) offers another checklist (see appendix 2) with more or less a similar focus and approach to EFL/ESL textbook evaluation. A cursory look at its contents indicates that still 誡ood' pronunciation practice, 誡ood' grammar presentation, grading and sequencing, cultural and pedagogical concerns in presentation, vocabulary practice, topics being interesting to different learners, etc. are emphasized as "grounds on which one might criticize or reject a textbook" (p.184). What if the purpose is not 誡rammar' and 誠ocabulary' practice? Can we tailor a textbook with such orientations to the needs of students of, say, science and technology?

The fundamental problem with such checklists, it seems to us, is that they depend on the swings of the theoretical pendulum (cf. Sheldon, 1988, p. 240). For example, Tucker (1975, p. 357) proposes "adequacy of pattern practice" as a criterion. Penny Ur (1996, p. 186) also offers "good grammar practice" as a criterion. Today, most probably, one would not rate them the same as a decade or so ago. Moreover, in such checklists, some of the criteria like "competence of the author" (Tucker, 1978, p.358) or "whether or not a textbook is based on the findings of a contrastive analysis of English and L1 sound systems" (William, 1983, p. 255) present serious flaws. Such decisions, it is believed here, depend mostly on one's own priorities. And so long as one's specific requirements in a specific teaching situation have not been identified, one probably cannot exploit any already-available checklisted criteria to judge teaching materials. Perhaps, that is why the relative merits of such checklists and their criteria, over the years, would diminish and new checklists would be offered.

The Current Study

It appears then that checklists have had little practical utility. Textbook evaluation has thus far been ad hoc, with teachers trying to make decisions based on such unreliable and simplistic criteria as "appropriateness of grammar presentation" (Ur, 1996), "functional load" (Sheldon, 1988), "competence of the author" (Tucker, 1978, p.358), etc. Strangely enough, some choices have been made on the basis of such simplistic criteria as "popularity." That is to say, if a book sells well, it must be doing something right, then.

This study attempts to indirectly explore whether or not a de facto consensus exists at all over what makes a a good/ standard EFL/ESL textbook a good/ standard EFL/ESL textbook. This is an attempt to possibly locate some theory-neutral, universal, and broad characteristics of EFL/ESL textbooks and to draw up, as such, some guidelines for the generation and/or systematic evaluation of EFL/ESL textbooks. Ten EFL/ESL textbook reviews and 10 EFL/ESL textbook evaluation checklists were used. Then, an attempt was made to discover what authors often consider as important elements in EFL/ESL textbooks. Finally, a select set of common consensus-reached characteristics of EFL/ESL textbooks

was identified.

In addition, this paper also aims for a graphically represented mode of EFL/ESL textbook analysis as a reaction to subjective rule-of-thumb evaluation procedures. Specifically, a sample procedure is offered here to demonstrate how such a framework can be applied or weighted to suit a particular EFL/ESL program.

It is not, however, asserted here that these characteristics are actually operative in all EFL/ESL textbooks. Nor is it claimed here that all the characteristics described would be ostensibly present and simultaneously adhered to in each and every textbook. What is claimed here, however, is that the elements presented may lead us to the development of universal textbook-evaluation schemes which can be used in EFL/ESL departments to record in-house textbook assessments or, on a more modest level of optimism, to a revamped standard format for EFL/ESL textbook review.

Method

Here we would like to document the materials that we used and the procedures that we followed to support the intent of this study.

Materials

The following 10 EFL/ESL textbook evaluation schemes and 10 EFL/ESL textbook reviews served as the corpus of the present study.

The List of 10 Textbook-evaluation Checklists:

- Chastain, K. (1971). The development of modern language skills: Theory to practice (pp. 376-384). Philadelphia The Center for Curriculum Development, Inc.
- Tucker, C. A. (1975). Evaluating beginning textbooks. English Teaching Forum, 13, 355-361.
- Cowles, H. (1976). Textbook, materials evaluation: A comprehensive checksheet. Foreign Language Annals, 9 (4), 300-303.
- Daoud, A. & Celce-Murcia, M. (1979). Selecting and evaluating a textbook. In M. Celce-Murcia and L. McIntosh (Eds.), Teaching English as a second or foreign language (pp. 302-307).Cambridge, MA: Newbury House Publishers.
- Candlin, C.N. & Breen, M.P. (1979). Evaluating, adapting and innovating language teaching materials. In C. Yorio, K. Perkins and J. Schacter (Eds.) On TESOL '79: The learner in focus (pp. 86-108). Washington, D.C.: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.
- Rivers, W. (1981). Teaching foreign-language skills (pp. 475-483). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Williams, D. (1983). Developing criteria for textbook evaluation. ELT Journal, 37(2), 251-255.
- Sheldon, L. (1988). Evaluating ELT textbooks and materials. ELT Journal, 42 (4), 237-246.
- Skierso, A. (1991). Textbook selection and evaluation. In M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.), Teaching English as a second or foreign language (pp. 432-453). Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.
- Ur, P. (1996). A course in language teaching: Practice & Theory (pp. 184-187). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The List of 10 EFL/ESL Textbook Reviews:

- Chan, M. (1988). [Review of Yee & Aik's English for occupational purposes]. ESP Journal, 7 (3), 213-216.
- Collins, P. (1993). [Review of Sinclair et al.'s Collins COBUILD English grammar]. IRAL 31 (2), 161-167.
- Hall, G. (1994). [Review of Wills's Collins COBUILD student grammar]. Modern English Teacher, 3 (1), 84-85.
- Matthews, P. (1981). [Review of Hartley & Viney's Streamline English]. ELT Journal, 35(3), 360-361.

- Miller, J. (1989). [Review of Hamp-Lyons & Heasley's Study writing]. ESP Journal, 8 (1), 93-95.
- Parkinson, J. (1981). [Review of Swales & Fanning's English in the medical laboratory]. ELT Journal, 35(4), 471-472.
- Perren, G. (1981). [Review of Allen & Widdowson's English in social studies]. ELT Journal, 35 (1), 68-69.
- Shih, M. (1994). [Review of Reid's Teaching ESL writing]. TESOL Quarterly 28(4), 815-818.
- van Naerssen, M. (1983). [Review of Swales & Fanning's English in the medical laboratory]. ESP 2 (2), 179-182.
- Whitaker, S. (1981). [Review of Jupp & Milne's Basic writing skills in English]. ELT Journal, 35(4), 470-471.

Procedure

First, the reviews and checklists were closely scrutinized. Secondly, all points made by reviewers as for and against a particular textbook were jotted down. Then, the same procedure was followed to identify the elements that checklist producers introduce as important criteria by which teachers may evaluate and select an appropriate teaching text. The assumption made here was that of all the points made, perhaps, a select set of common-core summary characteristics appearing across the reviews and checklists can be identified as universal.

Results

What follows here is what we think is a set of universal features of EFL/ESL textbooks.

Approach

- Dissemination of a vision (theory or approach) about
    - the nature of language
    - the nature of learning
    - how the theory can be put to applied use

Content Presentation

- Stating purpose(s) and objective(s)
    - For the total course
    - For individual units
- Selection and its rationale
    - Coverage
    - Grading
    - Organization
    - Sequencing
- Satisfaction of the syllabus
    - To the teacher
        - Providing a guide book
        - Giving advice on the methodology
            - Giving theoretical orientations
            - Key to the exercises
        - Supplementary materials
    - To the student
        - Piecemeal, unit-by-unit instruction
        - Graphics (relevant, free from unnecessary details, colorful, etc.)
        - Periodic revisions
        - Workbook
        - Exercise and activities
            - In the classroom
            - Homework

- Sample exercises with clear instructions
- Varied and copious
- Periodic test sections
- Accompanying audio-visual aids

Physical Make-up

- Appropriate Size & weight
- Attractive layout
- Durability
- High quality of editing and publishing
- Appropriate title

Administrative Concerns

- Macro-state policies
- Appropriate for local situation
  - Culture
  - Religion
  - Gender
- Appropriate Price

Discussion and Application

The process of materials evaluation can be seen as a way of developing our understanding of the ways in which it works and, in doing so, of contributing to both acquisition theory and pedagogic practices. It can also be seen as one way of carrying out action research (Tomlinson, 1996, p.238).

Perhaps, no neat formula or system may ever provide a definite way to judge a textbook. However, at the very least, probably the application of a set of universal characteristics of EFL/ESL textbooks may well help make textbook evaluation a coherent, systematic and thoughtful activity. Following Tucker (1975, pp. 359-361) a system for textbook evaluation should, we believe, include:

- a predetermined data-driven theory-neutral collection of universal characteristics of EFL/ESL textbook, discrete and precise enough to help define one's preferred situation-specific criteria,
- a system within which one may ensure objective, quantified assessment,
- a rating method that can provide the possibility for a comparative analysis,
- a simple procedure for recording and reporting the evaluator's opinion,
- a mechanism by which the universal scheme may be adapted and/or weighted to suit the particular requirements of any teaching situation,
- a rating trajectory that makes possible a quick and easy display of the judgments on each and every criterion, and
- a graphic representation to provide a visual comparison between the evaluator's preferred choices as an archetype and their actual realizations in a particular textbook under scrutiny.

What follows is a demonstration of how such a system works. Evaluation essentially involves the following steps. First, an evaluation form with four columns is designed. The universal theory-neutral characteristics of EFL/ESL textbooks appear in the first column on the form. In the second column, however, the evaluator decides to insert his/her preferred situation-friendly criteria. Preferences could be based on the results of students' needs analysis. Secondly, two separate scores may serve as the basis for rating:

- (1) a perfect value score (PVS) of 2 which appears in the third column indicating an ideal weight assigned to each defined criterion,

- (2) a merit score (MS) consisting of numbers 0 to 2 which appears in the fourth column on the form. A comparative weight is assigned to the relative realization in the textbook under scrutiny of each actual criterion: a perfect match between the ideal defined criterion and its actual realization in a particular textbook receiving 2, a total lack a score of 0, and any inadequate match a score of 1.

Finally, the numbers in the MS and PVS columns after each criterion are represented on a graph by drawing (1) a dotted line corresponding to the numerical value of the Merit Scores, and (2) a straight solid line to represent the Perfect Value Scores.

This framework has a dual utility. On the one hand, if the evaluations of several raters should be compared and contrasted in order to reach a correlated consensus, several opinions of a single textbook can be easily displayed on the same graph. On the other hand, an evaluator can display his judgments about several textbooks on a single graph using a separate line for each textbook. In this way, he may compare the profiles of various textbooks, see them in contrast to the ideal solid line, and judge how far a particular textbook can satisfy his requirements. If this is done, not only are the differences among various textbooks portrayed, but also any instances of marked variation can be noted and revised.

Furthermore, this two-tier system can be approached in two distinct ways. An evaluator may first examine a particular textbook to identify its characteristics and then he/she may judge it against his/her preferred criteria. Or an evaluator can first define his/her preferred options, and then s/he may investigate how far a particular textbook matches his/her preferred criteria (cf. appendix 3 for a sample analysis).

Concluding Remarks

All said, we would like to conclude this article with a quotation from Allwright (1981, p.9):

> There is a limit to what teaching materials can be expected to do for us. The whole business of the management of language learning is far too complex to be satisfactorily catered for by a pre-packaged set of decisions embodied in teaching materials.

This means however perfect a textbook is, it is just a simple tool in the hands of teachers. We should not, therefore, expect to work miracles with it. What is more important than a textbook is what we, as teachers, can do with it. As Brown and Yule, 1983) put it:

> it is, in principle, not possible to find materials which would interest everyone. It follows that the emphasis should be moved from attempting to provide intrinsically interesting materials, which we have just claimed is generally impossible, to *doing interesting things* with materials ... these materials should be chosen, not so much on the basis of their own interest, but for what they can be used to do (p. 83, emphasis added).

Acknowledgements

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Appendices

If you are interested in seeing the Appendices, you may download the following images.

- [Appendix 1](#) (13 Kb)
- [Appendix 2](#) (15 Kb)
- [Appendix 3](#) (50 Kb)
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