



Educational Outcome

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EVALUATION AND SELECTION OF ESL TEXTBOOKS: What Criteria?

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ABSTRACT

The use of textbooks in English language classrooms especially in English as a second language (ESL) situation has been from of old. Of ten, programme directors and teachers are under pressure to adopt new reading textbooks on a fairly regular basis and the process of evaluating and selecting appropriate textbooks has not been easy for most of them.

Despite the fact that textbooks are a staple in almost every English language class especially in the ESL situation, there has been surprisingly little investigation done in terms of how and why certain texts are selected by teachers. Some textbooks that appear sound on the surface may lack many of the criteria of a truly superior book. If a text is extremely sound pedagogically but if it is extremely expensive, difficult to follow or insensitive to ESL students' needs and concerns, its value is limited. The primary aim of a text therefore is to cater for the needs of the learner by providing the skills needed and the methodology that has distinctive activities taking into consideration other variables that may interfere in the learning process. The teacher must therefore be trained sufficiently to be able to acquire the skills involved in textbook evaluation and selection. Through this examination of textbook use and evaluation, it is hoped that administrators and language teachers will gain some knowledge on how to conduct this evaluation themselves regularly.

Introduction

The use of textbooks in English as a Second Language (ESL) situation is a global phenomenon. It has been accepted as one of the methods of teaching and learning a second language. Teachers have found the use of textbooks indispensable and the learners depend on them as very authoritative sources of language acquisition. Textbooks, therefore, have become a key component of most language programmes. In some situations, textbooks serve as the basis for much of the language input learners receive and the language practice that occurs in the classroom. As a matter of fact, in view of the rate of information flow in the current time, the best of the teachers may not be up to date at

any point except in a very limited sense and area. The need to resort to textbooks arises time and time again. Experience shows that much of the language teaching that occurs throughout the world today could not take place without the extensive use of textbooks much ^{of which} are commercial materials. Learning how to evaluate and select textbooks is an important part of a teacher's professional knowledge. This paper therefore explores possible characteristics of English language textbooks that teachers and text evaluators must look out for before selecting or adapting them.

The Need for Textbook Evaluation

The ultimate purpose of every English language programme, especially in an ESL situation, is to teach students the language abilities they need to communicate effectively in their societies. To be able to do this effectively, all materials involved in the programme must be carefully weighted before selection in consonance with the schools or states adopted statement of aims and objectives as contained in the academic curriculum. It is a prospect that must be respected as it has significant impact on the ability of students to meet their language learning objectives, and affects both the process of how they learn and the outcomes. According to Scheldon (1988:237) "the selection of a course book signals an executive educational decision in which there is considerable professional, financial and even political investment".

The volume of ESL textbooks published every year forces decision-makers and even teachers and students to sort through a seemingly endless assortment of choices, attempting to find those that best match their programmes or students. But many teachers have not been adequately trained in this selection process and may be unaware of how to judge which texts best suit their situation. Individuals at all levels of a programme, from policy-makers and administrators to teachers and students, rely heavily on textbooks to achieve prescribed goals and objectives. Therefore, it is vital that all involved consider the importance of their decisions and strive to match course books with the identified needs of students. But what are those things to look out for in trying to select textbooks for ESL programme? What are the basic components of the ESL textbook? This is the concern of this paper.

The Role of Textbooks in ESL Context

Ubahakwe (1979:377) states that "the incompleteness of the curriculum in Nigeria, for example, highlights the need for good textbooks". According to him, "it is not much use instructing a primary school teacher in such vague terms as: 'The idea of teaching language arts including English, is to enable the pupils to speak, to read and write freely and to take active part in discussions... children should be encouraged to talk about their environment and things they are familiar with' as contained in the Eastern Nigeria Ministry of Education Syllabus for Elementary schools: Official Document No. 28, 1963 p7. He believes that the problem with language education is not really that of knowing that the pupils should be taught to speak, read and write but with knowing what to speak, read and write about, especially, knowing how to approach it. Quoting O'Neill (1990), Allwright (1990), Kiatao and Kitao (1997) posited that textbooks and other learning materials help teaching and learning because teachers and students rely heavily on textbooks which determine the components and methods of learning, that is, they control the content, methods, and procedures of learning. They said that students learn what is presented in the text book, and the way the textbook presents material is the way students learn it. The educational philosophy of the textbook will influence the class and the learning process. They quoted O'Neill (1990) as arguing that "textbooks make it possible for students to review and prepare their lessons and that textbooks are efficient in terms of time and money." Apart from controlling teaching and learning, approved textbooks for schools can help standardize instruction. This ensures that students in different classes and in different places receive similar content in the same programme.

In trying to find out why teachers use textbooks and how they have become the central focus of so many classrooms, Garinger (2001) quoted Sheldon (1988) as identifying three main reasons he believes they are so heavily utilized. The first is that developing their own classroom materials is an extremely difficult, arduous process for teachers. The second is that teachers have limited time in which to develop new materials due to the nature of their profession. The third is that external

pressures restrict many teachers. Each of these is an accurate analysis of the strains teachers feel and using a textbook is one of the most efficient and readily available ways in which to relieve some of these pressures. According to Grainger, (2001) the use of textbooks lessens preparation time, provides ready-made activities, and provides concrete samples of classroom progress though which external stakeholders can be satisfied. Writing on the role of textbooks in a language programme, Richards (2005 Website) said textbooks "may provide the basis for the content of the lessons, the balance of skills taught and the kinds of language practice the students take part in. in other situations, the textbook may serve primarily to supplement the teacher's instruction". According to him, the textbook may provide the major source of contact the learners have with the language apart from input provided by the teacher. For inexperienced teachers, textbooks may serve as a form of teacher training by providing ideas on how to plan and teach lessons as well a formats that teachers can use. Kitao (1997) quoted Clarke (1989) as arguing that what constitutes textbook characteristics vary from one text to another. In a study of English textbooks published in Japan in 1985, Kitao et al (1995) said that they were reviewed and problems were found with both the language and content of many of them.

Due to the growth of the ESL publishing market, teachers need to be increasingly knowledgeable and sophisticated concerning textbooks in order to sort through the masses of books available. Yet, many ESL teachers are yet to be adequately exposed to the textbook evaluation and election process and may be unaware of how to judge which ones best suit their situation.

Must Teachers Use Textbooks?

Many authors believe textbooks are only a starting point from which teachers are stimulated and provoked to create lessons for their classes. Experts have advocated a number of methods for how teachers should use textbooks. Allwright (1990) viewed textbooks as "resource books for ideas and activities for instruction" rather than being directly used as "instructional materials". Laime (1999, Website) advocated that anytime an approved textbook slips to take the place of the classroom

curriculum, it becomes unfortunate because "the learner's needs are subjugated in favour of the limited possibilities of the text." Thus, Cunningsworth (1984:15) asserted that "course materials for English should be seen as the teacher's servant and not his master". Richards (2005 Website) also presented potential negative effects of dependence on textbooks. Among such is that they sometimes contain inauthentic language in their presentation of dialogues and other contents, which are not often representative of real language use. Again, they may not reflect students needs and interests because of their global nature. He pointed out that over emphasis on textbooks might create some handicap for teachers, when they are used for major instructional decisions without critical appraisal and interpretation. The teacher's role "can be reduced to that of a technician" whose primary function is to present materials prepared by others. Ansary and Babaii (2002 website) offered what looks like a comprehensive presentation of the place of textbooks in an ESL context. Acknowledging that no textbook is perfect, they said it can serve as a framework which regulates and times the programmes. While agreeing with previous views on the need for textbooks, they observed that learners consider them as the conveyor of learning and that without them their learning is not taken seriously. They, however, cautioned that dependence on textbooks may have counter effects too. Ur (1996) made arguments against textbooks dependence. He pointed out that a textbook can inhibit teacher's creativity as the author's ideas become his guide. Apart from this, teachers will become mere mediators between books and students with no free hand and slaves to other's judgments about which is good and what is not. Again, topics in a textbook may not meet the interest of all students or their needs. Generally, issues in ESL textbooks have been trailed by controversies like this with reactions fluctuating between these two extremes. Therefore, it is important for teachers and administrators to know how to evaluate and select the best texts and other materials for instruction, so that is the textbooks that are being used in a programme are judged to produce results other than the intended one, remedial action should be taken, for instance, by adapting or supplementing books or by providing appropriate guidance and support for teachers.

Textbook Evaluation Criteria

Although many teachers may feel the most effective manner by which to evaluate textbooks is to examine the language objectives contained in them, it is noteworthy that different texts are best used in different situations. Essentially, materials evaluation means judge the fitness of the existing materials in the light of already established needs. As teachers, students and administrators are all consumers of textbooks, the problem is how they can get reliable information on how to select suitable textbooks. In the words of Maisamari, (1999:42) evaluation entails "matching needs to available resources". He suggested that this could objectively be done by using a checklist, which will involve having some kind of rank order of criteria to which the evaluator can plot the fitness of the material. In Nigerian schools, the curriculum, albeit incomplete, should provide information that would guide evaluation. At the tertiary level, the various controlling bodies like the **NUC**, **NBTE**, **NCCE**, **NABTEB** provide the aims and objectives of various courses run in institutions under them. At the secondary level, the states adopt the national policy online to design their own curriculum. The school curriculum, therefore, becomes the teacher's principal guide in evaluation if it provides adequate information and guidance on:

- a) the terminal objectives which the course strives to achieve;
- b) the learning experiences through which the course content will be mastered e.g. pupils may listen, discuss, draw, write or investigate;
- c) the syllabus which gives the course content;
- d) the approach and methods to be adopted by the teacher in order to achieve the objective;
- e) the evaluation procedure to enable the teacher determine whether or not the objectives are being realized (Ubahakwe 1979:377).

Learners should be the center of instruction and learning. The curriculum is a statement of the goals of learning, the methods of learning, etc. to help learners to learn, according to Richards (2005) teachers have to follow the curriculum and select teaching materials that meet curriculum requirements and also monitor the progress and needs of students. They must, therefore, select materials that have underlying

instructional philosophy, target audience, approach, method and content including both linguistic and cultural. Cunningsworth (1995) proposed four criteria for evaluation textbooks thus:

1. they should correspond to learner's needs. They should match the aims and objectives of the language learning programme.
2. they should reflect the uses (present and future) which learners will make of the language. Textbooks should be chosen that will help equip student to use language effectively for their own purposes.
3. they should take account of students' needs and learners and should facilitate their learning processes, without dogmatically imposing a rigid 'method'.
4. they should have a clear role as a support for learning. Like teachers, they mediate between the target language and the learner.

Similarly, Maisamari (1999: 43), while proposing a checklist for English textbook evaluation, included among others the validity of text content, cultural considerations, coverage of subject matter and organization of the content to facilitate learning as important elements. All these he said must be appropriate to the learner's ability and needs. Other factors like attractiveness, size and durability should also be considered.

In his own contribution, Hartley (1994:163) gave three basic content areas that must be addressed which evaluators will seek answers to:

- i) Does the book meet their teaching objectives?
- ii) Is there sufficient depth and breadth of material?
- iii) Will it need to be supplemented?

This is necessary because every gap between a curriculum and a required text should be bridged. Moreover, it will be irresponsible to force students to purchase textbooks that will not be used for their maximum benefit.

In his textbook evaluation checklist, Gariger (2001 website) presented two major headings to be considered.

A. Practical Considerations.

Value/Availability: (i) layout/physical characteristics, which include an appropriate mix of graphics and texts, good organization, clarity and effective use of heading, (ii) cultural component, which stands for accurate reflection of learner's culture.

B. Language Related Considerations

- (i) Skills: It should integrate language and cognitive skills well and offer a good balance. It should present authentic language in a variety of ways.
- (ii) Exercises should be balanced between free and controlled methods. They should promote communication in a meaningful manner. Benchmark level should be clearly stated to define what the student should be able to do at the end of the text.

In a similar checklist presented by Miekley (2005 website), he gave priority to **CONTENT** in areas of subject-matter presentation, culture, authenticity of language, reality of content, sentence structure. In areas of **VOCABULARY** and **GRAMMAR**, he presented grammar rules presentation (ascending order) vocabulary words, (new ones interactive). In **EXERCISES AND ACTIVITIES**, he said they should be task-based and interactive, sufficient examples given and activities to facilitate students use of grammar developed. Activities should address one concept at a time and promote critical thinking. He also gave **ATTRACTIVENESS** of the text and physical make-up as another consideration. Attractive illustrations, visual imagery, aesthetics, book cover beauty are important. In **CONTEXT** consideration, the book should be appropriate for the curriculum, for the students who will use it (clear examples and explanations) and of the teacher who will teach from it. The teacher should be proficient enough in English.

In a study conducted on what should constitute the universal characteristics of **EFL/ESL** textbooks, Ansary and Babaii (2002 website) through textbook evaluation checklists and reviews gave a list of recurring characteristics as follows:

- i) approach,
- ii) content presentation,
- iii) physical make-up,
- iv) administrative concerns.

Approach

This involves dissemination of a vision (theory of approach) about (i) the nature of language (ii) the nature of learning (iii) how the theory can be put to use.

Content Presentation

This involves (i) stating purpose(s) and objective(s) for the total course and for the individual units, (ii) selection and its rationale in coverage, grading, organization and sequencing, (iii) satisfaction of the syllabus: -

- a) to-the-teacher-as-a-guide book, giving advice on methodology in theoretical-orientations-and on exercises and also serving as a supplementary material.
- b) to the student by giving piecemeal unit-by-unit instruction, graphics (relevant, free from unnecessary details, colourful, etc), by giving periodic revisions, serving as a workbook, giving exercises and activities for classroom work, homework, sample exercises with clear instructions on varied and copious scales, giving periodic test sections and audio-visual aids.

Physical Make-up

This involves appropriate size and weight, attractive layout, durability, high quality of editing and publishing, appropriate title.

Administrative concerns

This concerns macro-state policies and must be appropriate for local situation as it concerns culture, religion. Gender and finally appropriate pricing.

However, Ubahakwe (1979:378) stated that the first stage in any textbook evaluation is the authors' aims and objectives. This is because the author has an audience in mind as well as the language skill he intends to transmit and of course, the approach he intends to adopt to achieve his objectives. He, therefore, posited that any competent assessment of a text must be based on the objectives of the author, proposed teaching methods and teacher's judgment.

From all the considerations of presentations above, it is evident that English language textbook evaluation is an important activity, which every language teacher must engage in with seriousness. Even though

no neat formula or system may sufficiently provide a system of judging a text, at least, a set of generally accepted characteristics may still be helpful in ensuring a coherent, systematic and thoughtful process of evaluation.

Almost all studies, investigations and opinions in this paper point to similar areas of attention in textbook evaluation. Areas of philosophy of programme, text content presentation, methodology and text physical make-up are recurrent. I believe that these are the core issues to consider bearing in mind the objectives which the school has set out to achieve.

Discussion

The learner is the center of every curriculum and instruction. One thing that stands out is that an effort to evaluate any given text is dependent on the needs of the learner. Therefore, every ESL teacher should note that text evaluation is a crucial thing that requires the teacher's wit. This is because there is a limit to what textbooks can do or can be expected to do for us.

The type of evaluation a textbook receives will reflect the concerns of the evaluator. One teacher may look at a book in terms of its usability, whether the book works easily in her/his class and whether it can be flexible for adaptation. Another teacher may look at a book more critically in terms of its theoretical orientation and approach. Two teachers evaluating a writing text may likewise look at it from very different perspectives. One may subscribe to a process-oriented view writing and look for activities that practice such processes as generating ideas, drafting, reviewing, revising and editing. Another may be more interested in the adequacy of treatment to different conventions for organizing different kinds of texts, such as narrative writing, expository writing, and descriptive writing.

The content of every text depends largely on the author's objectives. Any objective evaluation should, therefore, be based on that to avoid criticizing the author for not doing what he did not intend to do.

Finally, every textbook evaluator must take care to ensure that cultural background of the local environment of the learner is well protected. That should be one of the considerations of textbook acceptability.

This paper is of the opinion that every text evaluator must first of all understand the needs of his students and the statement of programme objectives and be able to evaluate and select the text that has the content and methodology that will best suit them. Any gap between the two must be bridged.

Recommendation

In today's ESL classroom, teachers and learners rely heavily on textbooks. It is obvious that textbooks have a significant role in the teaching and learning process. But because no single text may effectively meet the needs of a particular programme, one or two adjustments may be needed. The first is to adapt the existing materials by modifying content to suit the learner, perhaps because of such factors as his age, gender, social class, occupation, religion or cultural background. It can also be done by adding or deleting content, or by reorganizing content; by addressing omissions; by modifying tasks or extending tasks. The second adjustment is to develop a new set of materials. This may not be easy considering the amount of time and effort that will be committed to doing this. This may, however, become necessary where all existing texts do not meet teacher's criteria. Teachers therefore need well-designed periodic training programmes and experience to be able to accomplish this task. They have to be trained again and again.

Implications

The basic implication of this paper is that alertness is needed in textbook evaluation and selection. The market is saturated with all manner of language texts each competing for selection and use by English language teachers. Even though there is no good or bad book, teachers must choose books that will match the learning needs of their students as contained in the curriculum. Critical examination of language texts and materials are needed to ensure that the end result of the language-learning programme is the desired outcome.

With the highlighting of the perceived features of ESL texts, teachers are better equipped with the skills to evaluate them to ensure that students use high quality ones and their learning is enhanced and not hindered by books.

Conclusion and Summary

Despite the impact of new technologies in language learning, textbooks will continue to play an important role in teaching by providing a useful resource for both teachers and learners. They can serve as good guidelines for official government syllabus, providing a rich source of content and activities that would be beyond the capacities of most teachers to develop on their own. Because both teachers and students need a framework on which to build and textbooks definitely provide this, it is important that teachers strike a balance between being slaves to their textbooks and providing organized, objective-based instruction. Therefore, any text evaluation must ensure provision of language and tasks that are authentic and effective in enhancing communicative competence. Textbooks alone cannot provide students with all the knowledge they require but they are major tools in enabling learners to progress.

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