

FCE textbook evaluation: a checklist of criteria

I decided to distinguish ten categories according to which the FCE textbook could be evaluated. These categories are as follows:

- layout and design,
- material organisation,
- language proficiency,
- teaching reading comprehension,
- teaching writing,
- teaching grammar and vocabulary,
- teaching listening comprehension,
- teaching oral skills,
- content,
- exam practice.

Let me briefly comment on each criterion and present the rationale behind it.

In my opinion, the **layout and design** of the FCE textbook must be as similar as possible to the FCE examination format. The backwash effect of the exam on the course design is to be taken under consideration in this respect. If the students get accustomed to the format of the examination beforehand, it will probably give them a great deal of confidence during the exam proper as they know what they can expect. The layout and design should not only be appropriate for the examination format, but it should also be interesting for the candidates. Needless to say, the pictures must be attractive, catchy and thought-provoking, but on the other hand, as Dougill (1987:31) puts it, *the pictures cannot be offensive for the students*. According to Sheldon (1988:243), the book should have an optimum density and mix of text and graphical material on each page. Furthermore, the pictures should be clear enough and they should serve their aims. In general, the layout of the book must help both the teacher and the students to use the texts and visual materials in an efficient way.

With reference to **material organisation**, clarity should be the salient feature in all language textbooks, independently of what their type is. Sheldon (1988:243) argues that there should be a linkage of materials, which means that the textbook should be organised in such a way that the units and exercises connect in terms of theme, situation, topic, pattern of skills development, or progression in grammar and lexis. The nature of such connection must be made obvious, for instance, by placing the input texts and supporting tasks in close proximity. Furthermore, the materials should provide a balance and variety of activities. The materials should be organised in such a way that it is easy for both the teacher and the students to find a relevant piece of information in the textbook. There should be clear and conspicuous section headings, indexes, vocabulary lists, etc. Ideally, the FCE textbook should not need any supplementing whatsoever. The teacher's book should provide the teacher with

sufficient guidance and suggestions for some additional activities. Nevertheless, as Sheldon (1988:245) postulates, although the teacher's book is an indispensable part of the course, it cannot limit the teacher's freedom in using the materials. The teacher's book should rather provide the teacher with a whole range of teaching options to exploit the textbook in various ways.

By **language proficiency** I mean both the level of language at the beginning of the course and the progression of the material presented. According to O'Neill (1997:1), the exam-oriented textbooks basically represent two approaches to progression of the teaching materials. In the '**deep-end**' approach, students are faced at the very beginning with texts and tasks that are as difficult as those encountered in the exam or even exceeding the exam level. On the other hand, there is '**progressive steps**' approach if the texts and tasks at the beginning are below the examination level and the level of difficulty builds up progressively to reach the examination level about two-thirds of the way through the course. O'Neill claims that the 'progressive steps' approach leads to better results, as *the learners develop the necessary problem solving skills only if the problems they are faced with initially are reasonably transparent* (1997:3). Furthermore, when learners are faced at the beginning of the course with excessively difficult texts and tasks, *they tend to panic and focus narrowly on simplistic learning strategies* (O'Neill 1997:3). Finally, the students should rather infer the new language from the context. Thus, the language proficiency in the FCE textbook should be appropriate for the candidates, which means the tasks should not be excessively difficult at the beginning of the book and the progression of the language should allow the candidates to develop confidence as well as various skills and strategies needed for the examination.

Paper 1 of the FCE examination tests the candidates' reading skills and strategies, for instance, locating specific information (i.e. scanning) and understanding of the gist of the passage (i.e. skimming). Therefore, the FCE textbook should provide students with the sufficient practice in **teaching reading comprehension** through interesting, up-to-date and thought-provoking texts accompanied by tasks developing adequate strategies. In the FCE exam the candidates can expect a variety of authentic texts, including newspaper articles, passages taken from works of fiction, advertisements, or letters. Thus, the texts in FCE textbooks should be as authentic as possible, not only for the examination's sake but also for the sake of students' future encounters with the actual English texts.

Teaching writing is one of the important aspects of preparing the students for the FCE examination. Writing a transactional letter is a compulsory task; it is also a task with a clear purpose. Therefore, the candidates should be taught how to organise ideas into paragraphs and then into larger units to convey certain messages or to express their feelings and opinions about something. Furthermore, the tasks in the FCE textbook, similarly to the examination tasks,

should specify an addressee as an important element in the process of writing, especially a letter. The transactional letter is not the only written form that appears in the FCE examination. Thus, the FCE textbook should give practice in using language appropriate to, for instance, a composition, a narrative, or a description on all the different types of topics and language functions.

Evaluating FCE textbooks would certainly be incomplete without assessing the criterion of **teaching grammar and vocabulary**. In my opinion, the FCE textbook should basically cover all the major areas of grammar as well as essential vocabulary relevant for the upper-intermediate level. Structures and lexis have to be presented and practised in an interesting way and, most importantly, vocabulary and grammar exercises should provide students with the meaningful context as testing grammar and lexis is highly contextualised in the First Certificate examination. However, not only the effective presentation and practice of structures and lexis are essential ingredients of the language course preparing the candidates for the FCE examination; the FCE course should also provide students with sufficient revision of the essential grammatical structures and vocabulary items. Finally, the FCE textbook should focus the students' attention on potential areas of difficulty and common errors as this may help the candidates to deal successfully with, for instance, error correction exercise in the Use of English paper.

Teaching listening comprehension must also be included among the criteria of FCE textbook evaluation. When assessing the listening practice we basically have to evaluate the audio-cassettes accompanying the textbook as well as the tasks accompanying listening materials. The recordings should make the candidates familiar with the form and tempo of real-life spoken English while the format of the exercises should be similar to what the candidates will be faced with in the exam proper. Since in the Listening part of First Certificate the students are exposed to unsimplified English, spoken at a natural speed, often with different varieties of spoken English (i.e. native, regional, non-native), the same characteristics should be present in the audio-materials used in the FCE textbook. Moreover, similarly to the exam tasks, the tasks in the textbook should teach and test the candidates' ability to extract information from the texts, to interpret the speakers' attitudes or intentions and to recognise the meaning of stress and various intonation patterns. Finally, however obvious it may seem, the recordings should be of good quality.

Likewise, the textbook preparing the candidates for the FCE examination has to offer sufficient **speaking practice** in expressing personal views and opinions, as this is the key to success in the Interview. It is crucial for the textbook to provide students with a sufficient communicative practice, for example, in role-play or simulation, pair work and group-work communication tasks. Of course, to achieve a real communication between the students, the speaking practice has to be motivating. Otherwise, the candidates' performance

will be highly artificial and unnatural, or there will not be any communication in the classroom whatsoever. Moreover, as Sheldon (1988) and other researchers argue, a good textbook should also teach everyday language in real-life situation. It is obvious that this may bring profit not only during the FCE examination. Finally, enough attention must be paid to pronunciation practice as this is also assessed during the Interview.

Although all the above criteria deal with the content of the FCE textbook, I have decided to give a label '**content**' to a separate criterion. I did it on purpose as I intended to have the content of the FCE textbook explicitly evaluated in some important aspects that are not covered by any of the above criteria. As Breen and Candlin (1987:19–20), Cunningsworth (1984:60) and Dougill (1987:35) suggest, it is advantageous for learners if the activities in the textbook encourage their personal involvement in the learning process. The course should not only be concerned with the linguistic development but also with the development of the students' whole personality. Thus, the FCE textbooks should not only be appropriate for the students' level and needs, but also their age, background and interests. Not only must the selection of topics, situations, pictures be adequate for the candidates' conceptual level, but they also should be interesting enough to hold their attention. Furthermore, as Sheldon (1988:244) convincingly argues, flexibility should be one of the features of a good foreign language textbook. The materials should be easy to modify or adapt to the practical constraints with which the teacher has to deal in different teaching situations. Ideally, the teacher ought to be able to use the materials in a variety of ways, also different from their intended purpose. It is also crucial for the textbook to offer a sufficient and well-designed guidance both for the teacher and the candidates. Thus, the instructions and explanations should be as clear as possible. Finally, as the majority of TEFL material evaluation theories emphasise, it is worthwhile to consider whether all different and appropriate religious and social environments are catered for. The textbook should avoid presenting the stereotypes, inaccurate, condescending or offensive images of gender, race, social class, or nationality. Especially the FCE textbooks have to avoid cultural bias and be appropriate for international audience.

At first glance, the final **exam practice** criterion may seem redundant as all the above categories have something to do with the FCE examination practice. However, there are still some issues that are not fully covered in the aspects listed formerly, more global assessment is also required. It must be decided whether the FCE textbook as a whole provides sufficient quantity and quality of exam-like exercises. Success in the FCE examination is not only the adequate proficiency in English and knowledge of the examination format, but also well developed strategies useful for the exam. Therefore, I think there should not only be some special sections in the FCE textbooks devoted to the straightforward

description of the First Certificate format, but also some useful examination tips. Therefore, the exam practice category seems in place.

Materials: the questionnaire format

Before assessment, teachers are encouraged to study a list of more detailed questions concerning each category which, in my opinion, should help in passing judgements. In fact, the main purpose of providing the set of additional questions is to explain what is meant by a given category. The questions presented below are attached to the questionnaire:

- 1. Layout and design:** Are they appropriate for your students? Are the pictures clear and attractive? Does the layout of the book help to use the texts and visual materials? Do the pictures serve their aim?
- 2. Material organisation:** Are the materials clearly organised? Do the materials provide a balance and variety of activities? Are there clear section headings, indexes, vocabulary lists and other methods of making the material organisation student and teacher friendly? Is it easy to find relevant materials in the book? Do sufficient supporting materials (e.g. recordings) accompany the textbook or does it require supplementing?
- 3. Language proficiency:** Is the language proficiency appropriate for the students? Are the tasks too difficult at the beginning of the book? Is the progression of "new" language appropriate for the students? Can the new language be inferred from the context?
- 4. Teaching reading comprehension:** Does the textbook develop reading skills and strategies (e.g. skimming and scanning), and not just the ability to answer reading comprehension questions? Are the reading texts authentic (or authentic-like) and up-to-date? Are the texts interesting and thought-provoking?
- 5. Teaching writing:** Does the textbook give practice in using language appropriate to, say, a transactional letter, a composition, a narrative on all the different types of topics and language functions? Does the book teach how to organise ideas into paragraphs and paragraphs into larger units? Does it provide models of different types of written texts? Does the book specify an addressee as an important element in the process of writing?
- 6. Teaching grammar and vocabulary:** Does the book cover the major grammar areas and essential vocabulary? Does the book focus attention on potential difficulty areas and common errors? Are there enough exercises revising grammar and vocabulary? Do the grammar and vocabulary exercises provide students with the meaningful context? Is grammar and vocabulary practised in an interesting way?

7. **Teaching listening comprehension:** Do the recordings accompanying the coursebook make the students familiar with the form and tempo of the recordings actually used in the exam? Are the tasks accompanying the listening materials similar to what the students will be faced with in the FCE examination? Do the speakers use unsimplified English, spoken at a natural speed? What is the technical quality of the recordings? Do the listening comprehension exercises teach how to extract the main points of information from the text?
8. **Teaching oral skills:** Does the textbook provide the students with the sufficient speaking practice in expressing their personal views and opinions? Does it provide sufficient communicative practice, for example, through role-play, pair work or group work, simulations, etc.? Is the speaking practice interesting and motivating for students? Does the book teach everyday English in real-life situations? Is there enough attention paid to pronunciation?
9. **Content:** Are the materials in the book appropriate for your student's age, background, needs and interests? Are the materials appropriate for international audience or are they culturally biased? Can the materials be used in a variety of ways, also different from their intended purpose? Are instructions and explanations simple and explicit?
10. **Exam practice:** Are there enough exam-like exercises in the book? Are the new types of tasks (e.g. error correction) also practised in the book? Are there any direct or indirect guidelines to develop exam skills in the materials? Does the coursebook sufficiently develop strategies useful for the exam? Are there special sections devoted to the exam format?

Some researchers claim that it is advantageous to administer a questionnaire dealing with teaching English as a foreign language in the native language of the respondents to eliminate possible confusion or misunderstanding. Nevertheless, I have decided to use an evaluation sheet for the FCE textbooks in the English version as the questionnaire is directed to Polish teachers of English who have (or, at least, should have) a very good command of English. After all, they teach students of upper-intermediate level and, therefore, their competence in English should not be an obstacle. I also assume that the teachers will probably find it easier to think about and assess examination textbooks in English since the labels sound more familiar in English and the professionals are presumably much more used to the 'foreign' jargon. Such criteria as *exam practice*, *speaking practice*, *reading comprehension* seem more natural than their Polish counterparts.

After considering the questions referring to various categories the teachers are asked to evaluate the given textbook according to the ten aspects using marks from 1 to 5 for each category, where 1 stands for an unsatisfactory mark, 2 for poor, 3 for satisfactory, 4 for a good mark, and finally 5 represents a very good

mark. The results should be summed up – the maximum score that a FCE textbook can obtain is 50.

Category	Score
LAYOUT AND DESIGN	
MATERIAL ORGANISATION	
LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY	
TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION	
TEACHING WRITING	
TEACHING GRAMMAR AND VOCABULARY	
TEACHING LISTENING COMPREHENSION	
TEACHING ORAL SKILLS	
CONTENT	
EXAM PRACTICE	
TOTAL	

Table 1: Checklist of criteria for FCE textbook evaluation.

Conclusions

It is obvious that each teacher preparing students for the FCE examination would like to be as efficient in giving his students a sound preparation for the challenge as possible. In this respect, appropriate selection of a textbook used for the course seems to be of crucial importance. The choice of the textbook should be a conscious decision made on the basis of a thorough evaluation and a comparison of what is available on the market. After all, an unfortunate choice of the textbook with some major deficiencies may spoil the whole year of work in preparing the candidates for the FCE examination. However, many teachers do not have enough time to undertake such an assessment.

Therefore, the main objective of the above discussion is to help Polish teachers of English in a selection of possibly the best FCE textbook available by offering them a ready-to-use checklist of criteria to be considered. In order to achieve some background on the nature of how a proper textbook assessment project might be carried out I have analysed the nature of tasks in the FCE examination and reviewed some most current approaches to textbook evaluation. In result I have obtained a set of ten categories clearly defined by the accompanying questions. After simple calculations the users may easily compare the total scores as well as some particular aspects of the textbooks examined.

I think that the questionnaire may also be useful not only for the sake of FCE textbook selection but also for an assessment of any EFL textbook, provided it is

appropriately modified. It is important because, as Sheldon points out, the business of textbook evaluation is *haphazard and under-researched* (1988:237).

Nevertheless, I am fully aware of the fact that the questionnaire study, among some obvious advantages, has also some limitations. Needless to say, textbooks are not only used by teachers but also by students. Thus, a complete and thorough textbook evaluation project should embrace both teachers and students. It might be interesting to see how the FCE candidates perceive their First Certificate textbooks and then to compare the scores for a given FCE textbook as evaluated by the teachers and by the students.

I am, however, fully aware that questionnaires and frameworks notwithstanding, evaluative techniques do not provide a foolproof formula by which all textbooks could be unerringly judged. Textbook evaluation seems to be an ongoing process; the more comprehensive and telling the assessment strategies, the more likely it is that a perfectly acceptable textbook will be found.

References

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