The Evolution of Coursebook Evaluation Checklists

Mrs. Gogineni Aswini

Research scholar, Department of English, Koneru Lakshmaiah Education Foundation, Vaddeswaram, AP, India & Assistant Professor of English, Dhanekula Institute of Engineering and Technology, Vijayawada, AP, India

aswini.g.phd@gmail.com https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6658-3307

Dr. Munagala Madhu Sudhan Rao

Research Supervisor & Associate Professor, Department of English, Koneru Lakshmaiah Education Foundation, Vaddeswaram, AP, India.

madhu.css@kluniversity.in https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0383-4866

Dr. Dasam Sridevi

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Velagapudi Ramakrishna Siddhartha Engineering College, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, India.

dsridevi@vrsiddhartha.ac.in   http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9532-7281

Mrs. Jasti Pushpalatha

Assistant Professor of English, Dhanekula Institute of Engineering and Technology, Vijayawada, AP, India.

Lathajasti1@gmail.com

Abstract

Evaluation is one among the five pillars in language teaching. Evaluating teaching materials is a very important professional activity for all ELT teachers. Teachers use textbooks as valuable resources to productively lead teaching and learning activities and to assist students in achieving learning objectives more effectively. According to Tomlinson, the materials evaluation process has two concerns: to examine how the books work for better understanding in the classroom and to present how the pedagogical practices and acquisition are applied. This paper discusses the guidelines for evaluation of the textbook at all stages, i.e., pre-use evaluation, in-use evaluation, and post -use evaluation. Hence, the connectedness between the course book writers and the users in the real classroom can become stronger.

Keywords: Evaluation, Materials, English Language Teaching, In-use evaluation, post-use evaluation, Pre-use evaluation

Introduction

Evaluation is a dynamic process which investigates the suitability and appropriateness of an existing practice (Rea-Dickens and Germaine 1992). It is a useful device for both teachers and material writers as an underlying element in the development of innovations and modifications within the teaching/learning context. English is a complicated language system that conveys meaning and allows the speaker to conduct communicative activities. Linking the learning process of learner to the professional skills to promote learning is the significant role of the teacher.

Three facts regarding textbooks and course books evaluation by Tomlinson (2011)

1. Materials need not be textbooks or course books prescribed by authorities. It can be anything from print to electronic, from the conventional to the non-conventional. It can be anything which is deliberately used to increase the learners' knowledge and/or experience of the language.

2. Materials can be developed by teachers and in fact, they are responsible for the materials that their learners use.

3. There can be three types of materials at all levels.
    a) They can be instructional in the sense that materials instruct learners about the language. Most of the materials that are in use today in India belong to this type.
    b) They can be experiential in the sense that learners experience the language in real life, or they are exposed to it, or materials function as a stimulus for language use by learners.
    c) Materials can be explorative in the sense that they help learners discover about language use.

Evaluation is widely acknowledged as a powerful means of improving the quality of education. Though a lot of research has been done on evaluation, it remains inadequate. There is a need for developing a checklist that has a construct domain and consistency accounts of the scores generated by the items. There is a significant impact of ELT course books on the performance of language teachers' and language learning experience of the students' consequently as the success or failure of an ELT coursebook depend upon the quality of a coursebook (Mukund an, 2007). Textbooks contribute to the requirements, inject subjects in the classroom, and can perform from various activities and explanations (Hutchinson & Torres ,1994). The evaluation of ELT textbook was introduced during the early 1970s, till then there was no systematic evaluation due to lack of adequate detailed criteria (Harbi,2017). Evaluation of the textbook through the checklist can define the quality of a textbook. The textbook evaluation gradually increased in 1980s, but the evaluation occurred only in specific category till 2013. Gutie′rrez Bermu'dez (2014) proposed that a prospective evaluation checklist must promote a structured qualitative evaluation having a descriptive nature but being defined with a specific guideline which will help teachers to express their ideas. In 2014, Standard Evaluation International Framework was developed by International Organization for Standardization (ISO), and it is in use to till date.

Theoretical Background

For clear and better understanding, the relation between the two terms assessment and evaluation must be defined. They both appear as synonyms but there is an argumentation

from a few adepts that they are antonyms (Tomlinson 2011; Littlejohn 2011; Nunan 1988). Evaluation is not merely gathering the information but also interpreting the information for making value judgments (Nunan 1992, p.185). The users of the course book conduct evaluation of the textbook they used to reflect their perceptions and experiences of the given material. It results in subjective results rather than assessment (Tomlinson 2003, p.22). On the other hand, within a systematic framework closed questions are answered such as checklists or questionnaires. Objective examination of teaching materials is the aim of the course book. It would be easier to establish comparison among diverse materials by employing a checklist (Montasser,2013). The analysis of course book aims at teaching materials examination objectively, within a systematic framework through answering closed questions such as checklists and questionnaires. Through such questions, description of the materials can be constructed which specifies about the content present in the material. Evaluation is a broader area. The fitness of the course book for a specific purpose can be considered for a range of purposes and executed in diverse ways is judged by evaluation (Rubdy, 2003, p.41).

Review of the literature

There are plenty of resources available to discuss the development and analysis that provide different methods for evaluating a coursebook. Although methods are not universal, to prepare a context -appropriate tool they provide a range of examples. Checklist is one of the most proposed and investigated tool for material analysis.

The development and publication of ELT materials started in 1990s in well-known publishing houses. Tucker in 1975, designed the first published coursebook evaluation checklist that includes eight external criteria and ten internal (Skierso, 1991, p.440). For EFL/ESL coursebooks, a list for comprehensive evaluation was suggested by Cunningsworth (1995). It comprised forty-five criteria in eight distinct categories: topic, methodology, content, study skills, practical considerations, language content teacher's book, aims, design/organization and approaches. Aims and goals, bibliographical data, subject matter, structures and vocabulary, and layout and physical makeup are the five main sections included in Skierso (1991) checklist. A three-dimensional checklist was proposed by Garinger (2001): depth, teaching objectives & breadth of materials, and the textbook needs to be supplemented or not. Stradling (2001, pp.258-263) within his analytical framework developed a detailed checklist of forty questions and four main categories.

In the first category, cultural or regional aspects of textbook content are evaluated. In the second category, pedagogical value, e.g., use of visual elements, skills development and thinking analytically are dealt. Author bias or stereotypical approaches are the intrinsic qualities evaluated in the third category. Place and year of publication, price and robustness are the extrinsic factors investigated in the fourth category. This has abundantly helped the scholars and practitioners.

Many of the researchers developed textbook evaluation criteria based on a set of universal (but not theory-neutral) characteristics. The evaluation criteria are flexible enough to be used worldwide, corresponding to local needs with some modifications. In general, English did not receive due attention and its use was limited (Aliakbari,2002, Soori et.al. 2011) One of the most comprehensive evaluation criteria list ESL/EFL coursebooks was suggested by Cunningsworth (1995). It comprised 45 criteria in eight different categories: study skills,

topic, methodology, content, aims and approaches, language content teacher's book, practical considerations, and design/organization. According to Tomlinson, many of those evaluation criteria are specific to a learning context and are generalized or transferable to other contexts without extensive modification.

According to McGrath (2002), textbooks are written to suit many students in different teaching-learning contexts, no one book can be found to be perfect for a particular institution, or a particular class or an individual in a class. The evaluation process is divided into four stages according to Hutchinson and Waters (1987) including defining criteria, subjective analysis, objective analysis, and matching. Cunningsworth (1995) and Byrd (2001), in proposing evaluation criteria, considers the target learners, and the fit between the textbook and curriculum, as well as students and teacher. Evaluation is widely acknowledged as a powerful means of improving the quality of education. Though a lot of research has been done on evaluation, there is still to explore as materials production takes place every year. There is a need for developing a checklist that has a construct domain and consistency accounts of the scores generated by the items. To identify the strengths and weaknesses in the textbooks, materials are evaluated (Cunningsworth,1995).

Material evaluation helps in developing our understanding of how a textbook works and, in doing so, contributing to both acquisition theory and pedagogic practices (Tomlinson,1996). Hycroft (1998) states that textbooks are psychologically essential for students since their progress and achievement could be measured concretely when they were used. Evaluation is considered as an intrinsic part of teaching and learning according to Dickins and Germaine (1994). The material should reflect the needs of the learners and the aims, methods, and values of the teaching program (Cunningsworth,1995:7). Textbook evaluation helps the teachers to go beyond impressionistic evaluation to acquire useful, accurate, systematic, and contextual insights into the overall nature of the textbook material (Ellis,1997). ("Textbook Selection and Evaluation in EFL Context - ed")

In the educational process, evaluation is considered as an integral part in the educational process. The researchers conduct their studies in the field of evaluation focusing on the objective of textbook modification and improvement.

Alan Cunningsworth (1984) suggested basic theories of developing foreign language textbooks as teacher and textbook, principles of textbook analysis, and grading of foreign language textbook. One should consider whether the background used in the textbook is linked to the learner's condition in textbook evaluation. McGrath (2002) and Skierso (1991:432-434) recommend a first glance evaluation, although she prefers to the process as survey, in which it is possible to eliminate the most unsuitable textbooks (p.435).

The two types of materials evaluation distinguished by Ellis (1997) are:

Predictive Evaluation: This method helps to make a design regarding what is the purpose of the materials and how they are used. This evaluation also determines which materials are best suited to the determined purposes.

Retrospective Evaluation: Materials are evaluated after usage of the materials and further evaluation is conducted to find out whether the materials have worked out the determined purpose and this type of evaluation is called retrospective evaluation.

Both the evaluation methods aim at making teaching / learning environment more effective.

Methods used in Evaluation:

Tomlinson (2011, p.25) explained three basic methods for evaluating a course book: checklist method, impressionistic and the in-depth. The impressionistic method analyses a course book with a general perception. The teacher gains topics, layout, a sense of structure, and visual after skimming through the material. The examining of a chapter, unit or specific activity is done through in-depth method. Teachers can draw a conclusion considering the suitability for the curriculum, the material's flexibility etc. "The in-depth approach is characterized by its active nature: we actively seek out information about the material in line with an agenda that we have already decided on," according to Cunningsworth (1995, p.2). However, this method sometimes misleads teachers if the material selected is not representative of the course book completely. Widodo (2015) reports that this method concentrates on students' needs, their attitudes towards learning, besides the practical teaching-learning approach. Impressionistic method and in-depth method can ideally be combined for systematic analysis of the materials. In Checklist method, the objectivity of system with the subjectivity of impression combines and helps inexperience teachers to form or if they need more objective judgments while evaluating materials in terms (Mc Grath, 2002; Nimehchisalem & Mukundan, 2013). Checklists suffer context-sensitivity as it closely resembles evaluative criteria and categorical organisation.

Theoretical framework of textbook evaluation for the present study

In 1970s, ELT textbook evaluation was introduced. Due to lack of adequately detailed criteria, there was no systematic evaluation (Harbi, 2017). The interest for textbook evaluation aroused in 1980s, which foregrounded a checklist for textbook evaluation. During 2011-2013, evaluation concentrated on a specific evaluation category or few evaluation categories.

The textbook evaluation is classified into three types according to Cunningsworth (1995) and Ellis (1997). "Pre-use evaluation (before use), In-use evaluation (during use), and post-use evaluation (after use)" (Mukundan, 2011). Assisting teachers or persons in charge in selection of appropriate textbook (s) for students to best achieve a set of learning objectives of a particular course is aimed by pre-use or predictive evaluation. The strengths and weaknesses of the textbook is done by the teacher in in-use evaluation. The overall quality of the textbook having been used throughout the course is being assessed in post-use evaluation. All the three stages of evaluation help to foresee, assess, and review the quality of a textbook which is used as a teaching and learning tool in English language development.

Dweilkat (2011) investigated teachers and students' opinion towards learning activities and exercises in an ELT course book for tenth grade entitled English for Palestine, tenth-grade textbook series called Action Pack was evaluated by AL-Qazaq (2011). Alshehri (2012) assessed grammar, vocabulary, and the four language skills in EFL textbooks used in Saudi Arabia on the aspects of learning objectives. The Ministry of Education puts great emphasis on CEFR. All the current English language education curricula across the nation are based on CEFR, including content, instruction activities, as well as English language testing and assessment at all basic education levels (Mukundan, 2011).

Existing textbook evaluation checklists (2014 to the present)

Researchers since 2014 developed or revised an evaluation checklist for their studies purpose. It was found that the checklist is only applicable for its local context of country, it might not

be suitable for all the countries' context despite of similar language teaching and attainments. However, the earlier used evaluation checklist can be adopted as a guideline for the development of localized textbook evaluation checklist.

In 2014, Gutiérrez assessed the New English File quality of Elementary course book by 3-point Likert scale. The evaluation checklist is used for evaluation covering five evaluation categories: curriculum design, task design, usability, versatility, and book design. Later, in 2014 Khodabakshi evaluated Skyline textbook used in Iran and research followed the criteria suggested by Litz (2005). The evaluation consisted of forty evaluation items covering seven evaluation categories, i.e., practical consideration, skills, layout and design, language types, subject and content, activities, and conclusion.

In 2015, Khoo and knight examined the characteristics of KBSM form four and KBSM form five used in Malaysia. A 5-point Likert scale checklist entitled checklist for textbook evaluation revised from the checklist proposed by Mukdan and Nimehchisalem (2012). This checklist comprises thirty-six item revised checklist with six evaluation categories: efficient outlay of supplementary materials; physical and utilitarian attributes; methodology; general attributes in relation to syllabus and curriculum; suitability for learners and learning-teaching content. However, ten items are heavily devoted for the first evaluation category, while the other twenty-six items seem insufficient for evaluation of the other aspects of textbook.

In 2016, the characteristics were investigated by Hamidi et al. between New Interchange 2 and four corners three, widely used in Iran. Daoud and Celce-Murcia (1979) developed 5-point Likert scale for evaluation. Five evaluation categories were covered out of twenty-five total evaluation categories. They are subject matter, vocabulary, and structure; exercises; illustrations; and physical make-up. However, this checklist failed to emphasize on the four language skills. A textbook entitled Visa to the world, a middle school course book used in Morocco was assessed by Laabidi and Nfissi (2016). Seven evaluation categories were used from a checklist with 45-evalaution items: cultural presentation, four language skills, language teaching methods, physical appearance, format of the textbook, accompanying materials, content and topics, exercises and activities, cultural presentation, four language skills, and language teaching methods.

Böcü and Razi (2016) investigated intercultural communication competence found in Life A1 and life A2. They elicited teachers' and students' perceptions towards five cultural elements: source culture; target culture; international culture; big c (e.g., politics, history, economy, etc), and little c (e.g., food, holiday, lifestyle, etc.) a revised questionnaire was employed.

In 2017, Harbi studied teachers' opinion towards Traveller Series Book 3 and Traveller Series Book 4, high school course books in Saudi Arabia. For data elicitation, the researcher developed a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire. The questionnaire covered five evaluation categories (49 items in total): language skills (12 items); objectives of the target EFL textbooks (6 items); evaluation (7 items); layout and design (10 items); and teaching methods and activities (13 items). Furthermore, exercises and activities, lesson reviews, as well as quizzes were included under the category of evaluation. There was more emphasis on layout and design (10 items) but less on language skills (12 items).

It is pivotal for teachers and persons in charge to rely on an adequate textbook evaluation checklist when choosing a suitable ELT textbook. An evaluation checklist must be developed and adopted with detailed items and clear descriptions to reflect language skills and sub-skills

in a textbook. Sheldon (1988) states that a global evaluation checklist is not applicable to all the contexts. It is always important to develop a localized evaluation checklist.

Tools

To evaluate a language teaching material, textbooks checklist is the instrument used by the practitioners of ELT. Checklists may be quantitative or qualitative. Quantitative scales allow an objective evaluation of a given textbook through Likert style rating scales (e.g., Skierso,1991) and on other hand Qualitative checklists often use open-ended questions to elicit subjective information on the quality of course books (e.g., Richards,2001). The studies can be done with qualitative and quantitative survey research and case study research. The mixed method approach is deemed important to achieve the primary benefits of development and expansion of the checklist (Greene, Aracelli, & Graham, 1989).

Sheldon (1988, p.241) states that "textbook criteria are emphatically local". Ansary and Babaii (2002) suggest locating some universal and broad characteristics of ESL/EFL textbooks and to draw up, as such, some guidelines for the generation and /or systematic evaluation of ESL/EFL textbooks. One effective way to ensure that the needs and wants of learners are given careful consideration when choosing textbooks is to apply a written checklist of appropriate selection criteria to potential textbooks (Mukundan, 2011). Such a checklist if used must be tailored to the needs and wants of the learners who will use the textbook.

Conclusion

It is undeniable that English textbooks are the main sources of language input for students at all school levels. Based on the assumption that the teachers and/or people directly responsible for selecting the textbooks are knowledgeable about the CEFR as well as CLT, the researcher identified 61 checklists starting from Chastain Checklist (1971) to Sirajul Munir Textbook Evaluation Checklist (2021) which belong to generalizable Criteria,Simplistic Criteria, Functional Load, Adequacy of pattern practice criteria, good grammar practice criteria with a Checklist of a 5-point Likert scale of 70 items under eight categories: LSRW skills ; vocabulary; grammar; and accompanied /supplementary materials, unit organization, language teaching methods, layout, design, physical makeup, content, activities, language and topics. The researchers can use these categories for further research.

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