

Literature review of material evaluation

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Abstract: A literature-based review concerning why and how to evaluate language-teaching materials is presented with the purpose to facilitate English Language Teachers' awareness of material evaluation and assist their conduction.

Key words: material evaluation; evaluation criteria; learners' needs

1. Introduction

As a key area in English Language Teaching (ELT), the significance of material design and evaluation has grown steadily. Evaluation is basically a matching process, which concerns matching learners' needs to available solutions (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 97). Low (1987, p. 21) reminds us that "teachers generally need to screen materials, in order to predict their suitability for particular classes". Thus, we should use material evaluation to question and develop our own ideas as to what is required. Another benefit is through identifying strengths and weaknesses in textbooks, optimum use can be made of strong points, and weaker points can be adapted or substituted from other books (Cunningsworth, 1995, p. 14).

2. Purposes of Material Evaluation

According to Swales (1985, cited in Low, 1987, p. 21), there are very few published works about the effectiveness of coursebooks in use. Teachers, material designers and education researchers tend to be less reflective about what is happening when one textbook is used. This primarily attributes to a centrally prescribed curriculum and coursebooks. Another reason seems to be different progress achievement tests and final achievement tests. So teachers have little time or motivation to judge the fitness of the textbooks.

Actually, materials, especially authentic materials, play a significant role in foreign language teaching. They are not simply the everyday tools of the language teachers; they are an embodiment of the aims and methods of the particular teaching/learning situation. In the words of Cunningsworth (1995, p. 7), coursebook is "a resource in achieving aims and objectives that have already been set in terms of learner needs". Through evaluation, we can assess whether the coursebook is the most appropriate for the target learners at various levels and in various teaching settings. What is more, the evaluation process will involve elements of comparison, especially where existing materials are being challenged by newly produced materials.

3. Types of Material Evaluation

In terms of when to evaluate a coursebook, Cunningsworth (1995, p. 14) points out that pre-use evaluation, in-use evaluation and post-use evaluation are engendered. The first type, pre-use evaluation tends to be the most

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difficult kind since there is no actual experience of using the coursebook. In-use evaluation, from another perspective, is a kind of evaluation for suitability, involving “matching the coursebook against a specific requirement including the learners’ objectives, the learners’ background, the resources available, etc” (Cunningsworth, 1995, p. 14). On the other hand, post-use evaluation refers to an assessment of a textbook’s fitness over a period of continual use. Evaluation of this kind can be practical in helping to decide whether to use the same textbook on future occasions.

In addition, Cunningsworth (1995, p. 1) differentiates two approaches between impressionistic overview and in-depth evaluation. Since the former can only afford us a general introduction to the material, but not enough detail to ensure a good match between the content of the textbooks and the requirements of teaching/learning situation, an in-depth evaluation is necessitated as we can examine how specific items and different aspects of language are dealt with.

4. Criteria for Evaluation

It is beneficial to consider some guidelines for evaluation. As illustrated by Cunningsworth (1995, pp. 7-15), coursebooks should: correspond to learners’ needs; help to equip learners to use language effectively for their own purposes; facilitate students’ learning process; have a clear role in mediating the target language and the learner.

With reference to the evaluation criteria, Ur (1991) provides us 19 items in assessing a coursebook in general, for example: clear instruction and fluency practices in all four skills. It is decided by the assessor on what rating of each item in line with its importance. However, as far as I am concerned, Cunningsworth’s (1995, see Appendix) criteria are more detailed and specific for evaluating the effectiveness in different sub-skills and communicative interaction.

Moreover, as complementary criteria for evaluation, Nunan’s (1989) lists of successful listening, speaking, reading and writing skills can also be applied. To be more precise, let us now turn to some examples of Nunan’s skills.

Successful listening skills include:

- skills in segmenting the stream of speech into meaningful words and phrases—relating the incoming message to one’s own background knowledge
- identifying the rhetorical and functional intent of an utterance or parts of an aural text
- interpreting rhythm, stress and intonation to identify information focus and emotional/attitudinal tone
- extracting gist/essential information from longer aural texts without necessarily understanding every word.

(excerpted from Nunan, 1989, p. 26)

On the other hand, successful speaking skills involve:

- mastery of stress, rhythm, intonation patterns
- an acceptable degree of fluency
- skills in the management of interaction and negotiation of meaning
- skills in taking short and long speaking turns; conversational listening skills as precondition for good speakers
- skills in using appropriate conversational formulae and fillers (excerpted from Nunan, 1989, p. 32)

5. Evaluation Procedures

In terms of the evaluation procedures, three major steps are proposed. First, select a unit from one volume of the textbooks; secondly, decide and define the criteria for your evaluation; thirdly, analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the textbooks in matching their claims with learners' needs (adapted from Rea-Dickens & Germaine, 1992).

As mentioned earlier, evaluation is a straightforward, analytical matching process. In that case, analysis of our course in terms of subjective needs (material requirements) and analysis of objective solution (materials) are both required to find out how far the material matches the needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 97). Thus, four major steps can be taken in the evaluation process, as opposed to the former division:

(1) Defining criteria—On what bases will you judge materials?

(2) Subjective analysis—What realizations of the criteria do you want in your course (e.g. who are your learners; what language points should be covered)?

(3) Objective analysis—How does the material being evaluated realize the criteria (e.g. who is the material intended for; how is the content organized within the units)?

(4) Matching—How far does the material match your needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 97)?

6. Conclusion

To sum up, material evaluation can provide teachers a good source of techniques, tell us what to do as well as what to avoid and consequently help us make optimum use of the existing materials. For this reason, language teachers should judge the fitness of the coursebooks timely. Based on the evaluation results, we can either replace the textbook in use to adopt the most suitable one or to adapt the existing materials. By further adapting coursebooks in use, we can save a lot of expense and efforts. It is also worth noting that the evaluation process is particularly helpful for teachers to gain good and useful insights into the nature of the material. Only in this way, can we respond to learners' needs at the utmost and maximize the learning/teaching objectives.

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Appendix

Checklist for listening (Cunningsworth, 1995, p. 68):

- What kind of listening materials is contained in the course?
- Does listening form part of dialogue/conversation work?
- Are there specific listening passages?
- If there are specific listening passages, what kind of activities are based on them- comprehension questions, extracting specific information, etc?

- Is the listening material set in a meaningful context?
- Are there pre-listening tasks, questions, etc?
- Is there any video material for listening?
- If so, is good use made of the visual medium to provide a meaningful context and show facial expression, gesture, etc?

Checklist for speaking (Cunningsworth, 1995, p. 70):

- How much emphasis is there on spoken English in the coursebook?
- What kind of material for speaking is contained in the course? This may include:
 - oral presentation and practice of language items
 - dialogues
 - role play
 - communication activities (information gap)
- Are there any specific strategies for conversation or other spoken activities, eg debating, giving talks?
- Is any practice material included to help learners to cope with unpredictability in spoken discourse?

Checklist for communicative interactions (Cunningsworth, 1995, p. 129):

- What elements of genuine communication are present:
 - unpredictability
 - opportunities to express real information, feelings, opinions, etc
 - opportunities for learners to structure their own discourse
 - need to formulate and use communication strategies
 - emphasis on co-operation between speakers in communicative interaction?
- At the appropriate level, does the coursebook include material that reflects the nature of communicative interaction, in respect of:
 - structure of discourse in interactions (including openers, confirmation checkers, preclosers, etc)
 - complexity of structure
 - range of appropriate lexis
 - features such as fillers and incomplete sentences
 - roles of speakers in interactions?
- Does the material help learners in the skill of turn-taking in conversations?
- Are adjacency pairs included in presentation and practical material? If so, are there examples of framing (insertion sequences)?

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