Evaluating ELT Textbooks and Materials: Methods and Principles

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Abstract

This article tries to make a relatively comprehensive description on textbook evaluation by surveying four scientific journals on textbook evaluation. They include William (1983), Ellis (1997), Sheldon (1988), and Hutchinson (1987). These articles are selected as they are cited in many research papers on textbook or teaching materials evaluation in different background and teaching contexts despite of their old-fashioned publications. The discussion covers two main features in textbook evaluation; methods and criterions or principles. It can be concluded that methods offered in those articles include: checklist items, qualitative and quantitative data analysis, and matching process. The principles that are offered are varied and relative based on the teaching contexts in which the textbooks are used.

Key words: textbook evaluation, materials evaluation

Introduction

Textbook plays an important role in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) and becomes prolonged discussion among ELT experts. Concerning this field, the experts are split into two main opposite groups; the proponents and the opponents. Tomlinson (2001:67) says that the proponents argue that textbook presents teaching materials in the most convenient way as it builds consistency and continuation of the material presentation. It also gives learners a sense of cohesive and progressive learning system. It helps teachers prepare the lesson within limited time they have. McGrath (2002) sees that textbook can set direction, content and it can propose ways in which the lesson is to be taught. Garinger (2001) states that textbook is the most effective media to ease teachers’ burden in preparing the lesson as it provides ready-made activities and concrete samples of classroom progress through which external stakeholders can be satisfied.

Opponents of textbook based teaching claim that textbook can make teachers dependent on ready-made materials, so they will not consider the particularities of teaching context. Very often, many textbooks ignore the varied circumstances of teaching contexts by providing the same materials for the students who come from different contexts and conditions. Hutchinson and Torres (1994:315) say, “the danger with ready-made texts is that they can seem to absolve teachers of responsibility … they make it easy to sit back and operate the system, secure in the belief that the wise and virtuous people who produced the
textbook knew what was good for us. Unfortunately this is rarely the case.” Graves (2000) find that this failure includes the irrelevance of content with the students, exclusion of important items, imbalanced variety of task-types, boring activities and unrealistic proposed timetables.

It is found also a conflicting interest between commercial and pedagogical demands in the way authors or publishers present the materials. Very often, the proportion of pedagogical considerations should be lessen for fitting commercial demands that will give more profits to the publishers and other related stakeholders. In some cases, school stakeholders ignore the contents offered by the authors or publishers in the textbooks for the sake of the financial profit. This policy will not only give harmful impact to both teachers and students but also will create boring and monotonous teaching activities as the teachers don’t get adequate company to bring interesting teaching in the classroom.

It is, therefore, suggested for the teachers and other related stakeholders to conduct textbook evaluation so they will not get trapped by the “bad” textbooks. Textbook evaluation is such a necessary practice to help the teachers assist in the choice of the most suitable book for a specific content, promote their awareness on the actual contents of a book and facilitate them to make necessary adaptations (Kontozi, 2011:1).

There are many proposals of textbook evaluation as suggested by the experts. This article tries to make a relatively comprehensive description on textbook evaluation by surveying four scientific journals on textbook evaluation. They include William (1983), Ellis (1997), Sheldon (1988), and Hutchinson (1987). These articles are selected as they are cited in many research papers on textbook or teaching materials evaluation in different background and teaching contexts despite of their old-fashioned publications. The discussion will include two main features in textbook evaluation; methods and criterions or principles.

**The Nature of Textbook Evaluation**

The term “evaluation” should be distinguished from “analysis”. The latter refers to the process which leads to an objective, verifiable description whereas the former involves the making of judgments. In evaluating the materials, ones should make a comparison between the descriptions of a context with the descriptions of the textbooks. Therefore, textbook evaluation should be made by looking at a specific required elements or set of criteria (Kontozi, 2011:1).
Textbook evaluation concerns on matching certain criterions, usually varied based on particular teaching contexts, to the solutions offered by the author in the textbooks. Do the available solutions in the textbooks match to both students’ needs in language learning and teachers’ perspectives in presenting materials? Hutchinson and Waters (1987) states that textbook evaluation is basically a straightforward, analytical matching process: matching needs to available solutions.

Textbook evaluation is an important process in the terms of teacher’s professional development. It is not only potential for influencing the way teachers conduct their teaching but also enabling them to select a textbook which will develop their awareness of their own teaching and learning situation (Hutchinson, 1987).

**Types of Textbook Evaluation**

Recently, there are many proposals of textbook evaluation offered by the experts which can be generalized into three types; pre-use or predictive evaluation (Ellis, 1997; McGrath, 2002; Tomlinson, 2003), in-use or whilsts-use evaluation (McGrath, 2002, Tomlinson, 2003) and post use evaluation (McGrath, 2002; Tomlinson, 2003).

Pre-use or predictive evaluation (Ellis, 1997) is conducted before the materials being used by teachers. It helps them to make a decision concerning the materials. Through this evaluation they can determine whether the textbooks suit the determined teaching objectives or not. This evaluation can be conducted by investigating certain features of the textbooks and match them to the desired needs of the students or particular teaching objectives.

In-use (McGrath, 2002) or whilst-use evaluation (Tomlinson, 2003) involves measuring the value of materials while using them or observing them as being used. This evaluation is beneficial to make sure whether the materials are suitable for the students or not and the result is used for the textbook use in the future.

Finally, post-use evaluation measures the actual effect of the materials on the users. Tomlinson (2003) says, “Post use evaluation can measure the actual outcome of the use of the materials and thus provide the data on which reliable decisions about the use, adaptation or replacement of materials can be made.”

**Methods for Textbook Evaluation**

A Checklist of items (Williams, 1983; Sheldon, 1988) is a common method used by researchers to evaluate existing ELT textbooks. It can be used to weight the extent of the
materials match the determined criterions by using scores, rating, or grades. The scores collected reflect the quality of the textbooks or its relevance to the standard criterions.

As textbooks evaluation is defined as analytical matching process; matching needs to available situations (Hutchinson, 1987), the matching process can be considered to be used as one of the evaluation methods. It seeks to compare the nature and underlying principles of the particular teaching/learning situation and of the available materials in the textbooks. Both quantitative and qualitative interpretations can be used to conclude the findings of the research.

Quantitative analysis is usually carried out if the data collected are test scores (Ellis, 1997). It is presented in the form of tables. On the contrary, if the data are in the form of journal it employs qualitative analysis and is presented in a narrative description and usually enriched by the illustration of quotations and protocols.

The methods for textbook evaluation as suggested in these four papers include a checklist of items, matching process, and qualitative or quantitative data analysis. Any researcher who expects to conduct a textbooks or materials evaluation can use one of these methods depending on the types of textbooks evaluation that they carry out.

**Criterions for Textbook Evaluation**

There is no definite standard of textbooks evaluation criterion. It always depends on the teaching contexts that the textbooks are intended. In some countries where the structural based teaching still gets its popularity, communicative-based criterions in textbooks evaluation is incompatible. Hutchinson (1987) says that materials evaluation is always relative by the nature as every book is an implicit statement about the nature of language use and language learning, and any language teaching situation embodies certain assumption of the nature of language and language learning. To this point, a thorough analysis of the teaching situation that the materials are required is a must.

Nevertheless, the experts propose flexible principled guidelines in designing textbooks evaluation criterions. The term “principled” refers to the recent theories on language use and language learning while “flexible” indicates that it can be modified and adopted by considering local elements that possibly suits in only few teaching contexts. Hutchinson (1987), for instance, states that any principles of textbooks evaluation should be based on the assumptions of language use and language learning. Researchers should define the nature and
underlying assumptions of language use and language teaching so they can be matched with the principles of the available materials. The matching process will determine whether textbooks are worth using in a particular teaching context.

Williams (1983), on the other hand, states that developing textbooks evaluation criterions should consider the assumptions about second language teaching including up-to-date methodology, guidance for non-native teachers, needs of second language learners, and relevance to the socio-cultural environment. These assumptions will examine some criterions including general, speech, grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing and technical. General refers to global considerations of methodology, the needs of the learners, the teacher, and the community, while technical refers to quality of editing and publishing, the availability of supplementary materials, cost and durability of the text, authenticity of language and style of the writer, etc. The mixture of each assumption and criterion will produce a great numbers of principles that should be fixed with the local elements of the teaching contexts.

Ellis (1997) offers different criterions to evaluate ELT textbooks. They include objectives, input, conditions, procedures, and outcomes. The statement of the objectives will examine the teaching goals the task strives to reach while input states what to work on the task. Condition is a description of how the task to be performed and procedures are explanations of what the students to carry out to complete the tasks. Finally, outcomes refer to certain results that should be achieved from the task.

Finally, Sheldon (1983) proposes a more detailed framework in textbooks evaluation which consists of seventeen elements;

1. rationale, the statement about the objectives of writing the textbooks which is in line with the statement about need analysis,
2. availability, an access to contact the representative of the publishers,
3. user definition, the profile of the audiences which textbooks addressed from ages, levels, etc.
4. layout/graphics, the utilization of artwork in presenting materials,
5. accessibility, the features that make the users easy to use the book such as table of contents, indexes or textbooks use,
6. linkage, the coherence and connection between each parts in the books such as the suitability of the topic, theme and the contents,
7. selection/grading, the choices or decisions of selecting and grading materials in the textbooks,
8. physical characteristics, the physical appearance of the textbook,
9. appropriacy, the appropriacy of the contents within the learner level, need analysis, teaching context, etc.
10. authenticity, the use of authentic materials and tasks in the textbook
11. sufficiency, the sufficiency of the textbook to help teachers in preparing the lesson and support the effective teaching,
12. cultural bias, the omission of contents that will cause cultural misunderstanding and misinterpretation,
13. educational validity, the relevance of the textbook with current educational issue,
14. stimulus/practice/revision, the ability of the textbook to give sufficient stimulus or response to the learners,
15. flexibility, the flexibility of the textbook that it can be modified based on local situations,
16. guidance, the complete guidance for teachers and students in using the textbook,
17. overall value for money, the relevance between quality offered and the cost that the customers should pay.

These elements may be applied completely in a particular teaching context and may be not in another one. A structural syllabus, for instance, may not include authenticity in the evaluation as the focus is not on authentic communicative contents.

The criterions proposed by four papers may be grouped into four main features; pedagogy, language use, technical and culture. Pedagogy concerns on the use of pedagogical theories in designing textbooks such as the use of methodology, stimulus, practice, procedures, etc. while language use refers to certain language elements such as objective, selecting/grading, authenticity, etc. Technical refers to the technical presentation of the textbooks outside pedagogical and language contents such as layout/graphics, accessibility, sufficiency, etc. Finally, culture refers to the inclusion of culture in the textbooks such as cultural bias and socio-cultural environment.

**Closing Remark**

The experts are split into two main groups regarding textbook based teaching. The proponents of the notion see that textbooks present materials in the most convenient way and help teachers to prepare lessons more effectively. On the other hand, the opponents see that
textbooks absolve teacher’s responsibility to present the teaching materials which suit particularities in the teaching contexts. This condition leads to see the importance of textbooks evaluation in order to get ‘best’ books for a particular teaching context.

Four papers surveyed in this article give different proposals in evaluating textbooks. Concerning on the methods, there are at least three methods proposed; a checklist of items, matching process and quantitative or qualitative data analysis. These can be used based on the type of textbooks evaluation employed. Regarding the criterions, there are many criterions offered but it can be summarized into four main groups; pedagogy, language use, technical and culture.

This paper, even surveys four most cited journals, have some limitations. First, the limited number of journals surveyed is worried to fail to give a comprehensive description of the perspectives in evaluating textbooks. There are some frameworks that are not covered in this paper such as textbooks evaluation that employs cultural studies as the heart of the evaluation. Second, this paper surveys the old-fashioned papers which were published over last two decades. It is afraid that it doesn’t reflect the recent trend in the field of textbooks evaluation. The further researchers are hoped to cope with the drawbacks of this paper.

References