

Developing an Evaluative Checklist for English Textbooks in India

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Abstract

Textbooks play an important role in education system. They serve as one of the main instruments for shaping students knowledge, attitudes, culture and principles. In Indian school context, textbook serves as the primary resource for students to receive the language input and the language practice that takes place in the classroom. The main purpose of the textbooks is to make learners become more capable and proficient in their concern subject with updating current trends. Since 1960s textbooks have been implemented as a wide range of supplementary materials, almost all of the schools use textbooks as a main teaching tool to present the material in the classroom. (Monjurul Islam-2013-2). Hence textbooks play an essential role in the process of language teaching and learning and it can be a tyrant to the teacher in the English language classroom. Keeping the importance of textbooks in Indian classroom researcher discusses different evaluative criteria's, checklists and guidelines currently available with a view to adapt and derive a set of well- defined criteria for evaluating English textbooks.

English textbook- an Introduction

In the language classroom particularly while learning English as a second language or as a foreign language, the textbook function as a supplement to the teacher's instruction and it can provide the foundation to the content of lessons, the skills and other language components, as well as the different kinds of activities learners engage in their classroom. For the ESL/EFL learners, the textbook becomes the major source of contact they have with the language apart from the input they received by the teacher. By using the concern textbook the learners may gain more confident, fluent, and proficient in their everyday use of English language in different situations and also to enable the students to transfer the learned skills into their day to day life. The term textbook has been defined as, "basic book used in a particular course of study or programme". The Webster Encyclopedia Dictionary calls it as, "A book used by a student in some branch of study"; whereas it also stands for, "A book containing the main principles of a subject". (A Review of English textbook by Abdul Khan, Vol.1 (3), 1-5, June (2013): www.isca.in). In other hand Nunan (1999, p. 98) states that "a textbook is the main component of any instructional programme and it is difficult to imagine a class without it". McGrath (2002) opines that a textbook is important because it sets the direction, content, and to a certain extent how the lessons are to be taught in the classroom. As Sheldon (1988, p. 237) suggests that textbooks not only "represent the visible heart of any English Language Teaching programme" but also offer considerable advantages for both the student and the teacher when they are being used in the learning and teaching process.

Textbook Evaluation-an Introduction

Textbook Evaluation is generally accepted as a central part of teaching and learning process. It is one of the basic components of any curriculum and acting an essential role in determining what learners learn. Usually evaluation is an integral part of any teaching and learning process. According to Nunan, (1988:185), "Evaluation assists us in deciding whether a course needs to be modified or altered in any way so that objectives may be achieved more effectively. For Nunan, evaluation is essentially a decision making process by which evaluators can alter the programme/course if targeted learning goals are not achieved effectively. Tomlinson (2003: 15) gives a similar definition of material evaluation, "Material evaluation is the process which involves measuring the value of a set of learning materials. It involves making judgments about the effect of the materials on the people who are using them". The outcome of the learning materials on the users can be measured by the process of materials evaluation. McDonough and Shaw (2003, p. 60) also state that, evaluation is "a useful process in its own right" because it gives teachers insight into the organizational principles of the materials and helps them to keep up with developments in the field. This will in turn help teachers to adapt materials realistically. These definitions suggest that materials evaluation is a complex analytical matching process which is essential to recognize the strengths, weaknesses and effectiveness of the materials, and take necessary decisions to support, revise, and modify to achieve the proposed objectives / goals of a program more effectively. Considering the importance of evaluation, we can say that the textbook evaluation is a necessary to qualifying the content of the textbooks and homogenizing it with the English teaching/learning process. It can be most effective when a set of well-defined criteria is developed for evaluation/assessment.

The main characteristics of Textbooks

The main role of textbooks is to assist and organize the teaching learning process by providing a pathway through the complex mass of the language to be learnt. According to John (1995) and Pemberton (1996), teaching learning materials should be self-access. They believe that self-access learning takes place where materials are organized in order to facilitate autonomous learning. According to Sheerin (1991: 143) self-access is a way of describing learning materials that are designed and organized in such a way that student can select and work on their own tasks and obtain feedback on their performance.

Let us briefly examine the salient features of textbooks/ self-access materials are as follows:

Adequate Subject Matter: Efforts are made to make the textbooks self-sufficient and the subject matter should be based on the psychological needs and interests of the students. It should be related to the student's environment by focusing on various topics with equal balance of language skills.

Self-explanatory: The content should be based on the principle of simple to complex, known to unknown, familiar to unfamiliar for easy understanding. The subject matter should be presented in such a logical manner.

Illustrations: The illustrations should make the subject matter more clear and effective. They should be sufficient in number wherever it requires. They motivate and attract the learner's with their natural colour combination. But too many ideas should not be conveyed in one illustration.

Suitable Vocabulary and Structures: The vocabulary should be controlled, properly selected and graded in the textbooks. The introduction of vocabulary should be progressive from class to class. The words and structures should be introduced in a systematic order. If the one word/structure has more than one meaning, we should use simple meaning. At the end of the textbook or on page, a glossary of difficult words and structures should be given. It is more helpful by giving transcription, stress mark with difficult words to develop proper pronunciation.

The tasks should be as realistic as possible: Many classroom activities are dissimilar to the authentic communication situations of real life. Textbooks should include tasks which are real (e.g. writing letters to newspapers, writing to friends, writing to stories, description, narration making conversation writing reviews etc.). -Tomlinson, B. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, (2010 p-72-86)

As can be seen from the principles outlined above, Tomlinson has recommended a more humanistic approach to design the activities which aims to develop both the declarative and the procedural knowledge of the learners, whilst at the same time making positive and broadening contribution to their personal and linguistic development.

Evaluation Models, Criteria and Checklists

One of the common methods to evaluate English language teaching and learning materials is the checklist/criteria. Evaluation checklist is an instrument that provides the evaluator with a list of features of successful learning-teaching materials. There is the possibility to the evaluators like teachers, researchers as well as learners to rate the quality of the material by using these checklists/criteria. Following are the different evaluative criteria's for evaluation of materials/textbooks.

Harmer's criteria for evaluating materials

J. Harmer's evaluative criteria/framework (1983) is one of the most useful and significant criteria to evaluate English language teaching materials. According to Harmer, the researchers/evaluators have to follow this criterion to evaluate the value of English textbooks by following three stages to find the knowledge about the textbooks and learners.

The three stages are:

- To describe the student's, saying who are they and what they bring to class: age, level, sex, and social/cultural background of the students, their motivation and attitude, educational background, knowledge of English and their level of interests and belief.
- To describe the student's needs, when they are likely to use English and what skills they should obtain in the language classroom.
- To think about in general terms the type of materials suitable for particular students.

And he also suggested while evaluating textbooks we have to follow two stages. The first stage is to find whether the textbook matches with the students and their needs and to carry out a pilot study on a small group of students to calculate the results to take appropriate decision. He also mentioned seven perspectives or principles to evaluate ELT materials/textbooks. The first one is 'Practical consideration' which includes the price of textbook and its availability. Some other factors such as work book, tape, cassette, manual, teacher's book ...etc. The second one is regarding the "layout and design" - to judge whether the materials look more attractive to learners. This means they shouldn't be in full color under the "language type" the question raised are whether the language in the - materials is practical and is at the level of learners. Then "subject and content" whether appropriate topics are selected and find out content material related to learners' background, personalities and their needs. In the rest of perspectives, whether the right skills are included in the textbook/material and if the balance between the different skills is appropriate. Finally, it can ask questions about the activities/ tasks and sufficient guidance in order to have clear objectives that both teachers and learners understand.

Grant Criteria for evaluating materials

N. Grant (1987) discussed four main perspectives/principles in his evaluative criteria. It includes Linguistic, psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, and pedagogic perspectives. The "linguistic" principle, deals with questions like aim of the textbook, the content, selection, skill development, and communicative abilities. In "psycholinguistic" principle, the criteria emphasizes on learning theories and their motivational values. The other principle "sociolinguistic", contains on questions that center on the teaching learning materials and cultural factors. In addition, it examines whether the textbooks/ materials meet the learners needs, as they perceive them with regard to "pedagogical level". This model concentrates on the role of teachers and learners in the classroom, the content of materials from the point of view of methodological perspective, the activities of the classroom to teaching/learning process. This model represents mostly on practical considerations as the research says that the textbooks should be attractive, durable, and appropriate for the level and average age of the learners, and should be obtained easily.

Penny Ur' evaluation Textbook Scheme

Criteria according to Penny Ur, the textbook should contain topics and tasks, which are very important components in a textbook to attractive learners. Ur (1996), states that the topics and tasks should be interesting and diverse so as to provide for different levels and learners learning styles. In addition, to examine the importance of fluency in learning language skills more than accuracy is needed because the fluency helps learners to develop their own learning strategies. As for the grammar, it needs to be well presented and the textbook should provide learners with adequate practice. The revision and test sections, audio cassettes, appropriate visual materials are also necessary to consider when choosing the right textbook for the particular class. Hence the format of Ur's checklist is user-friendly, seemingly easy to follow, and it contains clear terms.

The Hutchinson Model (1987)

According to Hutchinson, evaluation is essentially a matching process between needs of teaching/learning context and available solution. The model of Hutchinson for evaluative materials is based on two main principles as language and learning. Each one is related to some factors or features. In the "language" principle questions help us to examine whether the target materials have structural, functional or discourse features and relationship between those functions. In addition, it focuses on explanation of methods and suitability of learning/teaching

situation. The second one “learning”, principle contains some questions related to the objective of the course, the methods and fitness to the content and subject-matter, and the role of learners and teachers. By using this criterion we can find out the role of the teacher whether he/she is a giver of information, an evaluator of correctness, a manager of learning, a further resource or a combination of these. Furthermore, the role of learners is a decision-maker or just a receiver of information.

The Williams Model

D. Williams (1983) in his scheme for evaluating English language teaching learning materials, he suggested four assumptions which includes linguistic, pedagogical, general, and technical. The linguistic and pedagogical assumptions consistent with psychological and linguistic principles by examine textbook presentation, selection and organization of skills. The general assumption includes the methodology of materials, the needs of learners, interests and appropriate guidance for teacher. The technical criteria focus on publishing and editing of the textbook, and availability materials such as workbook, teacher’s book, illustration, tapes and cassette recorder.

Sheldon’s evaluation Checklist

L. E. Sheldon (1988) evaluative checklist attempts to assess/measure all aspects of the content in textbook. The aspects of the content are such as flexibility, authenticity and graphics and other. He suggested that ‘it is clear that textbook assessment is fundamentally a subject, role of thumb activity yardstick’ (p245). Sheldon (1988) presented a checklist that includes two main categories: factual details and factors. Factual details contain the title, author, publisher, price, duration of the course, target learner, teacher, and skills. Factors include rationale, accessibility, layout/graphics, linkage, user definition, selection/grading, physical characteristics, appropriacy, authenticity, cultural bias, educational validity, stimulus/practical revision, flexibility, guidance etc.

From all these existing models and criterions show that there are many established and available to textbook evaluation and that not all the characteristics described here would be present and simultaneously adhered to in each and every textbook. Therefore, it is necessary and useful to cull out relevant aspects and features from above checklists and prepare ‘a new one or modify the existing ones in order to cover all aspects of evaluation.’ (Cunningsworth1995:2). Thus, the researcher has benefited from all the previous models and reviews studies to adapt and build his new checklist for the purpose of evaluating English textbooks.

Following checklist is developed for evaluating English textbooks

General Criteria for Evaluation

- To what extent English textbooks realized with its stated objectives? Is there advice about how to supplement the materials, or to present the lessons in different ways?
- Do the textbooks cater for the development of language skills that would enable them to operate effectively?

- Do the textbooks exploit the learners' prior knowledge and experience and provide opportunities for further development?
- Do the textbooks offer the teachers scope for adaptation and localization?
- Are the textbook materials relevant/suitable/appropriate to the learners' cultural context and sensitive to their values and beliefs?
- Are the textbooks having sufficient practice in all four language skills? If so, is it balanced? If not, which skills are omitted?
- Do the textbooks ensure that students will be able to generate language on their own outside the classroom?
- Is the language presented in the textbooks clear and in an interesting manner?
- Do the textbooks give learners plenty of opportunities to make choice which suit their linguistic level, their preferred learning style, their level of involvement in the text and the time available to them?
- Do the textbooks offer opportunities for cooperative learning, through various pair and group activities and information exchange tasks?
- Are the topics sophisticated enough in content, yet within the learners' language level?
- Do the textbooks cover aspects like teacher, student guidance; instructions, reflection on study techniques, advice on study skills/ reference skills, other?
- Does the textbook material encourage deductive or inductive approach to learning, or a balance of both?
- Is the material culture specific? Are they reasonable, well produced and attractive in all three textbooks?
- Are students encouraged to take some degree of responsibility for their own learning?
- Is there any reflection on study techniques?
- How are the non verbal/ visual items represented in the textbooks?
- Are the learners encouraged to learn in a less stressful atmosphere in the classroom?
- Do the textbooks show parallels and contrasts between the learners' cultures and others?
- Are learners encouraged to use language creatively?
- Is there an integrated skills approach? And to what extent are all four skills catered for?
- Is the learner a decision maker or just a receiver of information?

Checklist for assessing Listening Skills:

- Do the textbooks have sufficient listening activities/tasks?
- Are there any specific listening passages are given in these textbooks?

- Do the textbooks listening passages help the learners to develop their comprehension skills?
- Are the listening passages in the textbooks accompanied by background information, questions and activities?
- Are there any recorded materials for listening?
- Are the cassettes/ CDs for pronunciation practice?
- What kind of listening comprehension questions are asked?

Checklist for assessing Speaking Skills:

- Do the textbooks contain sufficient speaking exercises/activities?
- Is textbooks material for spoken English (dialogues, role-plays, GDs etc) well designed to equip learners for real-life interactions?
- Is there any video and audio material support for developing spoken English?
- Are the textbooks activities balanced between individual response, pair work and group work?
- Do the textbook exercises focus on production?
- Are the activities/tasks in the textbook encouraging learner-learner and teacher-learner interaction?
- Are the speaking tasks and activities creative?
- Are there any information gap activities?
- Do the situations in the dialogue/ conversation sound natural?

Checklist for assessing Reading Skills:

- Are reading texts and associated activities of English textbooks suitable for learners' levels, interests, etc?
- Are learners given sufficient exercises for reading comprehension in all units?
- How authentic are the reading texts?
- How long are the reading texts? Do they encourage intensive/extensive reading?
- Do the exercises in the textbooks promote critical thinking on the text?
- Are the reading texts appropriate (interesting, challenging, contemporary, varied, culturally acceptable,)?
- Does the reading material in the textbooks give adequate examples to preview, skim, and scan, summarize and find the main idea?

- Is there a range of varied and interesting reading texts that engages the learners cognitively and effectively?
- Is there any emphasis on reading for pleasure and for intellectual satisfaction?
- Is the length of the reading texts appropriate in all three textbooks?
- Are the passages too long to hold the students' attention?

Checklist for assessing Writing Skills:

- Are writing activities of English textbooks suitable in terms of amount of guidance/control, degree of accuracy, organization of longer pieces of writing (e.g. paragraphing) and use of appropriate styles?
- How do the textbooks handle controlled writing, guided writing and free or semi-free writing?
- Is there appropriate progression and variety of tasks given in all three textbooks?
- Does the textbook writing material provide a variety of instances for text production?
- Is attention given to the language resources specific to the written form, such as punctuation, spelling, layout, etc?
- Are learners encouraged to review and edit their own written work?
- Is paragraphing taught adequately?
- How much emphasis is there on accuracy?

Checklist for assessing Grammar:

- Is grammar taught explicitly in English textbooks?
- Are the grammar items in the textbooks related to the school level?
- Are the textbook activities and games adequate?
- Do the tasks in the textbooks follow the deductive method or inductive method?
- Does the textbook contain functional grammar items?
- Are new structures presented along with language functions?
- Are there any easy tips mentioned in the textbooks to learn and teach grammar?
- Does the grammar items included in the textbooks correspond to the learners' language needs?
- What grammar items are included?
- Do the textbooks exercises correspond to students' language needs?
- How balanced is the treatment of form and use?

Checklist for assessing Illustrations:

- Are there adequate pictures, charts, graphs to understand the context/topics in English textbooks?
- Do the textbooks have appropriate Illustrations according to the topics/lessons?
- Are the Illustrations, images, cartoons relevant to the text and students level?
- Are the pictures, illustrations appropriately placed?

Checklist for assessing Content Selection and Organization:

- Are the textbook lessons of English are adequate for the age group and level?
- Is the clarity maintained properly in presentation of contents?
- Are the ideas and thoughts coherently organized in all lessons?
- Are the textbook lessons helpful in developing the aesthetic sense among the students?
- How varied are the topics included in the textbooks?
- Do the lessons in the textbooks reflect the values among the students?
- Is the knowledge acquired through textbooks applicable to the learner's daily life?
- Are the lessons effective in developing the creative thinking abilities among the students?
- Are the textbook topics easy to understand, through the support material provided?
- Will the textbooks contribute to expanding learners' awareness and enriching their experience?
- Does each unit in the textbooks follow the same format? If so, is there sufficient variety to maintain student interest? If not, is there sufficient regularity for teacher and students to establish a working pattern?

Checklist for assessing textbook Exercises/Tasks:

- Do the exercises/activities in the textbooks of English communicate ideas effectively?
- Are the activities adequate for the age group and level?
- Do the textbook exercises cover the content of the lessons?
- Are the questions in the activities well framed and graded?
- Do the textbooks have adequate authentic texts?

- Is the information given in the text accurate?
- Do the textbooks exercises encourage learners to guess and predict?
- Are tasks sufficient in the textbooks? Does it allow for free production? / does it involve the students in any way other than just as a mechanical exercise?

Checklist for assessing Vocabulary:

- Is there any principled basis for selection of vocabulary in English textbooks?
- Is there any distinction between active and passive vocabulary, and classroom vocabulary?
- Is vocabulary learning material included in its own right?
- Are the new vocabulary words presented in a variety of ways?

Checklist for assessing Physical Aspects of the Textbook:

- Is the design/layout of English textbooks is attractive to the learner's age level?
- Is the size and volume of the book handy?
- Are the artwork and typefaces functional? Appealing?
- Is the size of the print appropriate?
- Do you find any difficulty in reading the printed material?
- Do the Textbooks illustrations create an interest among the students?
- Is the use of cartoon and photograph at the right level for the learner?
- Are the visuals in the textbooks used as an integral part of teaching or are they essentially decorative?
- Are the pages too dense or unappealing?

Conclusion

In this paper, the discussion on the salient features and characteristics of teaching learning materials and review of existing framework for materials/textbook evaluation were undertaken to derive a framework for evaluating NCERT English textbooks.

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