A Review on Approaches of Evaluating Tertiary Textbooks

Nguyen Van Dat

The Ho Chi Minh City University of Food Industry (HUFI)

ABSTRACT

An important part of the training process is textbook evaluation, which lets students determine whether or not the curriculum satisfies their goals while also helping teachers enhance their professional capacities. The textbook is still the most common type of material utilized in today's foreign language classrooms. It serves as the core of a training program and provides learners with the essential input they require through a wide range of different activities. This article clarified the textbook, coursebook, and materials' roles in ELT classrooms. This article also reviewed three main approaches to coursebook evaluation: Tomlinson's approach (2003), Littlejohn's approach (1998 & 2011), and McGrath's approach (2002). The author also summarized the main criteria for textbook evaluation. The design of future textbooks at tertiary levels is discussed, along with some of the potential directions that could be taken.

Keywords: textbook evaluation, coursebook, English-majored students, material.

1   Introduction

Coursebooks are the "visual heart of any ELT program" and are regarded fundamental materials (Sheldon, 1998). They play many important roles in ELT, including providing a source of learning and teaching activities with systematic and standard knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, as well as a resource for learners' self-study, a syllabus based on predetermined learning objectives, and support for inexperienced teachers (Cunningsworth, 1984). Coursebooks also aid in the standardization of language instruction, the framing of language content, and the provision of language models and practice activities for teachers and students to use in class. However, some cultural and social elements or instructional approaches may not be acceptable for all teaching and learning environments. Despite these challenges, selecting and evaluating a good coursebook for a certain teaching course is always a challenge. It's also significant since the coursebook chosen will influence the teaching and learning process and reflect the educational institution's worth. As a result, analyzing course books should be given equal weight because it aids in identifying the materials' strong and weak areas, allowing future decisions to be made about whether or not to continue utilizing the materials or altering them to better meet learners' requirements and learning objectives. However, in comparison to the predictive evaluation, which is carried out before employing the materials to determine if they are to be picked, relatively few retrospective evaluations have been carried out (Ellis, 1997). When it comes to retrospective evaluation, or evaluating things that have already been used, there are two approaches: impressionistic and empirical evaluations. While the former, which involves observing learners' engagement and passion in activities and book content, is more popular, the latter, which entails collecting data in a more systematic manner, is less common. The necessity of empirical course book evaluations, as well as the scarcity of them, motivates the researcher to conduct a course book. Based on predicted evaluation of the books, the teaching staff selects the book that they believe best fits the course objectives and corresponds to students' needs.

After years of piloting the book, the researcher, who is also a teacher, finds it to be quite engaging for students, with a lot of authentic videos and meaningful tasks; however, it also reveals several issues that

make it difficult to meet students' needs and achieve the ultimate goal of the teaching and learning program. There hasn't been a thorough and systematic review of the course book to date. That is why the researcher wishes to do an empirical evaluation of this book in order to determine the validity of the teachers' predictive evaluations in the English groups of the school and her own personal impressionistic evaluation, as well as the book's suitability for the learners, learning and teaching context and purposes.

2   Textbook, Coursebook and Material

Teaching materials are an essential part of every language-learning program. Researchers have defined this notion in a variety of ways, but they all agree that materials may be anything that helps with language teaching and learning (Littlejohn, 1998; Tomlinson, 1998; McGrath, 2002). Littlejohn (1998) and Tomlinson (2011) looked examined materials in a variety of formats, including student books, workbooks, teacher's guides, videos, CDs, DVDs, lesson plans, and internet activities.

McGrath (2002) on the other hand, gave a wide definition of materials, explaining that they may be "realia" (real objects) or presentations (drawings or photographs). Textbooks, workbooks, computer software, and recordings were all included to the list of items. The textbook is the official material and "the visual core of every ELT program" among various formats (Sheldon, 1998). It is a foundation of study for students and a primary teaching tool for instructors in schools and colleges, and it serves as a basis of study for students and a primary teaching instrument for teachers.

A course book is described as a textbook that teachers and students utilize as the foundation of a course as a form of teaching materials. In other terms, it refers to a book used by students while pursuing a certain course of study. According to the dictionary definition, Ur (1996) and Tomlinson (2011) clarify that course books serve as the main resources for a language-learning course, with a copy for the teacher and each student. Its goal is to deliver as much information as possible in a single volume, and it is the sole book that students utilize during a course. A course book frequently includes exercises on not just language aspects such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, but also reading, writing, listening, and speaking functions and abilities.

It can be seen from the above definitions of "textbook," "course book," and "materials" that text book and course book are both types of materials, and these three terms are interchangeable in ELT teaching and learning.

3   Roles of Materials in ELT Classrooms

Course books are essential in the curriculum, according to (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), as cited in (Kayapinar, 2009), since they establish content and determine coverage for syllabus topics. They serve as a source of learning and teaching activities with systematic and standard knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and other topics, as well as a resource for learners' self-study, a syllabus based on predetermined learning objectives, and help for novice teachers (Cunningsworth, 1995).

Course books can aid in the standardization of language education, the framing of language content, and the provision of language models and practice exercises for teachers and students to use in class (Ur, 1996). Ur expands on the benefits of course books. They, for example, provide available and relevant texts and activities for the majority of students and courses. They are also the most cost-effective and convenient means for instructors and students to obtain teaching and learning resources.

As a result, course books are becoming increasingly popular in colleges, private institutions, and certain public schools. The ready-made syllabi in the ready-made course books are favoured by both school administrators and English teachers. Furthermore, course materials allow students to practice the target language in the classroom before using it in real-life settings.

Course books, on the other hand, as pre-planned instructional resources, may have significant drawbacks. Course books fail to give real-life language models and contextualize language exercises, according to Richards and Rodgers (2001), as cited in (Kayapinar, 2009). They neglect to educate idioms in ordinary language and to address linguistic competence. Course books have a number of drawbacks, including inequity in female representation and a lack of cultural awareness encouraging. As a result, course books are becoming increasingly popular in colleges, private institutions, and certain public schools. The ready-made syllabi in the ready-made course volumes are favoured by both school administrators and English teachers. Furthermore, course books allow students to practice the target language in the classroom before using it in real-life settings.

The following are some of the disadvantages of course books, according to Ur (1996) To begin with, course books are insufficient since each class and learner has unique learning requirements that a course book cannot provide. Second, course books are irrelevant since the things covered in them may or may not be relevant to the class. Boredom and a lack of enthusiasm on the part of the students may result from course books. They also don't account for the wide range of abilities and knowledge seen in most classes. Furthermore, while coursebooks are seen to be a magical tool for language teachers, excessively structured coursebooks have been linked to teacher de-skilling (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994)

In conclusion, on one hand, coursebooks prove to be very advantageous for both school administrations, language teachers and students with available syllabi and already designed texts and tasks which are suitable for a large portion of language learners. On the other hand, coursebooks reveal some limitations such as inadequacy, irrelevance, inauthenticity. That is the reason why any coursebooks should be evaluated to see whether or not they match the school curriculum and learners' needs and interests.

To summarize, coursebooks benefit both school administrations, language teachers, and students by providing readily available syllabi as well as pre-designed texts and assignments that are appropriate for a wide range of language learners. Coursebooks, on the other hand, show flaws such as inadequacy, irrelevance, and inauthenticity. That is why any coursebooks should be assessed to determine if they meet the school curriculum as well as the needs and interests of the students.

4 Coursebook Evaluation

Coursebook evaluation is critical because it identifies the books' strengths and weaknesses and aids in making judgments on whether to change the materials or adopt new ones. It is vital to understand what the assessment process entails in order to undertake a coursebook evaluation. Researchers have offered a variety of definitions of assessment. According to Tomlinson (2011), coursebook evaluation is an attempt to measure the potential value of the coursebooks.

It entails making judgments about the impacts of coursebooks on the agents who use them, such as learners, instructors, and administrators, based on aspects of the books such as credibility, validity, adaptability, and so on. Rea-Dickins (1994) describe coursebook assessment as "the techniques through which we might obtain a better knowledge of what is effective, what is less effective, and what looks to be of little benefit." Asking the right questions and evaluating the responses are key to a successful review (Cunningsworth, 1995).

In summary, coursebook evaluation is the process of collecting data, giving judgement on the effectiveness of books based on the collected data to make precise decisions of effectively using the materials or replacing them.

5   Approaches to Coursebook Evaluation

Material evaluation is "a dynamic process which is basically a subjective, rule-of-thumb activity" where "no neat formula, grid, or system will ever provide a definitive yardstick" (Sheldon, 1998). There are a range of ways and criteria for evaluating coursebooks, which differ depending on the ELT environment. Administrators and instructors should examine the individual teaching and learning situations when selecting the most appropriate criteria for evaluating coursebooks. The following sections outline a variety of approaches to coursebook evaluation, all of which focus on four primary areas: internal content, goals and approaches, supporting sources, and the coursebook's physical appearance.

5.1   Tomlinson's Approach

Tomlinson (2003) proposes a three-stage review process: before usage, during use, and after use. According to Tomlinson (2003), the first step, pre-use evaluation, is "impressionistic, consisting of a teacher scanning through a book to acquire a brief impression of its potential worth." It entails determining the potential worth of items for their intended consumers, which may include a rapid scan of a book's physical look and content pages to gauge its potential value. The second step, in-use assessment, is assessing materials while they are being used. Although, according to Tomlinson (2003), this stage includes problematic concerns regarding what exactly may be assessed, it can be more trustworthy than pre-use assessment since it involves a deeper review of the content of materials and makes use of classroom observation and input from users. Some of the criteria (e.g., task credibility, success of performance targets, motivating power of materials, etc.) appear to be broad, while others (e.g., task credibility, achievement of performance objectives, motivating power of materials, etc.) appear to be difficult to quantify. He does, however, suggest that these criteria "may be approximated during an open-ended, impressionistic observation of materials in use," but that focusing on one criterion at a time will provide higher dependability. They may be quantified in a variety of ways. For example, he proposes 'noting such factors as student eye attention, closeness to the materials, duration on work, and face movement' to assess the items' motivational impact (Tomlinson, 2003). Most evaluators seek answers to questions like these during the last step of this technique, post-use evaluation:

What effect does the coursebook have on students?
What effect does it have on teachers?
What effect does it have on administrators?

This step, according to Tomlinson (2003), is perhaps the most important in the assessment process since it entails assessing the materials' effects on users after the coursebook has been used. Additionally, as Cunningsworth (1995) points out, post-use evaluation is helpful in determining whether or not to utilize a coursebook in the future.

5.2   Littlejohn's Approach

Littlejohn proposes a different method of appraising coursebooks (1998 & 2011). He proposed a three-level evaluation checklist that included the following questions:
(1) What is there? (2) What is required of users? (3) What is implied? Questions regarding the physical qualities of the coursebook are asked at the first level. These cover publication date, intended audience, physical aspects (number of pages, paper quality, artwork, etc.), and are similar to the ones in Tomlinson (2003). At second level, it focuses on the language learning activities and assignments in the coursebook to see what teachers and students should do with them. It delves a little deeper into an examination of the most crucial component of coursebooks. The coursebook's strategy, philosophy, and goals are discussed at

the third level. Littlejohn explains that his rating levels progress from more objective to less objective criteria. The first level is the most objective, while the third is the least objective.

5.3   McGrath's Approach

McGrath (2002) proposes a third way to coursebook assessment. In a two-stage method of systematic materials evaluation, he highlights the areas that need to be evaluated. They're called 'first-look' and 'in-depth' evaluations, respectively. Each level consists of a set of evaluation criteria for the coursebook. There are four phases to the 'initial glance' assessment. According to McGrath (2002), the in-depth evaluation tends to address the following points:

- The aims and content of the book
- What they require learners to do
- What they require the teacher to do
- Their function as a classroom resource
- Learner needs and interests
- Learner approaches to language learning
- The teaching-learning approach in the teacher's own classroom

6   Criteria for Coursebook Evaluation

6.1   Criteria Proposed by Hutchinson and Water

Hutchinson and Water (1987) provided a material assessment checklist that included factors such as audience, aim, content, methodology, price, and availability, as well as items linked to subjective and objective examination of the book.

Audience: This part of the checklist consists of some questions related to information about the learners such as their age, sex, nationalities, study or work specialism, language background and interests.

Aim: Evaluators need to consider if the aims and objectives of the coursebook match those of the course/ school program.

Content: The questions involving the language description, language point, macro-skill and their proportion, micro-skill, types, subject matter areas, topics, organization through the course, organization within the course unit, content sequence are covered in this part.

Methodology: In this part, the checklist investigates methodology including questions about the theory of learning, the attitudes or the expectation of the learners about learning, exercises and tasks, teaching and learning techniques used, teaching aids, teaching guidance needed and the flexibility of the material in different teaching situations.

6.2   Criteria Suggested by Cunningsworth

Cunningsworth (1995) proposed a number of criteria to consider the materials, which was presented as a basic quick-reference checklist for evaluation and selection, including: aims and approaches, design and organization, language content, skills, topic, methodology, teacher's books and practical considerations.

Aims and approaches: Evaluators should take into consideration the suitability of the aims of the coursebook with the aims of the teaching program and the needs of the learners as well as the suitability of the book with the learning/ teaching situation and styles.

Design and organization: The components of the book package, the organization of the content, the recycling and revision included in the coursebook are concerned in this criterion.

Language content: The language components such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation are considered carefully through detailed questions in Ellis' checklist.

Skills: The questions involved four skills are to be investigated in this set of criteria with regard to the adequacy, authenticity, integrity and suitability of the skills in the coursebook with students' level.

Topic: Evaluators need to consider whether the coursebook provides students with enough variety and range of topics of genuine interest to learners; whether the topics equally address men and women as well as other groups of various ethnic origin, occupation, disability; whether the social and cultural values are conveyed in the range of topics in the book.

Methodology: Approaches to language learning presented in the coursebook, the language presenting/ practicing techniques, the method to teach different skills and the guideline to students' self-study are taken into account in this set of criteria.

Teachers' books: The guidance, supporting materials and the answer key that the book provides for teachers as well as the teaching techniques, language items and cultural content that they cover are to be evaluated.

Last but not least, the *practical considerations* which involves the price, the duration, the appearance of the book and the equipment it requires are also considered.

In summary, the criteria set by both established material evaluators like Hutchinson and Water (1987), Cunningsworth (1984) for an in-depth and objective analysis of teaching materials. They share some core factors and the criteria listed in them may not always be effective in a specific context. Therefore, it is necessary to prepare "a new one or modify the existing ones in order to cover all aspects of evaluation" (Cunningsworth, 1995).

7   Conclusion

This article has been carried out to evaluate the coursebook, which is used for teachers and students in colleges and universities, to determine whether it meets the requirements of the course in terms of the objectives, students' needs, and methodology. With the importance of the training process to measure the training quality, some of the above approaches and criteria for textbook evaluation are proposed. Hopefully, this article contributed to an insight into constructive adaptations of the coursebook, so that the teaching and learning will be improved.

References

Cunningsworth, A. (1984). *Evaluation and Selecting EFL Teaching materials.* London: Heinemann Educational Books.

Cunningsworth, A. (1995). *Choosing Your Course Book.* Oxford: Macmillian Heinemann.

Ellis, R. (1997). The Empirical Evaluation of Language Teaching Materials. *ELT Journal, 51*(3), 36-42.

Hutchinson, T., & Torres, E. (1994). The Textbook as Agent of Change. *EL T Journal, 84*(4), 315-328.

Hutchinson, T., & Water, A. (1987). *English for Specific Purposes.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kayapinar, U. (2009). Coursebook Evaluation by English Teachers. *Inonu University Journal of The Faculty of Education, 10 (1)*, 69-78.

Littlejohn, A. (1998). The Analysis of Language Teaching Materials: inside the Trojan Horse . In B. Tomlinson, *Materials Development in Language Teaching* (pp. 197-211). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

McGrath, I. (2002). *Materials Evaluation and Design for Language Teaching.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Rea-Dickins, P. (1994). Evaluation and English language teaching. *Language Teaching, 27*(2), 71-91.

Richards, J., & Rodgers, T. (2001). *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Sheldon, L. (1998). Evaluating ELT textbooks and materials. *ELT (42) 4*, 237-246.

Tomlinson, B. (1998). *Materials Development in Language Teaching.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tomlinson, B. (2003). *Developing Matrials for Language Teaching.* London: Continuum.

Tomlinson, B. (2011). *Materials Development in Language Teaching.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ur, P. (1996). *A Course in Language Teaching.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.