



Tips for Teachers

Developing Criteria for Textbook Evaluation

Ruth M. H. Wong, The Hong Kong Institute of Education

Despite its central role in most language courses, textbook selection and evaluation is often given little time or attention. Sometimes, busy teachers and program coordinators resort to a cursory examination of books, looking particularly to replicate a desired quality or avoid a problematic feature of their current text. In other situations, decision makers put off textbook replacement because they do not have an effective means of looking at the strengths and weakness of new books. In cases where several teachers must agree upon and use the same textbook, the selection process can be tedious and even contentious. Too often, flaws in newly adopted texts are not noticed until it is too late. Developing or adapting an evaluation checklist can help teachers objectively examine, evaluate, and select new textbooks.

An evaluation checklist can help ensure that we examine textbooks from several angles. Since a textbook often provides a framework or serves as a syllabus for a course, it is imperative that the content match the underlying approach and needs of the program in which it will be used. In a language class, linguistic content may come to mind first, but today, cultural and real world content are often equally important. Good textbooks must also provide support for teachers and clear guidance for students. Finally, there are practical concerns that play a role in textbook evaluation and selection. The evaluation form presented in Table 1 takes into account these four perspectives—linguistic and other content, learner needs, teacher support, and practical considerations. The specific questions displayed in Table 1 constitute a synthesis of points that I have gleaned from a number of sources and adapted for the program where I teach. However, they can readily be revised to fit the needs of other programs or settings.

Table 1
Textbook Evaluation Checklist

Check the appropriate box to show your rating for each question					
Linguistic Content	Rating				
	<Poor -----Excellent>				
		1	2	3	4
Are grammar items appropriate for the target level?					
Is the range of vocabulary wide and useful enough?					
Are the four skills adequately covered?					
Are the reading passages sufficient?					
Are the listening materials of good quality?					
Are the listening materials as authentic as possible?					
Are the listening tasks realistic?					
Are the speaking activities realistic?					
Are the writing tasks realistic?					
Can communicative abilities be developed?					
Does the textbook address differences between L1 and L2?					
Is the length of the text appropriate for learners' language level?					
Are different styles and registers of English provided?					
Are examples and texts generally well written?					
Are there activities designed for integrating language skills?					
Is there a glossary?					
Are there appendices or reference sections for grammar information?					
Total: _____					

Other Content	Rating <Poor -----Excellent>				
	0	1	2	3	4
Does the textbook support the aims and objectives of the program?					
Does the textbook match any external syllabus requirements?					
Does the textbook provide review of previously learned topics?					
Is the organization of topics clear?					
Does the textbook provide learners with opportunities for individual practice?					
Does the textbook provide learners with opportunities to communicate with each other?					
Are new points of learning presented in an interesting way?					
Will the topics interest students?					
Is there sufficient variety in topics?					
Do the topics expand learners' awareness and enrich their experience?					
Are topics adequately supported or explained?					
Are women and men portrayed equally?					
Can the supplementary materials be tailored to the needs of particular classes or students?					
Does the content relate to the learners' culture, background, and environment?					
Is there a good mixture of text and graphic information on most pages?					
Are there sections for revision or review?					
Total: _____					

Learner Concerns	Rating				
	<Poor -----Excellent>				
	0	1	2	3	4
Does the textbook fit target learners' needs?					
Will learners perceive the textbook as interesting, useful, and relevant?					
Does the textbook accommodate different learning styles?					
Will the activities give learners a sense of achievement and success?					
Does the textbook provide learners with advice on study skills and learning strategies?					
Are there references, websites, and additional resources for students to try on their own?					
Does the textbook promote learner autonomy?					
Total: _____					

Teacher Concerns	Rating				
	<Poor -----Excellent>				
	0	1	2	3	4
Does the suggested teaching and learning approach suit the learning/teaching situation?					
Is the textbook flexible enough to accommodate teachers with different teaching styles?					
Is the teacher's manual comprehensive?					
Does the teacher's manual include teaching suggestions?					
Does the textbook provide and support basic principles underlying the materials?					
Is an answer key provided?					
Is the teaching sequence appropriate?					
Total: _____					

Practical Concerns	Rating				
	<Poor -----Excellent>				
	0	1	2	3	4
Is the textbook affordable?					
Is the textbook easy for students to carry?					
Is the textbook attractive?					
Is the textbook durable?					
Is the textbook easy on the eyes?					
Total: _____					

To put the checklist from Table 1 into use, follow these steps:

1. Conduct a needs analysis for learners and teachers.
2. Amend the checklist to fit your program.
3. Evaluate the textbooks using the checklist.
4. Tally the points in each category given by individual teachers and enter them into Table 2.
5. Hold a meeting with teachers to discuss the results and make the final decision.

Table 2

Comparing Different Textbooks

	Textbook A	Textbook B	Textbook C	Textbook D
Linguistic content				
Other content				
Learner concerns				
Teacher concerns				
Practical concerns				
Total				

I hope that this checklist, and the suggested 5-step process that accompanies it, can save readers and their colleagues time and energy when they select their next textbook. Readers may also find the checklists in these two sources useful:

Cunningsworth, A. (1995). *Choosing Your Coursebook*. Heinemann. gives a “quick-reference checklist” which contains some of the most important general criteria for evaluation and selection purposes, including aims and approaches, design and organization, language content, skills, topic, methodology and teacher's book.

Hutchinson, T. (1987). *English for Specific Purposes: A Learning-Centered Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. This volume may be somewhat dated, but it provides teachers with an analytical chart to evaluate the audience, aims, content, and methodology of a textbook from both a subjective and objective perspective.

About the Author

Dr. Ruth Ming Har Wong is a senior teaching fellow in the Department of English at the Hong Kong Institute of Education. She has been teaching ESL learners of different age groups since 1993 and has published teaching resource books on language arts. Her research interests include second language teaching and learning, sociolinguistics, language arts, and learning motivation.