Evaluating Classroom Teaching Materials

The Institute for Cross-Cultural Training

With thousands of textbooks on the market, and dozens of publishers vying for your business, the selection of appropriate classroom materials is far from a simple process. To help you make well-informed decisions, we first address some widely held myths about EFL/ESL textbooks and then discuss three key steps to guide your evaluation of materials and selection of the most appropriate textbooks for your instructional needs.

***Myths About EFL/ESL Textbooks***

Those new to the field of ESL/EFL teaching often subscribe to at least one of the three common myths about classroom textbooks. We offer a counterpoint to each one.

### Myth # 1: The textbook is the course

Although many excellent textbooks are available, there is no perfect textbook that can meet all the teaching-learning needs that will arise in your particular situation. The most appropriate course content is often developed by using an eclectic approach which pulls the most useful ideas and activities from a variety of resources, including one or more ESL/EFL textbooks. The textbook, then, is only one of several sources you draw on to encourage your students to learn.

### Myth # 2: The textbook should be taught in its entirety with nothing added or deleted

It is seldom the wisest decision to teach the entire textbook without making additions or deletions. The time frame of a course may not allow sufficient teaching hours to deal adequately with each lesson in the text, or the content of individual lessons may be unsuitable for your students’ needs or proficiency level. Only you, as the classroom teacher, can determine which parts of a text are appropriate and useful for your learners. Good advice to new teachers comes in the form of an adage: The best textbook is not the one you adopt but the one you adapt.

### Myth # 3: If the title of the book contains the word communicative, you can trust that it is

The word communicative, unfortunately, has become an overused buzzword in the EFL/ESL community, and many of the textbooks claiming this orientation do not live up to their billing. Keep in mind that a truly communicative text fosters the use of English for real-life tasks. Through activities such as pair work and small group work, it provides students with opportunities to use their new language in a controlled setting (e.g., classroom) before using it out of class. It also focuses on overall fluency (i.e., smoothness or "flow") as well as the accuracy of grammatical forms. Finally, a communicative textbook encourages the use of authentic everyday language instead of "textbook" language that may be stilted and unrealistic.

**Textbook Evaluation and Selection**

To make an informed decision about textbook selection, you should know some information about your students

To make an informed decision about textbook selection, you should know some information about your students’ needs, your instructional objectives, and your personal teaching preferences. We list a number of questions to guide you through this assessment process. Although you may not be able to find a satisfactory answer for each question, the answers you do find—as well as the additional information you gather in the process—will be of considerable benefit in evaluating and selecting materials appropriate for your teaching situation.

### 1. Know your students’ needs

An invaluable first step in the selection of materials is to gather information about your students’ language learning needs and preferences. Although you may want to collect a much wider range of information, we suggest that you begin with these four categories: (1) language background, (2) proficiency level, (3) goals, and (4) preferred approaches to learning.

**Language background: previous experiences with their native language and with English**

* What are your students’ native languages?
* Can they read and write in their native language?
* In what settings have they studied English (e.g., classroom, tutoring, self-study)?

**Proficiency level in English**

* Are they beginners, or do they already know some English?
* Are all students at the same level?
* Are they stronger in some skills (e.g., reading and writing) and weaker in others (e.g., listening and speaking)?

**Learning goals**

* Do they need English for reading and writing purposes, or will they use the language mostly for listening and speaking?
* If they require oral communication skills, with whom will they speak English? For example, will they use the language with other non-native English speakers, or will they use it with business executives whose native language is English?
* What tasks do they want to accomplish in English? For example, will they need the language to sell products to speakers of English, or will they need it in order to understand lectures in English?

**Preferred approaches to learning**

* How do they learn most easily? What is their primary orientation—visual, auditory, kinesthetic, etc.? Do they favor analytical or global learning?
* Are they accustomed to a more traditional, teacher-centered classroom in which most interaction is between teacher and student (not student to student), or are they more comfortable in a learner-centered classroom in which students interact with one another in pairs and small groups?
* Do they like language learning activities in which they have an opportunity to communicate freely even though they may make mistakes, or do they prefer the study of grammar and an emphasis on accuracy of speech and writing?

The answers to these questions will provide one type of information essential for choosing materials that are suitable for your particular students. For example, if you are a new teacher in a country where much of your students’ previous instruction involved rote memorization of facts, you may not want to begin your teaching with a textbook that is strongly communicative or one that has little emphasis on grammar and accuracy. Frequently, a more communicative textbook will be better received after you have gained your students’ trust, and after you have employed activities such as pair work and role play gradually over time.

### 2. Know your instructional objectives

Taking the time to clearly define your objectives—or to understand the list of objectives provided by the institution in which you teach—will greatly limit the scope of your search for the right textbooks. To do this, you should ask questions such as this:

*Given my students’ language background, proficiency level, learning goals, and preferred approaches to learning, what can I realistically expect them to be able to do as a result of my English instruction?*

Then move from their needs to teaching objectives:

*Make a list of general objectives (e.g., speak outside of class with native-English speakers) and for each, try to list two or three specific objectives (e.g., discuss everyday topics such as foods and clothing).*

With a list of objectives in hand, you can narrow your textbook selection considerably. You do this by matching your objectives with the proficiency level, content focus, and activity types of a number of potential choices. You may find, for example, that your preferred text should have a heavy emphasis on grammar. Or, you may discover that it should focus entirely on oral communication skills, including pronunciation, but have little or no emphasis on grammar.

### 3. Know your personal teaching preferences

The third step in the selection process is the assessment of your own teaching style and teaching preferences. To help you to think about the teaching-learning environment that is most ideal for you, as well as your expectations of a textbook, you can begin with questions such as these:

**Classroom environment: roles of teacher and students**

What teacher role(s) suit your personality and teaching style? Do you prefer the role of director (one who carefully guides students in their learning exercises and activities, usually having them interact more with you than with each other), the role of facilitator (one who organizes and monitors pair work and small group work), or some combination of these roles?

**The "fit" between teaching style and textbook choice**

How dependent are you on the textbook content for planning your lessons? For example, do you prefer to stick to the textbook, using it as your basic syllabus? Or, do you like to vary your approach based on the content of the lesson?
Are you good at adapting materials and/or creating supplemental activities?

As you examine a range of textbooks, you should look for those that accentuate your strengths while also encouraging you to develop skills in new areas. For example, if you have not taught ESL/EFL before, you may prefer to begin with a text that is more teacher-centered, allowing you to be more in control of instructional activities. Then, as you get to know your students and feel more comfortable in the classroom, you may want to adapt some of the book’s activities for small group work, thus creating a more learner-centered environment.

**Summary: Three Key Questions**

By carefully evaluating a number of textbooks in light of what you know about your students’ needs, your instructional objectives, and yourself as a teacher, you will be better equipped to choose the best materials for your teaching-learning situation. For each of these three areas, we have given you a set of questions to guide your selection process. However, each set can be summarized by a single key question to ask about the textbook(s) you are considering.

* How appropriate is the book for my students’ language learning needs?
* To what extent does the book focus on my instructional objectives?
* What skills do I need in order to use the book most effectively?

**Challenges in an EFL Context**

Teachers looking for materials appropriate for EFL learners are likely to encounter two challenges not shared by their ESL colleagues: the availability of textbooks and the suitability of content. First, many of the materials readily available in the United States and the United Kingdom are difficult to obtain in other parts of the world. Second, some of the available textbooks may be unsuitable in an EFL context because they focus only on the language and situations of learners living in an area where English is widely spoken (e.g., vocabulary and phrases used for shopping in an American supermarket). ESL materials such as these may be inappropriate for overseas learners who have little interest in the topics presented and no opportunity to use similar language outside the classroom.

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