

# Literature Review of ELT Textbook Evaluation<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Textbooks have a fundamental role in English Language Teaching (ELT) classes; they can provide valid, valuable, and self-regulated sources for both learners and teachers. ELT textbook evaluation is essential for language learning and teaching. Accordingly, evaluating and assessing textbooks has a crucial role in confirming if they satisfy the needs of students, teachers, administrators, textbook publishers, and curriculum developers. In this regard, this article elaborates on textbook evaluation, then briefly overviews the various approaches toward evaluating ELT textbooks and material from the perspective of McDonough et al. (2013), Richards (2014), and Tomlinson (2013). Additionally, this article introduces criteria for material evaluation and it demonstrates how criteria can be established for evaluating English language textbooks.

## Resumen

Los libros de texto tienen un papel fundamental en las clases de enseñanza del idioma inglés (ELT); pueden proporcionar fuentes válidas, valiosas y autorreguladas tanto para los alumnos como para los profesores. La evaluación de libros de texto de ELT es esencial para el aprendizaje y la enseñanza de idiomas. En consecuencia, evaluar y evaluar los libros de texto tiene un papel crucial para confirmar si satisfacen las necesidades de los estudiantes, maestros, administradores, editores de libros de texto y desarrolladores de planes de estudio. En este sentido, este artículo profundiza en la evaluación de libros de texto, luego analiza brevemente los diversos enfoques para evaluar los libros de texto y el material de ELT desde la perspectiva de McDonough et al. (2013), Richards (2014) y Tomlinson (2013). Además, este artículo presenta criterios para la evaluación de materiales y demuestra cómo se pueden establecer criterios para evaluar libros de texto en inglés.

## Introduction

Textbooks are of utmost importance in the educational field (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994; Sheldon, 1988). Cunningsworth (1995) stated that textbooks can be practical since textbooks can provide sources for self-directed learning. Furthermore, they can be a basis of thinking and tasks, a valid reference for students, and a syllabus that reveals programmed language purposes and supports novice teachers. Moreover, schools and national exams must be constructed based on textbooks, so they are central to the courses and the syllabus (Harwood, 2016). Thus, evaluating the textbooks that are accessible in the market all over the world is a vital process. Many scholars believe that textbook evaluation can support teachers and give them valuable, precise, organized, and contextual perceptions into the fundamental nature of textbooks (Cunningsworth, 1995; Ellis, 1997; Litz, 2005; Richards, 2014). It should be mentioned that textbooks are developed based on not only the teacher's needs but also the student's needs (Garinger, 2002). Consequently, it is significant for educators to balance their materials while providing goal-based training (Garinger, 2002). Therefore, textbooks should be selected cautiously and thoughtfully since they should reflect learners' and teachers' needs and goals (Cunningsworth, 1995).

Richards (2014) mentions different types of materials based on readers' needs which include "textbooks for international markets, specific age groups, specific skills, specific purposes, exam preparation, reference, self-study, and readers" (p. 20). Having a wide range of materials to select from increases the ability to meet the needs and goals of students and teachers. Moreover, textbooks not only ought to boost the students' interest but also allow them to review the earlier units. They should also provide details about novel content of all lessons and clarify the objectives of each lesson and all lessons. Also, they should include learning strategies with accompanying tasks. Finally, they should indicate the progress of students by providing assessment and feedback tasks.

Consequently, it is clear that reviewing the literature on textbook evaluation can provide many benefits since they come from a wide variety of resources such as material developers, book publishers, administrators, teachers, and students and so on. There are many studies and reviews of the literature on textbook evaluation and development (see Ellis, 1997; Işık, 2018; McDonough et. al., 2013; Richards, 2014;

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Tomlinson, 2013). In this paper, the author has reviewed various types of textbook evaluations and considered the different criteria they represent (Ellis, 1997; Işık, 2018).

#### English Language Teaching (ELT) Textbooks

All over the world, teachers use various terminologies to refer to textbooks referring to them as recipes, compasses, and springboards (McGrath, 2013). However, Tomlinson (2001) defines materials as "anything which can be used to facilitate the learning of a language" (p. 66). Therefore, textbooks are content resources and sometimes supplementary material for teachers and a means of self-study for learners. Accordingly, Tomlinson assumed that textbooks can be accessible for both learners and teachers in different forms, for instance, in print, auditory or visual on video tape, CD-ROM, DVD or a website.

Textbooks are useful because of their precise selection and organization of content, the design of images, and linguistics codes. Moreover, Richards (1993) stated that textbooks are the basis for curriculum in most countries. Most of the teachers around the world not only use textbooks, and see them as primary resources in the class, but also many teachers only feel comfortable when entering a class with a textbook (Canale, 2016). According to Tomlinson (2001), the utilization of a wide range of books and supplementary materials provides teachers with the ability to teach English worldwide.

Tomlinson (2001) views textbooks from two different points of view, proponents and opponents of textbooks. The advocates of textbooks suppose that textbooks are a convenience for both teachers and learners; moreover, they have continuity in content because they have a system, cohesion, and movement. On the other hand, the adversaries of textbooks believe that textbooks are artificial, and they cannot cover all language points. They also cannot predict learners' needs and tend to emphasize the teacher instead of the learners.

Another factor to consider about textbooks is, as Crawford (2002) stated, that a teacher's decision not to resort to a textbook may be dictatorial as it bestows all control into the hands of the teacher, not the learner. It is not deniable that publishers and authors' personal beliefs can be found in textbooks as well. It is noticeable that English language textbooks have reflected the imperialism that has supported one language, one belief, and one culture that teaches how to speak and what type of social factors and customs are to be the norms and are considered more valuable (Copley, 2017).

As the neoliberal era started to take shape, certain global ELT features such as innovation, contextualization, acculturation, flexibility, multi-tasking, risk management, personal achievement, and self-entrepreneur has been constructed. (Gray, 2010). ELT textbooks are considered to be communicative tools and a standard package to promote a comprehensive ideological worldview. In contrast to other viewpoints, for neoliberalism a textbook is communicative material with varying values and assumptions. As the most recent viewpoints on textbooks, neoliberalism, and empiricism express that a textbook should be accepted and constantly developed to achieve specific teaching and learning goals (Copley, 2017; Gray, 2010).

Regarding the literature defining a textbook, it can be concluded that textbooks are crucial in the field of teaching and learning English. However, there arises another point which how to choose a good textbook. According to Hutchinson and Torres (1994) textbook evaluation should be administered constantly to judge whether the textbook meets the needs of the curriculum language program, and of the learners. Methods of textbook evaluation will be investigated in detail in the following section.

#### Methods of Textbook Evaluation

Like any other issue in the field of education, scholars have approached textbooks evaluation differently (Carter & Nunan, 2001; Harmer, 2010; Lynch, 1996) probably because of their theoretical stance, and the way they look at L2 learning and teaching (Gray, 2010). Textbook evaluation can refer to evaluation of a variety of materials used in teaching and learning processes such as videos, DVDs, books, etc. Lynch (1996) expresses that evaluation is a systematic way to collect evidence by which judgments or decisions can be made. Carter and Nunan (2001) believe that textbook evaluation is the procedure of assessing materials that may under consideration and which is called predictive evaluation. Another type of evaluation which is carried out while using the textbooks is termed ongoing evaluation. Additionally, textbooks evaluation can occur after use, which is referred post-use or retrospective evaluation.

In the evaluations of textbooks research can be carried out at six different stages (Richards, 2014). The following evaluations can be called post-evaluation and can help teachers to decide to continue utilizing the book or not.

1. Observing different classrooms to see how teachers are using the textbooks and what the effects of the textbooks on the quality of teaching and learning are.
2. Making a record of what teachers used or did not use in the class, if they prepared any supplementary materials to teach the topics, and if so, why they did so.
3. Having meetings with the teachers who are using the books and asking them to share their ideas on the book.
4. Preparing feedback forms for teachers to reflect on the activities of the book as they are teaching in the class. For example, teachers can write short notes on each activity and explain why or why not the activity was or not.
5. Asking teachers to work in pairs, groups, or individually, to analyze the book, and mention why they liked the book or not.
6. Asking students to write about their experiences about the book.

McDonough et al. (2013) mentioned that the need for textbook evaluation is more pronounced these days because there are a vast number of textbooks available in the market, and one should choose the best book according to the students' needs. If a textbook is not evaluated appropriately, it can demotivate both students and teachers and waste time and funds. According to the researchers, there are many ways to evaluate textbooks (Ellis, 1997; McDonough et al., 2013). For instance, one way can be to review the book in evaluation section in journals like *ELT Journal* or *RELC* (Ellis, 1997); or teachers can evaluate the textbook that they are going to use in their classes using one of many checklists and principles presented to help them to evaluate textbook (Ellis, 1997). Still, no textbook is perfect and there is no agreed set of standards for evaluating them.

To this end, McDonough et al. (2013) developed three types of evaluation frameworks: External, Internal, and Overall Evaluation. External evaluation deals with the textbook from the outward point of view, like analyzing the blurb on the book cover page, the table of contents, and the introduction. The external evaluation is further completed by an internal evaluation that includes in-depth evaluation and exploration of at least two or more textbook units. Based on these units, evaluators can check the arrangement or demonstration of the skills as well as the grading and sequencing of the textbook. The choice of context and materials for reading and listening tasks (authenticity and relevance) are the other criteria that should be considered in that units during internal evaluation. Additionally, speaking tasks ought to provide real life interaction. Finally, the evaluation needs to be considered if units' tasks are engaging and motivating for the students. Overall evaluation, on the other hand, deals with the selection of materials for a text. For this type of evaluation, the usability factor (the corporation of the book into a specific syllabus), the generalizability factor (most of the tasks must be appropriate for most of the learners), the adaptability factor (the possibility of adding/excluding/utilizing of the tasks in various contexts), and the flexibility factor (the possibility of utilizing the tasks at different points) are taken into consideration (McDonough et al., 2013).

Alternatively, Richards (2014) believes that evaluation of the textbook can take place in two stages: the first one is description or analysis, and the next one is interpretation or evaluation. During the first stage, the content of the book needs to be described entirely before using the book. The information obtained from the first stage should be easy to detect from the cover of the textbooks. In this stage, the way the book is organized, the syllabus, sequences and gradation plan of the book, and the sorts of texts and tasks it covers should be analyzed. In the end, the evaluator describes the information obtained in the analysis stage. In the next stage, the evaluator may consider many factors in his interpretation, such as student's and teacher's needs, methodological requirement, curriculum requirements, and personal perspectives (Richards, 2014). This stage basically involves a critical analysis of the textbooks based on teachers' and students' needs on all general and specific subjects, teaching-learning processes, and if the tasks are

consistent and sustainable. This stage is a subjective judgment because these checklists are developed based on evaluator ideas.

Tomlinson (2013) mentions that textbook "evaluations differ, for example, in purpose, in personnel, in formality and in timing" (p. 30). He introduces three types of textbook evaluations, namely, pre-use, whilst-use, and post-use evaluation. Pre-use evaluation implicates predictions about the textbook, for example, writing a review of the book (context-free evaluation), writing a review for a publisher (context-influenced), and selecting a book for a specific text (context-dependent). A pre-use evaluation is "impressionistic and consists of a teacher flicking through a book to gain a quick impression of its potential value" (p. 31). The next one is whilst-use evaluation; whilst-use evaluation must happen while using textbooks. Tomlinson believes that whilst-use evaluation can be unbiased and trustworthy because it qualifies what is visible like simplicity of instruction and layout, understandability of the texts in listening and reading texts, integrity and practicability of the tasks, and so on. However, it cannot consider the mind of learners. Unlike pre- and whilst-use evaluation, post-use evaluation can evaluate the effect of the textbook on the learners since it happens after teaching or assessing textbooks thoroughly. Post-use evaluation can also measure learners' "motivation, impact, achievability, instant learning, and durable learning and application" (p. 33). However, conducting post-use evaluation has its own problems and difficulties. It is quite time-consuming, and requires expertise.

In this regard, Ellis (1997) proposed two book evaluations designs, predictive and retrospective. The first one is based on the purpose of the materials; predicative textbook evaluation must be applied before they are used in an educational context to define if it is based on learners' needs. On the other hand, retrospective design explores textbooks while or after using them. Retrospective design proposes that by exploring specific teaching activates, teacher can conduct empirical evaluations; it can be said that retrospective design can be called impressionistic or empirical because of collecting information that should be systematical. Moreover, a retrospective evaluation can test and confirm predictive evaluation. However, these methods of textbooks evaluation put the main emphasis on the stages of textbooks evaluation, and they have not provided predefined sets of criteria to evaluate them.

#### Criteria of Materials Evaluation

In order to evaluate English language textbooks, some criteria should be developed. According to Williams (1983), the evaluative criteria relies on four assumptions. The first one is up-to-date methodology; the textbook's psychological and linguistic principles should be accepted methods of language teaching. The next is that materials must provide guidance to teachers. Third, the appropriate textbook should consider learners' needs for second language. And the last assumption is that the textbook must be relevant to the socio-cultural environment of the specific second language learners.

To evaluate textbooks effectively, Tomlinson (2013) mentioned these criteria. The first is that the evaluators should brainstorm on the universal criteria that could be utilized. These criteria could originate from principles of language learning. After developing criteria for evaluation, the evaluators should subdivide them. This subdivision is based on the purpose of the evaluation, which could be for revision only or adaptation of the materials for a specific text. The next step would be checking and reviewing the list of general principles. To do so, the evaluator should consider each question in the evaluation list and consider if they concern the purpose of the evaluation, if each question regards only one aspect, if each question is answerable and free of dogma, and finally, if the questions are interpreted the same by different evaluators.

Afterwards, the list of criteria should be categorized. Tomlinson (2013) states that possible categories for universal criteria can be education criteria, ethnic and social perception, theme and content, instruction topics, texts, tasks, classroom procedure, guidelines, lesson plan and blueprint. The next step is to develop media-specific criteria, such as video, digital, and Web resources, which can evaluate the medium utilized by the textbook. Then, the evaluator should create criteria related to the contents and topics covered in the textbook. The aptness of the materials in the textbook for the respective age group should also be taken into consideration during this process. Besides age-related criteria, the suitability of the materials for the specific environment and culture that the textbook is being used should be evaluated.

At this stage, the evaluators can add some other criteria. Government, administrators, school administrators, and general policy have a significant role in evaluating textbooks. Moreover, the role of first language and

gender cannot be denied in providing criteria for textbook evaluation (Tomlinson, 2013). After that, the developed criteria should be tested to check their sufficiency, reliability, and usefulness. After examining the criteria, an evaluation can be conducted. To conduct the evaluation, it is suggested to have more than one evaluator, answer each question in the checklist separately, evaluate the whole lesson first, then move on to the tasks, score each criterion, comment on each category, and finally, evaluators write a joint report on the evaluation.

#### Main Evaluation Checklist Components

Numerous researchers (e.g., Harmer, 2010; Sheldon, 1988; McDonough et al., 2013) have offered different ways of textbook evaluation. They have proposed a variety of checklists that can be completed or questions to be answered; however, these have both advantages and disadvantages. For example, Williams (1983) and Sheldon (1988) did not consider teacher knowledge; likewise, Williams' checklist did not have guidelines as to how to analyze the scores. In general, most of checklists have theoretical biases. For instance, Tucker's (1975) focused on the appropriateness of pattern practice, Williams' (1983) sought to discover if textbook was constructed on the contrastive analysis of English and first language sound system and Ur's (1996) paid attention to grammar practices. While Skierso's (1991) textbook checklist is assumed to be the most comprehensive, it is not practical due to its length. Therefore, it is difficult to refer to globalized checklists. In this regard, McDonough and Shaw (2013) indicate that there are no specific criteria in textbook evaluation, and textbook criteria often are different based on conditions and contexts. Therefore, textbook evaluators should consider a wide range of factors in developing a textbook evaluation checklist.

According to McDonough et al. (2013), a textbook evaluation checklist must contain three broad components: setting, syllabus, and learners' needs. The first significant factor, setting, is related to the place of English in the country and the attitude of educational administrators, schools, and teachers toward English language teaching. Also, it may be associated with institute policy, facilities, staff attitude, the number of learners, the social and ethical situation, the nature of the tests, and procedures of observing and assessing the language teaching and learning (Byrd, 2001; Griffiths, 2008; Irfan et al., 2014). The second factor, syllabus, must also be considered. Syllabi for grammatical, lexical, skills, functional-notional ideas, and content must all be considered as part of any checklist. The learners' needs, as the third factor, must also be included as well. Learner' variables can be classified as: age, first language, input, affective factors, and education background (Griffiths, 2008). So, setting, syllabus, and learners' needs are the main factors that should be considered in evaluating a textbook (McDonough et al., 2013).

#### Empirical and Theoretical Studies

Numerous studies, which provide empirical evidence, have been undertaken. Lodhi et al. (2019) studied the significance of English textbooks at the intermediate level in a variety of schools in Punjab, Pakistan. In this regard, researchers applied a variety of research means including opinion polls, interviews, and questionnaire. The results showed that the textbooks being used in different Punjab schools could not achieve the common purposes of the second language, and they were incompatible with the learners' and teachers' needs. Moreover, these books did not have any novelty. Also, they did not pay attention to learners' interest, the content of materials was not relevant to culture, and they did not provide practice with the appropriate skills.

Irfan et al. (2014) reviewed related literature on materials evaluation and development, focusing on the syllabus, setting, and learner needs. The results showed that an extensive range of evaluation resources ought to be considered to achieve the aim of teaching-learning development.

Jahangard (2007) evaluated four high school English textbooks that had been developed in Iran by the Department of Education. He evaluated these textbooks based on checklists which were extracted from ten different textbooks evaluation checklists created. Thirteen of the common features were chosen for use. Finally, he elaborated on high school Iranian textbooks suggesting that they did not help develop students' fundamental language skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing since they only contained structural complexity with poor contextualization and personalization and were developed based on the predetermined purpose that pupils only needed to pass the final year exam and University Entrance Examination.

Alemi and Sadehvandi (2012) evaluated the *Pacesetter Series* (Strange & Hall, 2005). This textbook series has four levels and are taught at several language institutions in Iran. They used Litz's (2005) checklist which includes seven key principles: real-world reflection, arrangement and plan, tasks, skills, linguistic features, topic and content and general matters. Sixty-four EFL teachers rated the series. The outcomes of the descriptive study showed that *Pacesetter* applied the communicative approach as mentioned in the checklist. In fact, administrators, teachers, and students, by using this checklist were able to see if by these materials could achieve their objectives.

### Conclusion

Though textbook evaluation is a time-consuming and challenging process, it can assist in gathering validated data on the materials used in the classroom to know if the textbook adapts the materials based on learners' needs, teachers' interests, and institutes' methodological approach. In this regard, textbook evaluation should be done in a principled, efficient, and thorough way. Once one has done that type of evaluation, the evaluator is able to conduct the process quickly whenever a new textbook is needed. As Williams (1983) mentioned, it is of necessary to make acquaint novice teachers with the principles of textbook evaluation because further in their career, they will definitely need to assess a textbook. Moreover, teachers need to evaluate textbooks constantly to see if the tasks in the textbooks are in line with the objectives of their syllable or not. To put textbook evaluation in a nutshell, Williams (1983) believed that textbooks are teaching instruments that a good teacher has to be able to evaluate since their actual educational setting could be entirely different those for which the textbooks were developed. So, a teacher should adapt textbooks based on learners' needs and interests. Using textbooks that are based on limited linguistic and academic principals isn't always appropriate for all learners. Therefore, it is evident that the role of textbooks is significant, but it should be adapted based on different situations and contexts.

Finally, both checklist and non-checklist methods have been developed and administrators, institutions, and teachers can use them or a combination of them as a reference in order to find appropriate materials based on their educational approaches, situations, needs, and facilities. In conclusion, although it seems a demanding journey, attempts must be made to develop generalized criteria for textbooks evaluation. To achieve that, teachers, students, and administrators, as well as publishers and material developers must be educated on how to evaluate and assess textbooks to meet the varying educational needs of each group. Moreover, while researchers and material developer have attempted to find a generalized criterion of textbook evaluation, it is a very complicated issue that should be studied in different situations on both individual and institutional levels. By knowing how to evaluate and assess textbooks teachers and administrators can discover an appropriate textbook based on their educational needs and also textbook publishers and curriculum developers can create their textbooks and revise them based on the users' needs.

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