

# Finding the fit : A look at textbook evaluations

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## **Finding the fit: A look at textbook evaluations**

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As a new semester approaches many language teachers start to sweat over the ill-fated words of “What textbook are you using for your class?” Seeing how most institutions and students find that a textbook is indispensable as a tool in and outside the classroom, the teacher must find one that suits the students’ needs and the goals of his/her class—a sometimes impossible feat. This dreadful task of choosing a “good” textbook is not only time-consuming, but also frustrating.

Each semester teachers are bombarded by publishing companies and their latest manuals and catalogues. Once these manuals clutter the floors and desks of teachers’ offices, and the semester nears, the question, “Where should I start?” arises. Selecting a textbook for a course has never been easy, not to mention overwhelming, especially when the choices we have are numerous. Take the recent 2002 Oxford ELT catalogue vaunting over 100 titles for different English courses! How can we choose? Should we just read the blurb underneath the title and trust the publisher?

One way to choose a textbook with more objective judgment is with a textbook evaluation. Such evaluations can be found in most second language research books as well as in teacher training books. However, which one will find you the “right” textbook? Indeed, selecting a good textbook evaluation may better your chances of finding a “good” textbook. But this in itself is a complicated task for a couple of reasons: (1) Teachers may have undefined course objectives, which makes the task of choosing a textbook and an evaluation confusing and senseless. (2) They may simply lack knowledge on how to go about using an evaluation successfully; and (3) logistically; they may not have the available time to review different texts.

In this article, we will first take a look at the importance of defining objectives. (What do they mean? What role do they play in textbook evaluation? And How do I establish them?) Then, we will begin our investigation of 8 textbook evaluations. We will examine them from three differing angles (a glance, a closer look, and a detailed examination). From these research results, we will see what factors are considered essential in finding a “good” textbook evaluation. Remember, without an effective evaluation, it may be difficult to find a textbook to fit your needs.

### **Preparing for Textbook Evaluation:**

First and foremost, a teacher must establish his/her objectives. In other words, what is the goal of your course? What should students have achieved once leaving your classroom? Like driving without a map, using an evaluation to select a textbook without establishing your objectives first, can be misleading and guide you in the wrong direction. Usually objectives are described in one of the three types of models below

- **Skills-based**: objectives that describe the competencies that represent functional ability in a specific skill (speaking, listening, writing, reading) but are independent of specific settings or situations. An example of a listening objective is to “understand the gist and main ideas of authentic listening texts in familiar contexts.”
- **Content-based**: objectives that describe specific functions that students should be able to perform within specific content areas. For example, within the theme or topic “Family”, the learner should be able to describe immediate family members in terms of their relationships (mother, sister, etc.)
- **Proficiency-based**: objectives are based on what the student can do at his/her level. For example: “ask and answer questions related to personal needs and familiar topics”, “participate in short conversations and express basic courtesy” or “successfully handle a number of uncomplicated situations necessary for survival in the target culture.” (Shrum 44-45)

If the one of the above models coincides with your classroom goals, then now is the time to define your objectives by writing them down. If you find yourself wanting to use all three models in your objective statement, then I propose answering the following WH-questionnaire. Answer the questions accordingly to lay the groundwork for your classroom objectives.

1. **WHO**: Who are the students? How old are they? Are they mostly male or female? What is their supposed level before entering my class? What are their needs? What country are they from? What is their native language? What is their motivation? What are their interests?
2. **WHAT**: What skill(s) should I be focusing on in my class? Which skill(s) should I use as secondary skills? (i.e. speaking, listening, reading, writing, culture). What are some

essential topics that should be discussed? (name at least 4). What are students expected to do in class? What kinds of activities will they practice? What is my role in the classroom? What is the students` role?

3. **WHEN:** When students leave my course, what should they have learned? (i.e. how to ask and answer questions...)
4. **WHERE:** Where are students going to use the language? In the target culture or in their native country?
5. **WHY:** Why are students learning this language?
6. **HOW:** How am I going to teach this class? What is my approach?

If you have answered the above questions, you are now ready to write your objectives. To exemplify, I have answered the above questions for my English conversation class and presented my own objectives below:

My false beginner, Japanese students will participate in short conversations about personal and daily life, with an emphasis on asking and answering questions and giving brief explanatory reasons for their answers. Practice will concentrate on communicative activities, creative language use, and negotiating meaning. Likewise, students will listen to authentic recordings of various English accents. Topics will underline everyday, familiar themes as well as survival travel language and student choice themes. When students leave they will have an overall appreciation for the English language and culture.

These objectives are short, concise, and I understand them. Some of you may choose to expand and add more detail to your objectives. However, avoid being convoluted and confusing. Let it be known that your objectives are for *YOU*. They should be personal and reflective. Most importantly, you should like your objectives and feel confident that your statement is indeed your goal and that these are your intentions for teaching.

Once you have established your objectives, you can now start looking for a textbook evaluation that will fit your needs.

## **Finding the “right” Textbook Evaluation**

Looking for a textbook that complements your teaching style and can assist the students is complicated. Pedagogues have tried to simplify this task by creating textbook evaluations, criteria, and guidelines to aid teachers in their quest for the “right” book. As we all know, a teacher only needs one evaluation to make, or try to make, an objective judgment about a textbook. But, when a teacher has seven, eight, or even twelve evaluations, guidelines, and criteria, to choose from, this already tedious task becomes overwhelming. The inevitable question: “Which one do I choose?” becomes a dilemma.

Rightly, this is a problem. For my own research, I found over twelve evaluations, and there are still more out there! For those of you who want to find a good textbook evaluation, it is important to look at the evaluation from all angles. In what follows, I have examined the 8 evaluations by using a three-step method of analysis. First, I have done a quick overview of the evaluation. Next, I took a closer look at the evaluation’s organization, and finally I looked at the contents and details of each evaluation.

### ***A. A First Glance—looking at format, length and intention***

When selecting an evaluation, it is important to choose one that will coincide with your needs. Considering most teachers dread evaluating texts, the faster, more user-friendly, and effective the evaluation, the better.

Taking the initial step of merely looking at each evaluation, I noticed that each followed 1 of 3 formats.

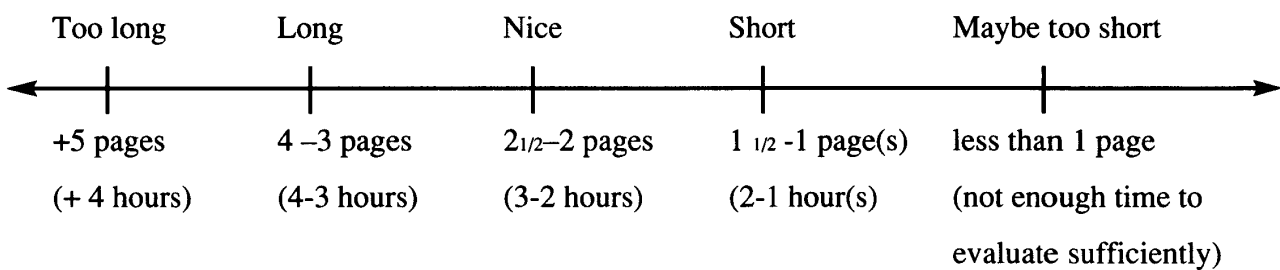
1. Questions                   + circling (H.D. Brown)  
                                      + point system (J. B. Brown)  
                                      + yes/no checklist (Harmer)  
                                      + chart (Rivers)
2. Detailed Questions + written answers                   (Bragger, Curtain, Richard-Amato)
3. Advice/ Suggestions   (Omaggio)

Some formats appear to be more user-friendly than others such as format #1, Questions + circling, point system, checklist, and chart. This type of evaluation is appealing for two reasons: 1) the

teacher does not necessarily have to write (with the exception of Harmer’s, which includes a comment section) which saves time and 2) It is clear to see which book is favorable either by score, number of checks in “yes” column, or the number of circles used.

The other formats, without reading their content, seem less appealing for two main reasons: 1) the teacher would have to spend time writing answers and 2) the teacher would have to spend time re-reading his/her comments/results to make a sound judgment as to which textbook is “good.” The benefit of having a chart, checklist, point or circling system is that it is comprehensible just by looking at it. One does not have to search for the answers, they are already clear.

Another preliminary attribute to consider is the length of the evaluation. “How long is it?” becomes an important question due to the fact that teachers are busy. We have papers to grade, classes to prepare, students to meet, meetings to attend, exams to write, and the list goes on... In short, our time is precious. Having an evaluation that is short, sweet, and to the point is essential in our profession. Representing the average teacher, I have outlined what I call the textbook length continuum detailing the amount of pages as well as the time it would take to evaluate three books using John B. Brown’s method of evaluating only the last three lessons of each textbook.



Evaluating textbooks is a personal, time-consuming task. If you have time to evaluate a text with a form that contains more than 5 pages, and where you must write your explanations, then I wish you luck and suggest drinking a cup of coffee. If, on the other hand, you are like the majority of the teachers in this world, I am certain that you would rather like to have an extra hour where you could relax and drink your coffee. In this latter case, I would suggest choosing a form that has about 2<sub>1/2</sub> or 2 pages and which includes questions plus chart, checklist, point or circling system to conduct your evaluation.

One last piece of information to consider is what kind of evaluation it is. Who is it intended for? I looked at the 8 evaluation forms to find that some had specific audiences in mind

whereas others were geared towards a wide-range, general audience. For instance, Rivers titles her evaluation “Detailed checklist for textbook evaluation” (477). There is no indication that this is for a specific group. On the other hand, Curtain specifies that her form is intended for “elementary and middle school foreign language teachers [in America]” (312). Likewise, John B. Brown states that his is meant as “a good jumping off place for assessing the books for your classes” (4). In addition, he affirms that his evaluation be used to examine English language textbooks for primarily a Japanese audience. Whether the evaluation is to be manipulated as a preliminary assessment, a detailed one, or one for a particular audience, it is necessary to know if the authors intentions match your objectives before using it.

***B. A closer look—Organization and content of evaluation***

Zooming in closer, one will notice that several evaluations are developed according to a set of categories. Look at the following 4 forms. What are their similarities? What are their differences? Which categories are important to you?

Rivers (477-482)	Curtain (313-314)	Harmer (241-244)	H.D. Brown (150-151)
Local Situation	Goals	Practical Considerations	Goals of course
Teacher / Student Needs	Communication	Layout and Design	Background of Students
Language and Ideational	Culture	Activities	Approach
Content	Subject Content &	Skills	Language Skills
Linguistic Coverage and	Thinking Skills	Language Type	General Content
Organization	Bias	Subject and Content	Quality of Practice materials
Types of Activities	Flexibility	Guidance	Sequencing
Practical Considerations	Physical Characteristics	Conclusion	Vocabulary
Enjoyment Index	Support Materials		General sociolinguistic factors
	Budget		Format
			Accompanying materials
			Teacher’s guide

The four forms include categories, which they find as important factors in evaluating textbooks. There are many similarities among these evaluations ranging from background information to practical considerations of the book. In fact, there are more similarities than differences. There are, however, two clear differences: 1) One is to include budget, bias, approach, and vocabulary as separate categories; 2) the other, is the use of language. Some of the categories may be misleading and/or unclear. In this case it is a question of language and/or interpretation. In

that, I will let you decide what makes sense for you.

The remaining four evaluations did not include categories. Rather, they are random numerated questions or suggestions giving the teacher little sense of the “advanced organizer” concept (Omaggio 58). If the evaluation is set up in an outline format, its organization is clear in that we know what to expect, what to look for, and on what we should be focusing our attention. Those lacking defined categories, (Richard-Amato, Omaggio, and Bragger), leaves the teacher guessing and increasing the risk of reading between the lines—something we want to avoid when evaluating.

### ***C. At the microscopic level: really looking at the content.***

Up until now, we have discussed the value in format, length, and the author’s intention as well as in content categories and organization. Now we are ready to look at the content details of each evaluation. To simplify this task I have made a list of their common details. Next to the content detail, I have placed a number in parentheses indicating how many of the evaluations included it in their evaluation, guideline or criteria. For example, if each of the 8 evaluations stated “price” as an important factor in choosing a textbook, then it should be assumed that price should be considered an asset in a good textbook evaluation.

#### **Most commonly used criteria in 8 Textbook Evaluation/Selection**

1. Student Background (Is the textbook appropriate for MY students?) (8)
2. Authentic language / relevancy used in print and audio segments (how often do I use these words/ phrases, language is not contrived, etc.) (7)
3. Themes and situations are appealing, organized appropriately according to proficiency level (6)
4. Meaningful/contextualized / purposeful language is used (6)
5. Language is presented logically from structured to open-ended activities (5)
6. Personalized (their own meaning) information and creative use/ student initiation (5)
7. Includes the 4 skills for a balanced, integrated lesson (5)
8. Recycling information (need for a review) (4)
9. Free of cultural bias/ stereotypes, etc...(4)
10. Accompanying Materials (Tapes, CDs, Teachers manuals, etc...) (4)
11. Directions are clearly stated (4)
12. Variety of tasks (4)



13. Clearly stated objectives (4)
14. Illustrations/ attractiveness of book (4)
15. Target language is the focus (3)
16. Includes a table of contents (3)
17. Vocabulary (3)
18. Functional rather than analysis of grammatical structures (3)
19. Price (3)
20. Approach / method is similar to yours (2)
21. Global perspective –presenting different accents (i.e. British, American, Australian and international ones too.) (2)
22. Most frequent grammatical structures are presented early (2)
23. Students are made responsible for their own learning (2)
24. Availability (2)

These factors are considered the most essential components to build an effective evaluation. Obviously, those that have the approval of all 8 evaluations should be considered of greater importance than those with only 2. Although I did not list the singular details of each evaluation, some contain valuable insight in textbook evaluation. I will cite a few that I find particularly helpful:

One such author offering good advice is John B. Brown. He suggests that teachers should second-guess textbooks containing too many pictures. He advises:

“While colorful pages make for a lively presentation, occasionally the art work seems to conceal the fact that there are really very few exercises on each page. There is no problem with this in principle, but it may have a direct bearing on whether there will be enough of the `right stuff` to keep your class going for the full year” (3).

Richard-Amato also says that we should be careful of the titles of textbooks:

“Sometimes the titles of textbooks are misleading and can lure one into believing that the content is generally communicative in nature. Catchy titles, those that imply a cast of characters, and those containing the words “communicative” or “Communication” are not always what they appear to be. Often these books are grammar-or function based texts disguised to look communicative. It pays to scrutinize them carefully before ordering them for student use” (210)

Wilga Rivers poses some interesting questions on the pace of the textbook and how they can help

heterogeneous classrooms:

“Do you think it moves too fast or too slowly or just right for the class you have in mind? Would it require a great deal of supplementing? Would you have to leave out a lot of material to complete the course in the time you have available? Could the extra material be used for enrichment for the faster learners, or is it too repetitive? Would it provide extra practice for slower learners? Is there so much material that the teacher would feel smothered or pressured?”(478).

Helena Curtain makes us ponder some questions about textbooks & culture, and learning style:

“Is culture integrated into the program materials? Is there emphasis on experiencing culture rather than on learning about culture? Is culture presented from a global perspective rather than focusing on a single country, region, or ethnic group?” (313)

“Are the illustrations and text free of racial, gender and cultural bias?” (314)

“Do the materials provide options for a variety of student learning styles—visual, auditory and kinesthetic?” (314)

H.D. Brown asks us to question whether the book underlines vocabulary as an important skill:

“Does the book pay sufficient attention to words and word study?” That is, does it include relevant vocabulary, strategies for word analysis and frequent vocabulary? (150).

As I mentioned earlier, this is only some of the good advice that these individual authors provide. I encourage you to read their evaluations and pick and choose the advice that you find valuable and helpful in your quest for a textbook.

Looking at the details of all 8 of the evaluation forms clarify what is meant by a “good” textbook. Their commonalities illustrate that these particular details, especially the first 10, should be treated with more attention and emphasis during an evaluation. This is not to say that certain individual qualities are not valuable, but that they should be regarded as secondary considerations in evaluating a textbook. In short, finding a good textbook means using a good evaluation. Without the essential criteria in your evaluation form, you may forget or not think to examine certain important areas of a textbook. Consequently, you may find yourself with an insufficient textbook, lost time, and feeling pressured to fill in the gaps for inadequate activities and the like. Ultimately, you may feel like you’re back at square one. In order to avoid this, it’s important to

choose wisely. In other words, take out your magnifying glasses and read the fine print before choosing! It is only then that you might find a form that is appropriate for *you*.

Based on this research, I plan on developing my own textbook evaluation in an upcoming article. This will take into account format, length, intention as well as organization and content. Although this evaluation will undoubtedly contain some imperfections, I have high hopes that this evaluation form will provide the average teacher with a quick, effective, user-friendly tool in assessing future prospective textbooks. At that time you will have the chance to evaluate *me*.

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