

EFL Textbook Evaluation Form—My proposal

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Introduction

Some teachers view textbooks as essential ingredients to the language classroom. Others view them as prisons, leaving little room for flexibility in teaching style and material. Whichever side of the spectrum you find yourself, one thing is evident; most institutions highly recommend and often require teachers to use a textbook to follow a course syllabus, to reassure students' expectations, and/or to coordinate student progression from one year to the next. Still some teachers may renounce the orthodox concept of textbooks and take on the challenge of creating all their own materials. This, however, demands an innumerable amount of time and simply is not cost-effective in comparison to buying a textbook. Realistically, combining teacher-generated material together with a textbook, which lends itself to adaptability, can create a harmonious balance. The problem is, however, finding a textbook that suits your students' needs as well as your own.

Rationale for evaluation

There are many reasons for which it is wise to evaluate a textbook before implementing it into your language course. First and foremost, evaluation allows teachers to be more objective when choosing a course textbook. Even though assessment tools are in no way perfect and are by nature a subjective activity, following a rubric and answering questions enables the subjective teacher to become more objective than without one. Therefore, a comprehensive model, which provides a list of criteria important for the particular purpose of assessment, not only assists the teacher in choosing suitable textbooks with more objectivity, but also helps at weeding out the so-called "bad" ones.

Textbook evaluation is also very important for high-risk classes and language program design and/or development. High-risk classes which cater to preparation for language proficiency exams such as the TOEIC or TOEFL often depend on textbook material as the course syllabus. Since the aim of the class is to pass a high-risk test, the choice of textbook is sometimes crucial in success-failure rate; hence, considerable attention in selecting a textbook is imperative. Likewise,

some language departments require the use of a single textbook or textbook series to guide a language program syllabus for many years. In a high-pressure situation such as this, finding the *right* textbook deserves serious consideration.

Another valuable reason to evaluate is simply to undergo the pedagogical experience of assessment. It is likely that each teacher, at some time in his/her career, will be asked to partake in some evaluation process for some particular purpose. For this, teachers should be aware of the existence of the many assessment tools available, and in particular of those created for textbook evaluation. At that moment, it is a question of taking the time and filling out the rubric or answering a set of questions to complete the evaluation. All in all, the teacher will find that the experience of assessment, in and of itself, is a valuable stepping-stone in any teaching career.

Textbook Evaluation Research: essential factors

In my previous article entitled *Finding the Fit: a look at textbook evaluations*, I examined a variety of evaluation forms. In this research, I discovered that the preliminary task of choosing an accurate evaluation is of paramount importance. If, for instance, you are selecting an EFL textbook for young learners, it is then wise to choose an evaluation specializing in children as well as in your particular subject, in this case English as a foreign language. If, on the other hand, you are searching for a textbook aimed at university students learning French as a foreign language and are using a textbook evaluation intended for Japanese EFL learners, your textbook evaluation will more than likely be unreliable, not to mention a waste of your time. Consequently, teachers *must* establish their classroom objectives before using an evaluation and know for whom the textbook as well as the evaluation is intended.

According to my research, a so-called “good” textbook evaluation should include an adequate list of content criteria for evaluation. I found a list of commonly shared criteria from eight different evaluation forms such as: student background, authentic language, attractive themes and situations, meaningful and contextualized language, etc...(for full list, refer to *Finding the Fit* p. 133). Seeing how these criteria are viewed by most foreign language textbook evaluations as important, we should then assume that all evaluations should include, in one way or another, a minimum of these criteria.

In addition, a “good” textbook evaluation should be user-friendly and not overly time consuming. That is, the evaluation form should take into account organization, length, and format.

In sum, establishing objectives as well as understanding the evaluation’s audience or intent, including essential content criteria, plus incorporating a user-friendly format and organization, are all pertinent assets in developing an evaluation.

The following will be my attempt to implement this research into a textbook evaluation

form. The evaluation will be set up into three large frames taking certain factors into account such as (1) preliminary considerations underlining course objectives, and student background and course information. (2) Macro-evaluation, which looks at student and teacher needs as well as some important practical considerations of the textbook such as the author's note, price, syllabus, layout & design, if it belongs to a series, etc. (3) Finally there will be a Micro-evaluation, which will take a closer look inside the textbook and really analyze the content areas.

This is in no way a perfect model for evaluating textbooks, and therefore is subject to criticism. This is simply my humble attempt to facilitate the selection of textbooks for those teachers pressed for time and who are interested in finding a "suitable" textbook for their classroom.

For Your Information

The following textbook evaluation is intended for university or adult learners of EFL. For any evaluation, you must take your time and really examine the textbook, especially in high-stakes situations. The following evaluation form is designed to evaluate three different textbooks using John B. Brown's method of examining the last three chapters of each book (Brown 16). If done properly, the evaluation process should take anywhere from 2-3 hours. It should also be noted that this evaluation is to be used under the assumption that the teacher only has access to a free student book inspection copy; therefore, supplementary materials will not be thoroughly examined. Good luck.

Preliminary Considerations

Before beginning any textbook evaluation, understanding for whom and for what the textbook is merits substantial thought. Please answer the following questions about student background and teacher needs carefully *before* examining a textbook. Afterwards, you can use this information for multiple evaluations for a particular group, or you may want to save it for future reference.

Chart 1

Background Information:

1. Who are your students? _____
2. How old are they? _____
3. What is their native language(s)? _____
4. What country or countries are they from? _____
5. Are they mostly male or female? What is the percentage of each sex?
 about  _____% about  _____%
6. What is their motivation to learning this language? (Please circle one)
Very high high moderate low very low
7. What are their interests? _____
8. What is their proficiency level? (*Need help? Refer to ACTFL guidelines in Omaggio 502-511*). _____
9. What is their educational background? _____
10. What are their learning styles? (*Need help? Look at the learning style checklist in H.D. Brown 195*). _____
11. What skills should you be focusing on? (Please put in order of importance 1-7; # 7,6,5,4 are the most important leaving 3,2,1 of secondary importance)
Listening / speaking / reading / writing / grammar / vocabulary / pronunciation

12. How many minutes is each class? (50 minutes? 60 minutes? 90 minutes? _____ mins.)

In order to adequately evaluate the textbook, please write your objectives in the box provided below. If you need help in writing them, please refer to the section entitled “Preparing for Textbook Evaluation” in *Finding the Fit*, p.128-129.

My objectives:

If you are finished filling out your background information and your objectives, you should have a clear idea of what you are looking for in a textbook. You are therefore ready to begin the initial process of evaluation. There are some questions about the textbook you must answer and check before doing a more detailed analysis. Below is a list of such questions. Please

	Textbook		
	A	B	C
Chart 2: Practical Considerations			
1. How much does the textbook cost?			
2. Is this price OK for my students? Yes (2) or No (0)			
3. Is this textbook part of a series? Yes (2) or No (1)			
4. Does the textbook author's idea of a lesson plan correspond to the number of hours I will need to teach? Yes (3) Somewhat (2) Not Really (1) Not at all (0)			
How is the design and layout of the book? (Look at the information and pictures on each page of the last three chapters. Then answer the following questions).			
5a. How many pictures are there? Too many (0) Enough (1) Not Enough (0) (Be careful, sometimes too many pictures mean that there isn't enough material for the lesson.)			
5b. Would the illustrations appeal to my students? Could they motivate my students? Yes (3) Somewhat (2) Not Really (1) Not at all (0)			
5c. Are the pictures used in a meaningful way to understand language, or are they only there for cosmetic value? Very Useful (3) Useful (2) Somewhat useful (1) Not at all useful (0)			
5d. How much information is there? (If there is too much on each page, students may feel overwhelmed and stressed at learning the material. Sometimes a little less, is a lot more.) Too much (0) Enough (1) Not Enough (0)			
5e. How is the presentation of the information? Clear and easy (3) Somewhat Clear (2) Not very clear (1) Difficult to understand (0)			
5f. How is the layout of the information? Easy to read (3) Somewhat easy (2) Kind of cluttered (1) Too cluttered (0)			
Total points:			

Chart 3: Teacher and Student Needs	Textbook		
	A	B	C
1. Look more carefully at the lessons and the author's note. Does it say or can you tell on what method the textbook is based? Please write the method below: Textbook A _____ B _____ C _____			
2. Does the textbook correspond to your method and teaching style? Yes (3) Somewhat (2) Not Really (1) Not at all (0)			
3. Does the textbook lend itself to adaptability? (<i>In other words, are activities easy to change if need be?</i>) Yes (3) Somewhat (2) Not Really (1) Not at all (0)			
4. Does the textbook have lists of vocabulary or an index to find grammatical items? Yes (2) No (0)			
5. Does the student book have a CD or tape for each student? (<i>This is especially important for students who want to work independently or to practice lessons at home.</i>) Yes (2) No (0)			
6. Does the textbook indicate that supplementary materials are available? (Add up all that apply. For example: Textbook A has tests and a video : 2 points) Workbook (1) Tests (1) Teacher's manual (2) Video (1) Supplementary Activities (2)			
7. Is there a table of contents for quick reference? Yes (3) No (0)			
8. Is there enough material in each lesson to complete the number of minutes you have for each class, or will you need to supplement activities? (<i>Try to imagine a lesson in your head...</i>) Yes, there is enough material (5) There is somewhat enough (3) I will need to add a lot of material (1) Not enough. I will need to add too much! (0)			
9. Are there review lessons, which recycle and practice already learned material? Yes (4) No (0)			
10. Are the themes and the topics interesting? (<i>Would you enjoy discussing them?</i>) Yes (3) Somewhat (2) Not Really (1) Not at all (0)			
Total points:			

** If you have finished both chart 2 and chart 3, now is the time to add their points together. Put the totals in the chart below. After, check to see if the textbook is worth a micro-evaluation or not.

Total points for:	
Textbook A :	
Textbook B:	
Textbook C:	

Points:	Advice:
53-30 points	Worth taking a more detailed look. Continue with the micro-evaluation which follows.
29 and below	Lacks some essential “ingredients” to help you and your students in and out of class. Discontinue the evaluation at this point.

Micro-Evaluation--A close look at the lessons and their content

Let us now dive in and really examine each lesson. While inspecting the last three lessons of each textbook, try to visualize yourself teaching to the group you described earlier in the background information section.

	Textbook		
	A	B	C
<u>I. Language</u>			
1. Is the sequence of language presented logically from structured to open-ended activities? Yes (3) Somewhat (2) Not Really (0)			
2. Meaningfulness and authenticity of language. - Is the language useful and common? (Would <i>YOU</i> use this language?) Almost all of it is (6) About 2/3 is (4) About 1/2 is (2) I wouldn't use it (0)			
-Is the language well integrated into a context in the lesson or is the language random and scattered? (<i>In other words, does the language focus on one topic at a time, or does it jump from one topic to another just to practice grammatical functions?</i>) Very well integrated (3) Somewhat integrated (1) Random (0)			
3. The target language is the focus of the textbook. Yes (2) No (0)			
<u>II. Activities</u>			
1. Are the activities personalized or are they constantly talking about Mr. Jones or some other textbook character? Yes (4) Somewhat (2) Not Really (0)			
2. Are students able to initiate and create their own language? Yes (4) Sometimes (2) Not Really (0)			
3. Are the activities for each skill varied or do they tend to repeat themselves after each lesson? (<i>Please note, lack of variety lends itself to boredom, and lack of motivation</i>) Varied & Different(4) Sometimes repeated(3) Frequently repeated(2) Always the same (0)			

<p>4. Do the activities allow a variety of pair, small group, whole class interaction as well as individualized work? Add up all that apply and write the total in the column on the right. Pair activities (2) Small group (2) Whole-class (2) Individualized (2)</p>			
III. <u>Language Skills</u>			
<p>1. How much time is devoted to each skill? Look at the Background information section. Are the skills which you rated # 7, 6, 5, and 4 from Chart 1 well integrated into each lesson? Add the points for your four important skills and then write them in the column on the right. Well integrated (5) Somewhat (3) Not so good (1) Poorly integrated (0) A: #7 _____ #6 _____ #5 _____ #4 _____ B: #7 _____ #6 _____ #5 _____ #4 _____ C: #7 _____ #6 _____ #5 _____ #4 _____</p>			
<p>2. Are students given enough opportunities to practice these skills? (<i>Really look at the lesson and decide how much time is devoted for each. Is it enough time?</i>) Yes (3) Somewhat (2) Not Really (1) Not at all (0)</p>			
IV. <u>Culture</u>			
<p>1. Are the lessons, whether in print or in illustrations free of stereotypes, cultural, racial, and gender bias? Yes (3) Somewhat (1) No (0)</p>			
<p>2. Culture is presented from a : Global perspective (3) Single country (2) Single region (1)</p>			
		Total points:	

<u>Total points:</u>	<u>Micro-evaluation advice:</u>
63-35 points	This will probably be a suitable textbook. Obviously those earning points closer to 63 should be your first choice when selecting.
34 and below	Textbooks earning less than 35 points will probably not suit your needs or your students. The textbook is lacking some necessary information .

Now that you have finished both macro and micro evaluations, you should be ready to make your final textbook selection. Among all your evaluations, find the two textbooks that have scored the most points. While visualizing yourself teaching the lessons, look through each textbook one last time. Is there anything that sets one apart from the other? If so, what? Make some mental notes and then make your final decision.

Conclusion

If you have come this far, it means that you have completed the textbook evaluation form and have chosen a “suitable” textbook for your language classroom, which meets the majority of yours and your students` needs. This, however, does not mean that this textbook will solve all your pedagogical problems. Nor will it make your students learn. This is a textbook, not some magical wonder drug! It was not written for you or for your particular students. It was written rather for the general public. The question you should be asking yourself is if this book is merely “suitable”, not perfect. Textbooks are only pedagogical supports, which are to be used in conjunction with teacher-generated materials and other classroom resources. It should never be relied on too heavily. In essence, textbooks are not and will never be perfect. It is therefore up to us, the teachers to respond and act accordingly by learning how to be flexible and adapt lessons and materials to those we are teaching.

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