

TEFL MATERIALS EVALUATION: A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the merits and demerits of two main types of instructional EFL materials, namely, global and in-house materials with special reference to those used in the Arab Gulf region. It also focuses on the evaluation of the much commoner global materials and the selection of the most appropriate ones for a specific EFL program. Although several questionnaires and checklists for evaluation exist, none of these has reflected the specific needs and concerns of EFL classroom teachers who would be using those materials. The paper stresses the need to scrutinize the current evaluation formats from a teacher's perspective. For this purpose, the writer proposes a specific "customizing" test that would help EFL teachers to assess the available evaluation checklists, select and adapt the most appropriate form that would fit in their respective settings.

KEYWORDS: TEFL materials; global; in-house; evaluation; customization.

1. TEFL instructional materials: Roles and uses

Instructional materials may take two forms: printed ones, such as textbook, workbook, teacher's guide, readers, etc.; and non-print ones, such as audiotapes, videotapes and computer-based materials. They are considered a key component in most TEFL programs essential for both teachers and learners. Obviously, most teachers use instructional materials as their primary teaching resource in providing the content of the lessons and classroom practice. In some situations, however, materials are only used to supplement the teacher's instruction. For learners, materials generally serve as the basis for much of the language input they receive and the language practice they take part in the classroom. Materials are also considered a reference source for learners on various aspects of language (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, etc.)

The importance of EFL teaching materials in relation to the other components of the curriculum, in particular the syllabus, teacher, and learner, needs to be highlighted. Instructional materials serve the basic purpose of providing a detailed specification of the content defined only generally in a syllabus. As Nunan (1991) points out, materials

writers put flesh on the bones of course content. Some scholars (Richards and Rodgers 1986) further argue that teaching materials can fulfill this role even in the absence of a syllabus. In addition, materials help in defining the roles of teachers and learners (Wright 1997). This is achieved by assigning certain parts to the teacher for presentation purposes, and others for learner practice and classroom activities. One should, however, exercise some caution regarding the perceived role of materials in the instructional process. After all, materials are only one aid to learning, which also depends on, among other factors, learner aptitude and motivation as well as the teacher's skilful use of teaching methods and techniques.

2. Centrality of textbook

Of the various types of instructional materials mentioned in Section 1 above, the textbook is the most widely used resource in EFL classes. Teachers consider the textbook the backbone of their courses and they are naturally concerned about the availability of the textbook in adequate numbers and in time. Meanwhile, the textbook provides security for learners because they have a kind of road map of the course: they know what to expect and what is expected of them. A note of caution should be sounded here, though. The textbook can be of great value, but only if viewed by the teacher as a teaching tool that can be adapted to the specific needs of the particular group of learners taught in a certain context.

Problems may occasionally arise, too, from the erroneous attitude held by some EFL teachers that the textbook is a sacred document that should not be tampered with (Graves 2000: 176). Such an attitude rests on the false assumption that there is a certain way to teach a textbook and that the results will always be the same each time. A more alarming notion, perhaps, is what Apple (1986) refers to as the "deskilling" of teachers: the idea that it is the textbook that teaches the students rather than the teacher. Actual practices in EFL classrooms suggest that an experienced, skilful teacher may transform a "bad" textbook into a "good" one by modifying and supplementing certain parts in the textbook in such a way that serves the specific objectives of the lessons.

3. Typology of EFL instructional materials

In schools and colleges in the developing countries where English has a second or foreign-language status, two main types of instructional materials are in common use: global materials produced by Western publishers (Longman, Oxford, Cambridge, McGraw-Hill, Thomson Heinle, etc.) and "institutional" or "in-house" materials produced by local educational institutions. In the Arab Gulf region, the area of the present study, government-run schools use "institutional" materials produced under the supervision of British and American consultants (e.g. *English for United Arab Emirates/*

Oman), while private schools tend to use global materials. At the tertiary level, global materials (examples: *Headway*, *Interchange*, *North Star*, *Cutting Edge*) are widely used in both public and private institutions. A few attempts were, however, made in general, secondary and tertiary education in Arab Gulf countries in the 1980s and 1990s to use in-house TEFL materials. An evaluation of those types of materials will be made below (Section 5), and their specific advantages and disadvantages will be discussed.

A much less common type of material is that prepared by the EFL teacher. This type mainly involves supplementing the textbook with additional materials in the form of teaching units, exercises and tests: occasionally it involves actually writing a course book. But, as Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998: 173) rightly observe, “*only a small proportion of good teachers are also good designers of course materials*”. This may be mainly attributed, in the present writer’s view, to the lack of training – or rather inadequate training – of would-be EFL teachers in this particular aspect at the tertiary level. In fact, “materials production” courses are almost absent in many TEFL programs. A look at the TEFL undergraduate and graduate programs in universities in the Arab Gulf region reveals that this type of course is offered, for example, in the MA TESOL program at the American University of Sharjah, while it is non-existent in both undergraduate and graduate TEFL programs at Sultan Qaboos University, the United Arab Emirates University and Kuwait University (see the References).

4. The present study

4.1. Aims

This study aims to examine the advantages and disadvantages of the two main types of TEFL materials, viz. global and in-house ones, with special reference to those used in Arab Gulf institutions. It then discusses the current practice in TEFL materials evaluation focusing on the types, criteria and formats employed in such evaluation. The study specifically highlights the need for assessing the existing checklists and criteria of evaluation from the classroom teacher’s standpoint. In this respect, the present writer proposes a screening procedure that would enable EFL practitioners including inspectors and teachers of English to assess current TEFL materials evaluation checklists, and select and adapt the one that specifically conforms to the needs and requirements of their particular language programs.

4.2. Scope

The EFL materials discussed in this paper, both global and in-house, are specifically related to those used in both public and private schools and colleges in the Arab Gulf context. However, the conclusions and findings of this discussion on commercial materials

seem applicable to ESL and also other EFL contexts given the fact that such materials are used in both EFL and ESL settings worldwide.

5. EFL Materials: Advantages and disadvantages

5.1. Global materials

The continued widespread use of global EFL materials in Arab Gulf countries over the last few decades indicates clearly that, for teachers, their advantages outweigh their disadvantages. One advantage of global materials, which have provided the central core of EFL programs in the Gulf region over the last two decades, is that they offer a comprehensive package of learning resources that include not only textbooks but also workbooks, readers, teaching guides, CDs, cassettes and videotapes. Furthermore, such materials are designed and produced in a highly attractive format that appeals to both learners and teachers. In most cases, the texts, dialogues and other aspects of content are presented in a way that reflects authentic language use. Meanwhile, the activities and exercises included in such materials are carefully graded to suit various levels, from false beginner to advanced. In addition, global materials are based on sound teaching and learning principles and are continually updated to reflect the latest findings of research in second language acquisition and language pedagogy.

However, global materials also have a number of pitfalls and deficiencies. First, global materials may distort content by portraying an idealized white, middle-class view of the world (Richards 2001: 255.). Second, a considerable part of the content presented in global materials is culturally inappropriate for EFL learners in many parts of the world. As Rossner (1988) points out, "British and American publishers project cultural attitudes which are inappropriate to the needs of the vast majority of learners of English as a foreign language". Examples of texts that suffer from cultural inappropriateness have been cited by a number of commentators. Bahumaid (2001: 333), for instance, mentions two examples of what he would consider as culturally inappropriate texts: *Desperately seeking someone* and *Never been kissed*, both of which appear in a commercial course book widely used in the Arab region – *Headway, Pre-intermediate* (1991: 38–39 and 58, respectively). This problem appears to persist despite the increased awareness among Western publishers of sensitive issues. One could speculate that the production of special editions of those materials that are particularly modified to reflect the specifics of the culture of the Arab Gulf region might not be a lucrative venture for publishers. Third, the attempt made by publishers to incorporate the latest insights from research into teaching materials, noted earlier in this section, has been counter-productive in the sense that it puts the EFL teacher in a difficult position. In the words of Rossner (1988), "[c]urrent materials tend to overburden the user with an embarrassment of riches [...] and] create more work for the teacher, who is forced to spend more time coming to grips with these materials". Support for this remark is not difficult to find. For example, Bahumaid (2001: 333) notes that many Arab EFL teachers who were trained along traditional lines

find such communicative tasks as information gap and problem solving, prevalent in communicative materials, “difficult” to do. Fourth, and perhaps more importantly, since global materials are often produced for use in a broad range of EFL contexts, they may not particularly reflect the needs, interests and concerns of learners in a certain situation. For this reason, the selection of a particular commercial package of EFL materials will have to be made on the basis of a rigorous evaluation involving a myriad of factors pertinent to the specific context in which they will be used.

5.2. In-house materials

In view of the pitfalls and limitations of global materials, outlined in Section 5.1 above, some TEFL institutions have opted for producing their own “in-house” materials. Several such attempts were made in the Gulf region in the 1980s and 1990s, at both school and college levels.

The educational authorities in the Arab Gulf region started in the mid-1980s to produce their own materials (e.g. *English for the UAE*) for use in schools under the supervision of British and American consultants. A major feature of these in-house materials is that they contain a wide variety of topics that are mainly drawn from local, Arab and Muslim culture. Inspectors and teachers of English as well as learners responded positively to these materials. Although no thorough critical evaluation of these materials has, to the knowledge of the present writer, been made, a few remarks have emerged. Some of these materials were criticized for being “unnatural, forced and inauthentic” (Byrd 1986, as cited in Kharma and Hajjaj 1986: 29). The design of such materials (layout, graphics, pictures, etc.) is far inferior to that of commercially produced ones as well. In addition, the in-house EFL materials produced for Gulf schools are not, in fact, complete packages, since they consist of students’ books, workbooks and teachers’ books, but no cassettes or videotapes accompany these materials, so that the pupils are offered rather monotonous fare.

At college level, a great need was felt in most Gulf countries for in-house ESP materials that would be culturally and vocationally appropriate and also suitable for Arab EFL students whose level is much lower than that premised in commercial American and British textbooks. Some attempts were made in several Gulf countries to produce such materials. These materials were used for a few years but it was soon realized that while they might be appropriate to both culture and level, they were time-consuming to create, costly, and mostly not well developed (Asenavage 1998).

6. TEFL materials evaluation

6.1. Rationale for evaluation

EFL educators, inspectors and teachers are often asked to select global textbooks and other kinds of instructional materials that would suit the particular language programs

in their respective institutions. This is indeed a daunting task given the fact that the market is flooded with an ever expanding array of TEFL materials. Obviously, selecting the “right” materials for a certain program will have to be preceded by a thorough evaluation of the materials available and, on the basis of such evaluation, informed judgments can be made on those materials. It is, therefore, imperative that EFL practitioners charged with the responsibility of selecting instructional materials should be well trained in evaluation. As far as TEFL institutions in the Gulf region are concerned, the present writer strongly believes that such institutions need to accord greater attention to materials evaluation in their programs. At present, materials evaluation is absent in TEFL programs in several universities in the region, such as Kuwait University and the United Arab Emirates University (see References). It should be pointed out that the lack of proper training in materials evaluation for teacher trainees would inevitably make the process of selecting materials for a particular level or course a “nominal” procedure that might be influenced by such factors as a catchy title, an attractive layout or the name of the author. Meanwhile, the total reliance on British and American ELT consultants attached to several TEFL institutions in the Gulf region in selecting instructional materials, as it is currently the case, should not be viewed as a viable, long-term strategy. It would be wise to couple such contractual consultancy services with the provision of adequate training, by expatriate consultants, of local EFL inspectors and teachers in materials evaluation.

6.2. Phases of evaluation

According to Rea-Dickens and Germaine (1992: 30–32), the evaluation of classroom materials passes through three phases: materials-as-workplan, materials-in-process, and outcomes from materials. The first phase involves the evaluation of materials prior to their actual utilization in the classroom and focuses on the theoretical value or the “construct validity” of the materials. The second phase i.e. the materials-in-process evaluation, involves the evaluation of materials during teaching to see how well they work in the classroom. The outcomes from materials phase examines what the learners have actually been able to achieve through the use of those materials

6.3. Forms and criteria of evaluation

The most common form of evaluation of EFL instructional materials is by means of a checklist involving several criteria. However, a questionnaire is occasionally used in some EFL institutions. The evaluation criteria employed in both forms are determined by five main perspectives: linguistic, psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, pedagogic and “practical”. On the linguistic side, the evaluations usually address the more basic questions of selection, grading and recycling of language content as well as the development

of skills and communicative abilities. The principal psycholinguistic considerations relate to the learning theory underlying the materials evaluated and their motivational value. At the sociolinguistic level, the most important question revolves around the materials' sociocultural appropriacy for the learner. Pedagogically, the major concerns are the materials' suitability for use in the classroom, their adequacy in the presentation and practice of grammatical structures and vocabulary items and their conformity with syllabus and examination requirements. The "practical" perspective often addresses the questions of layout, illustrations, durability, accessibility and cost.

Evaluation checklists and questionnaires used in EFL institutions vary in terms of the extent of coverage of different evaluation criteria. Some of these (e.g. Littlejohn and Windeat 1989; and Dudley-Evans and St. John 1998), employ a limited number of evaluation questions, while others (e.g. Grant 1987; Sheldon 1988; Skierso 1991; and Cunningsworth 1995) tend to be fairly extensive.

7. Customizing TEFL materials evaluation checklists: The MIRACLES Test

EFL practitioners can make use of the evaluation checklists and questionnaires mentioned above (Section 6.3) in the evaluation of the materials on the market or those used in their respective language programs. However, such evaluation checklists and questionnaires should not be viewed as a straitjacket, nor should it be assumed that they would fit any TEFL setting. In other words, none of these evaluation checklists or questionnaires can be used by the teacher as a basis for evaluating or selecting materials without adaptation. The main reason is that, as Richards (2001: 259) rightly notes, inspectors and teachers have different concerns and may look at a course book from different perspectives. Several examples may be mentioned to illustrate this point. In the evaluation of "a general English" kind of course book, different considerations will be invoked from those used in evaluating a conversation skills course book. Two teachers evaluating a certain writing course book might look at it from different viewpoints, one relying on a process-oriented approach to writing while the other emphasizes a text-type one. Meanwhile, practical considerations (usability, flexibility, accessibility, adaptability etc. of a course book) might be the focus of attention of a certain evaluator while another might stress the theoretical orientation and approach of the course book. Even when using the same criteria of evaluation, the relative weight of each criterion might vary from one teacher to another depending on the specific conditions of each language program. It is for this reason that assigning scores might be useful to reflect the variation in weight accorded in different EFL situations to the various criteria involved in the evaluation. From this discussion, it should have been clear that any kind of published checklist or questionnaire of evaluation of TEFL materials needs to be "customized" to the specific context in which the classroom teacher operates.

The process of "customizing" current forms and criteria of TEFL materials evaluation involves a careful study of those forms and criteria with the aim of selecting, modi-

fyng and adapting them to the particular situation of the classroom teacher. For this purpose, I propose a kind of “customizing” procedure which I have labeled the “MIRACLES” Test. The different letters in the mnemonic represent a “common core” of considerations that may be used by the teacher in selecting particular forms and criteria of evaluation which they may then adapt to suit their specific settings:

Manageability of the evaluation form: Can it be managed with ease, or is it too complicated to use? It would certainly be difficult and even impractical to employ an evaluation checklist with too many categories and criteria of evaluation.

Integratedness of the evaluation form: Does it integrate the key elements in evaluation: program concerns, course objectives, learner needs and teacher requirements?

Relevance of the evaluation criteria to the course, teacher and learner: There might be certain criteria (e.g. integration of skills) relevant for a certain course (e.g. English for general purposes) but not for others (e.g. writing course). Likewise, the provision of games and songs would be relevant in a course book for young children but not for adults.

Applicability of the evaluation criteria: Some criteria may sound good but they cannot be simply applied. A criterion such as “the learners’ involvement in communicative activities in the classroom” would be inapplicable in EFL programs where teacher-centered lessons dominate.

Clarity and specificity of the evaluation criteria.

Logicity of the evaluation criteria: This may seem obvious yet it is not uncommon to find evaluative questions that are out of place. For example, it is simply illogical to include a criterion related to the provision of computer-based materials in the evaluation of EFL materials in settings where computers are a luxury.

Extent of coverage of the evaluation criteria: The greater the number of evaluation criteria the better, provided that the other elements in this test are not undermined.

Scoreability of the evaluation criteria: The scores assigned to the evaluation criteria should reflect their relative significance and weight in the overall evaluation procedure.

It should be borne in mind that this screening framework is meant to be a helpful tool which would facilitate the teacher’s task of assessing and adapting the current forms and criteria of evaluation in the TEFL literature to their particular situation. In other words, teachers are expected to be flexible in applying this framework and balancing out its various elements in relation to their specific contexts.

8. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the roles and uses of instructional materials as one of the main components of the EFL curriculum. It has particularly focused on the textbook as the major resource in EFL classes highlighting its significance for both teachers and learners. However, it warns against the dogmatic attitudes held by some EFL teachers towards the textbook and has stressed the need to adapt it to meet the specific needs of learners in a given situation.

The paper has then examined the merits and demerits of global and in-house materials with special reference to those used in EFL institutions in the Arab Gulf region. Although some global materials suffer from certain limitations in particular their “idealized” white, middle-class view of the world, cultural inappropriateness and the “too demanding and challenging” nature of some tasks for EFL teachers and learners, their merits outweigh those of in-house materials. For this reason, global materials are expected to continue to be widely used in schools and colleges in the region for many years to come. The paper has further highlighted the need for TEFL programs in the Arab Gulf region to provide adequate training for teachers in materials production so that they can write effective lessons and exercises to supplement their classes in addition to tests and examinations.

Questions pertinent to the evaluation of EFL materials are then considered in some detail. The need for evaluation is justified on account of the fact that these materials are written for a broad range of EFL situations and the selection of the proper package for a specific language program will have to be based on a thorough evaluation of such materials. In this respect, the paper calls upon EFL institutions in the region to pay greater attention to issues of materials evaluation in their programs. Further, the paper proposes that the consultancy service currently offered by British and American EFL experts to some EFL institutions in the Gulf region in materials selection and evaluation should be associated with the provision of training to local inspectors and teachers of English in those matters. The paper has then proceeded to review types of evaluation as well as the current evaluation forms and criteria available in the EFL literature. It concludes that there is no ‘perfect’ evaluation checklist or questionnaire that can be used in all EFL contexts. Therefore, any published evaluation checklist or questionnaire should be ‘customized’ to reflect the specific needs and requirements of the classroom teacher in a particular language program. For this purpose, the author introduces his “MIRACLES” Test, which can be used by teachers as a helpful tool in the “customizing” process.

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