

Developing a Textbook Evaluation Scheme for the Expanding Circle

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Abstract

Among the four important factors in the educational contexts, namely, teachers, learners, textbooks and contexts, textbooks play an important role in English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom where it provides the primary source of linguistic input. The wealth of published material for English language teaching (ELT) available in the market makes selecting the right coursebook a challenging task. As such, it necessitates developing a textbook evaluation scheme so that the stakeholders benefit from the proposed model as a dependable criterion with regard to selecting the most appropriate textbook among the wealth of published textbooks. Taking these points into consideration, this study aimed at investigating and evaluating the available textbook evaluation schemes and checklists and seeking the experts' viewpoints with the objective of developing and designing a textbook evaluation scheme pertinent and beneficial to the expanding circle. As such, the existing textbooks evaluation schemes were reviewed critically and the experts' viewpoints were sought. Accordingly, a textbook evaluation scheme consisting of 6 main factors containing 41 items has been developed and proposed.

Keywords: Evaluation Schemes, Materials Development, Textbooks, Textbook Evaluation

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1. Background of the Study

According to Riazi (2003, p. 52), “textbooks play a very crucial role in the realm of language teaching and learning and are considered the next important factor (*element*) [italic is added] in the second/foreign language classroom after the teacher”. The textbook is a tool in the hands of the teacher, and the teacher must know not only how to use it, but how useful it can be. The wealth of published materials for English language teaching (ELT) available in the market makes selecting the right coursebook a challenging task. Moreover, the selection of a particular core textbook signals an executive educational decision in which there is considerable professional, financial, and even political investment (Sheldon, 1988). In the same direction, Garinger (2001) states that textbooks play a pivotal role in language classrooms in all types of educational institutions--public schools, colleges, and language schools-- all over the world.

In some parts, teachers are free to choose their own textbooks. The vast majority of teachers, however, have textbooks either suggested to them, or prescribed and assigned to them.

Taking these points into consideration, and given the fact that language teaching and learning is context-dependent and situation-bound, it is important that for each specific situation the best possible text be chosen based on the relevant evaluation scheme. Therefore, EFL teachers and administrators need to get acquainted with the principles of textbook evaluation as well as the evaluation checklists and schemes. Thus, developing and designing an evaluation scheme for the expanding circle (EFL) can prove helpful.

According to Kachru (1992) and Kachru and Nelson (1996), the uses and users of English internationally could be classified in terms of three concentric circles.

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Inner circle (Native): comprises the old-variety English-using countries, where English is the first or dominant language. U.S., Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand are the prototype examples.

The outer circle (ESL): comprises countries where English has a long history of institutionalized functions and standing as a language of wide and important roles in education, government, literary creativity, and popular culture. India, South Africa, Pakistan, Nigeria, Singapore and Zambia are some examples.

The expanding circle (EFL): comprises countries in which English has various roles and is widely studied but for more specific objectives than in the outer circle, including reading knowledge for scientific and technical purposes. The typical examples of such countries include China, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, and Nepal.

Kachru (1985) represented the spread of English in terms of three concentric circles: the inner circle, the outer circle and the expanding circle (Figure 1). Although Iran is not mentioned in the figure, Kachru and Nelson (1996) associated it with the expanding circle.

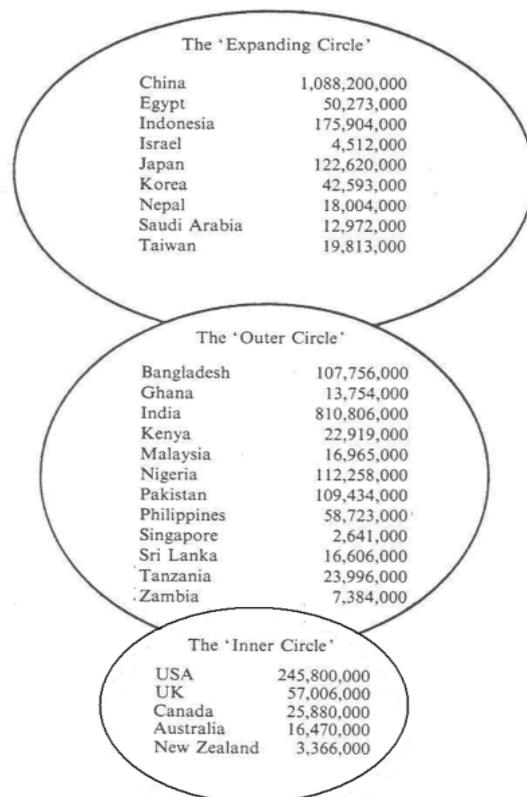


Figure 1. The Spread and Stratification of English

1.1. Textbook Evaluation Schemes in the Outer Circle and Inner Circles

During the last three decades, different textbook evaluation models (schemes) have been proposed in order to evaluate the existing English textbooks prepared for ESL/EFL learners. These schemes mostly focus on designing certain principles and criteria for such an evaluation. Among these, Tucker (1975), Sheldon (1988), Ur (1996), and Littlejohn (1998) are the most significant ones dominating the ESL field. Table 1 presents the second/foreign language materials evaluation checklists and schemes developed in three consequent decades of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s (Riazi, 2003). This, of

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course, is not intended to be a complete list of all the checklists developed in the said decades; however, it represents the major ones.

Table 1. Influential textbook evaluation schemes in the ESL context

Decade	1970s		1980s		1990s			
Year	1975	1979	1983	1988	1991	1995	1996	1998
Checklist	Tucker	Daoud and Celce-Murcia	Williams	Sheldon	Skierso	Cunningsworth	Ur	Littlejohn

1.2. Textbook Evaluation Studies in the Expanding Circle

In Iran and other countries, as examples of the expanding circle, several projects have been carried out to evaluate textbooks.

Tok (2010) examined the advantages and disadvantages of one type of TEFL materials, English language textbook “Spot On”, used in state primary schools in Turkey. The research revealed that ‘Spot On’ textbook actually did not stand up reasonably well to a systematic in-depth analysis and that the negative attributes out-weighed the positive characteristics very much.

Sahragard, Rahimi and Zaremoayyedi (2009) evaluated a series of ELT materials namely, Interchange, benefiting from Littlejohn’s detailed framework (1998). The most important thing they concluded is that these are not the learners who initiate the tasks. Al-Madany (2009) investigated Saudi students’ view of the English textbooks Headway Series based on need analysis, in order to identify the students’ needs and help them learn the English language in a smooth way. The results showed that there was a general satisfaction about the textbook. Razmjoo (2007) investigated the extent to which the Iranian high school and private institute textbooks represent the CLT principles. The results indicated that while high school textbooks are not conducive to CLT

implementation, private institute textbooks represent the CLT principles to a great extent. Yarmohammadi (2002) evaluated the senior high school textbooks based on a revised version of Tucker's model. He came to this conclusion that these textbooks suffer from a lot of shortcomings as the following: 1. they are not authentic; 2. English and Persian names are used interchangeably; and 3. oral skills are ignored. At the end, some suggestions were proposed to remedy the shortcomings. Besides, Keibari (1999) modified Tucker's model and applied it to the five volumes of Teaching Persian to Speakers of Other Languages (TPSOL) textbooks. She claimed that the philosophy behind the changes is due to the recent developments in language teaching. Results revealed that the books follow GTM which attaches less attention to role-playing, different kinds of tasks and language skills such as speaking.

1.3. Objectives and Research Questions of the Study

The present study intends to investigate and evaluate the available textbook evaluation schemes and checklists as well as the experts' viewpoints with the objective of developing and designing a textbook evaluation scheme relevant to the expanding circle. Accordingly, the following research questions are raised:

1. What is a qualified textbook evaluation scheme for the expanding circle?
2. What are the major components of the qualified textbook evaluation scheme for the expanding circle?

1.4. Significance of the Study

Textbooks play a very important role in many language classrooms and after teachers they are considered as the next important factor in the second/foreign

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language classrooms (Riazi, 2003). Therefore, the importance of selecting and preparing materials which match the desired features and the needs of the learners in the target situation demonstrates the significance of the kinds of studies such as this study that deals with developing a textbook evaluation scheme for the expanding circle. These studies are also very useful in teacher development and professional growth. Moreover, results of this investigation will hopefully help teachers, ELT administrators and experts, and even textbook writers and materials developers in their approach to textbook evaluation and selection as well as preparation of materials. So developing a textbook evaluation scheme is somehow necessary and it is worth investigating.

2. Method

This section includes the following parts: 1) participants, 2) instruments, and 3) data collection and analysis procedures.

2.1. Participants

The participants were 30 male and female TEFL instructors who had enough experience in teaching ELT materials as well as designing and developing materials for the expanding circle stakeholders. They were selected through availability sampling because the researcher believes such sample is representative of the target and the accessible population.

2.2. Instrument

Interview: Semi-structured interviews were conducted. The questions were borrowed from the studies done on proposing textbook evaluation schemes

such as Tucker (1975), Sheldon (1988), Ur (1996), and Littlejohn (1998). The participants were asked to provide open-ended answers to the questions in either English or Farsi. The interviews relatively spent one 30 minutes to respond to the questions.

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

On the basis of qualitative research, this study is established upon a grounded theory. Grounded theory follows two main purposes: It connects a study by describing the relationships among the various parts, and it provides a theoretical model of subsequent studies (Davis, 1995). Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh and Sorensen (2006) describe the general procedures followed in the analysis of qualitative data. They assert that analysis involves reducing and organizing the data, synthesizing, searching for significant patterns, and discovering what is important. Accordingly, Strauss and Corbin (1998) state that the codification of the data occurs in three processes namely open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding is the analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data. Axial coding includes the process of relating categories to their subcategories, termed "axial" because coding occurs around the axis of a category, linking categories at the level of properties and dimensions. The final coding is the selective coding described as the process of integrating and refining the theory. In the present study, the researcher just reported the findings in the form of the final phases proposed by Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh and Sorensen (2006) and Strauss and Corbin (1998). The results of the codified and categorized data were converted into a textbook evaluation scheme to be presented in the next section.

3. Results and Discussion

In this section, the larger categorization; that is, selective coding, was followed to propose the most comprehensive concepts or themes as the major criteria of the textbook evaluation scheme. The researcher came up with six major categories as follows: a. language components; b. tasks, activities and exercises; c. language skills; d. teachers' manuals; e. general considerations; and f. critical discourse analysis (CDA) features. The comprehensive list of the categories and subcategories as well as their related items is presented in the next part (Table 2).

3.1. The Developed Model

Regarding the checklists presented above, the following scheme is proposed for the expanding circle especially the Iranian context as a prototype sample of the expanding circle.

Table 2. The Proposed Textbook Evaluation Scheme for the Expanding Circle

Criteria		The Checklist	EX	G	AD	W	TL
Language Components	Pronunciation	1. Completeness and appropriateness of presentation					
		2. Completeness and adequacy of practice					
	Vocabulary and idioms	3. Correspondence between students' levels and the new words load					
		4. Systematic gradation of vocabulary from simple to complex items					
		5. Repetition of the new vocabulary in subsequent lessons for reinforcement					
		6. Complete and adequate practice of idioms					

Criteria		The Checklist	EX	G	AD	W	TL
	Structures	7. The balance between students' levels and sentence length					
		8. Appropriateness of the number of grammatical points as well as their sequence					
		9. Gradually increasing of structure complexity to suit the growing reading ability of the students					
		10. Using current everyday language by the writer					
		11. Logical sequence of sentences and paragraphs					
		12. Introducing linguistic items in meaningful situations to facilitate understanding					
Tasks, Activities & Exercises		13. Developing comprehension and test knowledge of main ideas, details, and sequence of ideas					
		14. Involving vocabulary and structures which build up the learner's repertoire					
		15. Providing practice in different types of written work					
		16. Providing a pattern of review within lessons and cumulatively testing new materials by the book					
		17. Promoting meaningful communication by referring to realistic activities and situations					
Language Skills	Reading	18. Adequate and Appropriate exercises and tasks for improving reading comprehension					
		19. Devising appropriate tasks for improving reading techniques					

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Criteria		The Checklist	EX	G	AD	W	TL
	Writing	20. Enough exercises to include pre-writing, writing, and post-writing					
		21. Presenting suitable patterns to improve writing					
	Listening	22. Adequate and appropriate tasks to improve listening					
		23. Organizing tasks from simple to complex (adequate sequence)					
	Speaking	24. Appropriateness of individual and group speaking activities					
		25. Completeness, appropriateness and adequacy of the speaking tasks					
Teachers' Manual		26. Helping the teacher understand the objective and methodology of the textbook					
		27. Providing useful index to guide the teachers to the vocabulary, structures and topics in the textbook					
		28. Providing the correct and/or suggested answers for all the exercisers					
		29. Providing extra activities and tasks for training the students in oral and written skills					
		30. Providing suggestions and information to help the teachers teach language skills and components efficiently					
		31. Providing guidance for the teachers for evaluating their students					
Gen. Considerations		32. Focus on the latest FLT approaches and methodology					
		33. Clear statement of the objectives of the course and of each textbook					
		34. Attention to L1-L2 differences and taking cultural values into consideration					

Criteria	The Checklist	EX	G	AD	W	TL
	35. Contextualization of pronunciation/grammar/ vocabulary exercises					
	36. Introducing self-check exercises and reviews at certain intervals					
CDA Features	37. The equal use of gender in terms of names and pronouns					
	38. Proving a situation so that students think and act critically					
	39. Relationship between the content of the textbook (text) and real-life situations (society)					
	40. Addressing social problems esp. the problem of inequality in the society					
	41. Focusing on the issues that are of immediate concern to learners/practitioners					

4. Concluding Remarks

Despite the fact that different evaluation schemes and checklists have been suggested to teachers to evaluate and select their required texts, none of them is based on the contextual needs of the stakeholders. As it is clear in the literature, the criteria and key questions central to such schemes mostly depend on the type of context/circle as well as the researchers' local priorities and preferences. So, the results of the studies benefiting from such checklists are mostly not dependable because of the discrepancy between priorities and preferences of the criteria in the scheme and the assumptions of the context in which the checklist is used.

The second key point worth discussing concerns the idea that not only would change the relative importance of criteria over time but also the

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interpretation given to the scores assigned to each category. Accordingly, a solid, structurally-based textbook which was very beneficial in the era of audio-lingualism definitely is not qualified nowadays which is the era of post-method and task-based language teaching. .

A major question in evaluating and selecting materials is: “To what extent are the materials sensitive to the situation?” As such, in the process of material evaluation and selection we must primarily examine the implications that the use of a set of material might have for classroom work and thus move toward grounded opinions about whether or not the methodology and content of the materials is appropriate for a particular language-teaching context. This is an equally important measure to be taken and involves matching the material against the context in which it is going to be used. We can check the appropriateness and adequacy of the textbooks and materials for specific situations by collecting data utilizing the local checklists such as the proposed one with regard to the institution and purpose, teachers, learners, curriculum, and socio-cultural context.

We conclude the paper by suggesting four stages in the evaluation and selection of textbooks and other materials for specific situations and contexts as Riazi (2003) states.

Therefore, the current scheme might be used in any of these four stages; namely, survey, analysis, evaluation, and selection. These four stages include:

1. Survey (A comprehensive survey will be done regarding the key issues of the teaching/learning situation such as learners, teachers, institution, goals and objectives.)
2. Analysis (A detailed analysis of the materials. In this respect, the student’s textbook, workbook, teacher’s manual, CD, film and other issues related to the perspective textbook will be analyzed in detail.)

3. Evaluation (The evaluators may use their experience and expertise as well as the key issues in the proposed model, namely, a. language components; b. tasks, activities and exercises; c. language skills; d. teachers' manuals; e. general considerations; and f. CDA features as the criteria and give weights to the illuminating information.)
4. Selection (Using an objective score in the evaluation stage and considering the requirements of the particular socio-cultural milieu situation in which the material is going to be practiced, a fair decision is made.)

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