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The Role of Textbook Evaluation on Second Language Teaching and Learning: A Perspective

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Abstract

ELT materials (textbooks) play a vital role in many language classrooms but in recent years there has been a lot of debate throughout the ELT profession on the actual role of materials in teaching English as a Second Language. The paper addresses the importance and the value of textbook materials in English language teaching and the role of materials evaluation. It also describes and discusses the evaluation process by applying a wide variety of relevant and contextually appropriate criteria for the evaluation of the textbooks that we use in our language classrooms. For this study, the Text Books of English by Board of Intermediate Education, Andhra Pradesh, are considered for evaluation.

Introduction

Materials Evaluation is essentially a matching process in which the needs and assumptions of a particular teaching-learning context are matched to available solutions (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). As pointed out by these writers, materials evaluation can develop awareness in many ways: A) It obliges teachers to analyze their own presumptions as to the nature of language and learning. B) Materials evaluation forces teachers to establish their priorities. C) Materials evaluation can help teachers to see materials as an integral part of the whole teaching/learning process.

Textbooks in English Language Education

English language instruction has many important components but the essential constituents too many ESL/EFL classrooms and programs are the textbooks and instruction materials that are often used by language instructors. As Hutchinson and Torres (1994) suggest:

"The textbook is an almost universal element of [English language] teaching. Millions of copies are sold every year, and numerous aid projects have been set up to produce them in [various] countries...No teaching-learning situation, it seems, is complete until it has its relevant textbook. " (p.315).

Another theorist Sheldon (1988) agrees with this observation and suggest that textbooks not only "represent the visible heart of any ELT program" (p.237) but also offer considerable advantages - for both the student and the teacher - when they are being used in the ESL/EFL. In addition, Cunningsworth (1995) argues that they are an effective resource for self-directed learning, an effective resource for presentation material, a source of ideas and activities, a reference source for students, a syllabus where they reflect pre-determined learning objectives, and support for less experienced teachers who have yet to gain in confidence.

Textbook Evaluation in English Language Teaching

It is important that to remember, however that since the 1970s, there has been a movement to make learners the centre of language instruction and it is probably the best to view textbooks as resources in achieving aims and objectives that have already been set in terms of learners needs. Consequently, we must make every effort to establish and apply wide variety of relevant and appropriate criteria for evaluation of the textbooks that we use in our language classrooms. We should ensure "that careful selection is made and that the materials selected closely reflect the aims, methods, and values of the teaching programme" (Cunningworth, 1995 p.7). Sheldon (1988) suggest that the selection of an ELT textbook often signals an important administrative and educational decision in which there is considerable professional, financial, or even political investment. He has offered several other reasons for textbook evaluation. Cunningsworth (1995) and Ellis (1997) suggest that textbook evaluation helps teachers move beyond impressionistic assessment and it also helps them acquire useful, accurate, systematic and contextual insights in to the overall nature of textbook material.

Prominent theorists in the field of ELT textbook design and analysis such as Williams(1983), Sheldon(1988), Brown(1995), Cunningsworth(1995) and

Harmer(1996) all agree that evaluation checklists should have some criteria pertaining to the physical characteristics of textbooks such as layout, organization, and logistics. Other important criteria that should be incorporated are those that assess a textbook's methodology, aims, and approaches and the degree to which a set of materials is not only teachable but also fits the needs of the individual teachers' approach as well as the organization's overall curriculum.

For this purpose, Board of Intermediate Education, Andhra Pradesh, India, prescribed English textbooks (INTERNET-I & INTERNET-II) were taken for analysis. One unit from each textbook was analyzed by taking the popular evaluation checklists developed by above said prominent theorists who have been working in the field of English language teaching especially in textbook valuation and materials design.

Layout and Design

A. Layout of the textbook

Intermediate First Year, is an integrated textbook that contains prose pieces, poems, short stories, grammar, study skills and communication skills. The layout and design of the book refer to its organization and presentation of language items and activities presented in the textbook. In this textbook, for instance, the learning objectives are not clear and a detailed overview of the topics, functions, structures/grammar, and skills with in each unit will not be found in the introductory table of contents page (see page 8) but it consists of topics regarding Prose and Poetry Sections I &II are collection of five poems and six prose pieces called 'Rhyme and Reason'. The topics deal with contemporary issues like positive attitude in 'Attitude is everything', 'The Extraordinary Story of Helen Keller' illustrates the will power and perseverance, indianization of English, revolutionarily changes that microchip brings about in modern life etc.. Section III is a collection of six short stories (see page 89) and Section IV deals with grammar, study skills, and communication skills.

The overall layout and design of INTER NET I & II seem to have extensive glossaries and reading comprehension questions, followed by some annotations both in

prose and poetry lessons. Model paper is given so as to help the learner to prepare for the exams at the end of the book. Grammar section has been dealt with separately in the Grammar section. It is evident that learners are provided extensive reading and writing materials whereas practice given for listening & speaking skills seems to be inadequate in enhancing oral skills of the learners.

B. Layout and Design of Each Unit

With respect to the each unit in the prose, for example Unit 5, the breakdown and sequencing is demonstrative of the approach known as PPP (Presentation, Practice, and Production) and it is organized as follows: 1. *Getting To Know the Writer* that gives us the brief details of the writer and his works. 2. *Getting Started* which introduces the learners to the main lesson and the gist of the lesson is provided in order to understand the lesson easily. 3. *Glossary* is designed to make them understand the text easily and ensure that the learners must comprehend the text thoroughly. 4. *How Well Do You Remember?* is for testing learners whether they follow the text by some guided questions. 5. *How Well Do You Understand?* is aimed at learners understanding on the given information. 6. *Annotations* section intends to see whether they interpret the text in the given context and it makes the learners to internalize the text. 7. *Additional Reading* section is designed for providing extra information for the learners to go for similar kind of readings.

The design of the poetry units is arranged like that of the prose lessons consisting of *Getting To Know the Poet*, *Getting Started*, *Glossary*, *Understanding the Poem*, *Appreciating the Poem*, *Annotations* and *Additional Readings*.

Methodology

One of the pragmatic criteria that permit to the overall textbook package is the authors' approach to teaching methodology. Brown (1995) and Cunningsworth (1995) suggest that it is absolutely essential in evaluating any textbook to determine whether or not its inherent methodology will reinforce the aims and objectives. It is understood from the book that it seems to be Structural/Situational than of Communicative

approach. The aims and objectives seem to be realized in the textbook. Though the textbook doesn't have syllabus, it is drawn from the hidden curriculum that the focus would be to provide interesting reading materials in order to interest the learners and to improve their language proficiency. (See page 8, Internet I). INTERNET I & II are integrated textbooks for first year and second year Intermediate Education respectively in terms of combining prose, poetry, grammar and communication skills but not an integration of LSRW skills in the units (see unit 5, prose; unit 6, Grammar section in INTERNET I and pages 74&75 and letter writing section in INTERNET II).

The textbooks seem to follow PPP (Presentation, practice, production) approach which is based on the belief that accuracy comes out of fluency. Instruction at the outset is form-focused and the teacher-centered and grammatical accuracy is stressed. The proponents of the approach such as Swain (1985) have suggested that learning a language is not the same as using a language and argue that some formal instruction and controlled activities must have their place in ELT classroom. Long (1990) and Willis (1996) have suggested that a better alternative to PPP would perhaps be a Task-Based Learning (TBL) approach. They claim that such an approach creates a need for learners to acquire new language through the tasks that require them to carry out and struggle through communicative task, before going on to focus on specific language items. The term 'task' is widely used in language teaching methodology (Prabhu 1987; Nunan 1989), often with different meanings. For Skehan (1996), a task is viewed as 'an activity in which meaning is primary; there is some sort of relationship to the real world'. Thus, the information and opinion-gap activities are common in this approach. However, as it can be observed in the units of prose and poetry in I&II year texts (see unit 5 in prose & unit 6 in Grammar section, INTERNET I and 4th lesson in poetry & letter writing and report writing sections in INTERNET II), these important approaches are not focused. The textbooks could have provided different tasks for the learners to interact and engage each other either by pair work or group-work in the each unit than discussing them separately in Grammar section.

Authenticity and Tasks/Activities

An authentic text is one ‘created to fulfill some social purpose in the language community in which it was produced’ (Little *et al.* 1988: 27).With the onset of communicative movement, a greater awareness of the need to develop students’ skills for the real world has meant that teachers endeavor to stimulate this world in the classroom. One way of doing this has been to use authentic materials. The use of authentic texts, embracing both the written and spoken word, is helping to bridge the gap between classroom knowledge and the students’ capacity to participate in real world events (Wilkins 1976:79). Many writers claim that authentic materials motivate learners because they are intrinsically more interesting or stimulating than artificial materials (see Allwright, 1979; Freeman and Holden, 1986; Swaffer, 1985).With respect to each unit in the textbook, a lesser amount of weightage is given to the authentic texts/materials (See unit 5 in prose section and 6th unit in grammar section in INTERNET I) but a few chapters like 1-4 in grammar and practice materials section in INTERNET II contain materials that focus on authentic texts like filling forms, bar charts, advertisements et.

The activities and tasks included in the textbooks do not seem to be adequate enough to meet the needs of the learners in succeeding in their attempts to get a good job in their academic career. A number of theorists such as Vygotsky (1978) and Long (1990) have advocated the cognitive value of student-student/social interaction for promoting learning. Long (1990), for example, cites five benefits of interactive group activities in comparison with teacher-fronted whole classroom instruction. These include increased quantities of students language use; enhanced quality of the language use; more opportunities to individualize the instruction; and greater motivation for learning. Until the late 1950s, the Grammar-Translation and Audio-Lingual Methods characterized language teaching methodology throughout the world.

These approaches advocated de-contextualization and rule-focused instruction and practice. Later studies demonstrated that a focus on form and accuracy did not necessarily ensure communicative competence outside the classroom. The notion of

communicative competence was refined along with the ‘Communicative Approach in 1970s, and this term was eventually accepted to encompass all components of language: from grammar discourse to social context and strategic ability (Hymes1972; Widdowson, 1978; Canale and Swain, 1980; Richards and Rogerts, 1996). Proponents of the ‘Communicative Approach’ to language teaching stressed the importance of the language use versus knowledge about language (Harmer,1996).Observation of social interactions attested to communicative competence showed that authentic language communication also involved the negotiation of meaning between interlocutors. When we analyze the textbooks closely, it is found that there are tasks or exercises which do not promote task-based learning, and consciousness-raising activities. Furthermore, materials do not contain a variety of role-play and information-gap activities which would help the learners engage in real life communication.

Skills and Appropriateness

As mentioned in the ‘methodology section’, INTERNET I &II followed multi-skills syllabus and therefore covers and integrates both productive (speaking and writing)and receptive skills(listening and reading skills).However it placed a lot of emphasis on reading and writing skills. Three prominent authors in ELT, Swan (1985), Harmer (1996) and McDonough and Shaw (1997) advocative an integrated approaches because it considers and incorporates several categories of both meaning and form. One of the characteristics of the integrated syllabus is that the linguistic elements of the textbook such as grammar and vocabulary items are closely connected to the skills–base. It is noticed in the units that after each lesson. Lot of glossary section is designed all the items presented are deductively and discrete in nature. As it is mentioned above, only reading and writing skills are stressed in the units of both INTERNET I&II and little scope and time is given for Speaking and Listening skills. It is also evident from the hidden curriculum that it is aimed at all language skills in general and Reading & Writing in particular (See unit 6 in study skills section in INTERNET I and chapters 1-5 and 9-13 in Grammar and Practice Material Section, INTERNET II). Receptive skills are those that involve active participation on the part of the reader or listener. They are

practiced by using both ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ processing skills and learning strategies. For speaking skills, learners are not provided enough practice except some model dialogues and a few functions. (Section 2, INTERNET I and Section 8, INTERNET II).

Another important factor is that whether the materials are appropriate to the learners’ needs and interests. The syllabus covers different subjects and themes that have a variety of topics such as ‘existential insecurity in the post World War period’; ‘a tongue in cheek account of the banking system’; ‘human relationships’, etc in Poetry and themes that include ‘adopting positive approach towards life’, ‘idealization of English’, ‘microprocessors and their place in modern life’, etc. It is assumed that the materials surely meet the learners’ short-term goals because they are designed in view of the learners ‘end- examinations’ which seems to be the prime objective of the English curriculum in most of the Indian classrooms. But in reality most of the students are lagging behind communication skills and employability skills as the textbook materials do not provide ample scope for them to use English in their day to day conversations.

Selection and Grading

Selection and grading is one of the important factors in the materials evaluation so as to check whether the level of difficulty of the tasks and activities presented and how these materials are organized in the textbooks. In connection with the activities and their grading and selection, it is found that grading is done adopting the ‘simple- to-complex’ methodology. (see pages 41, 42 & unit 6 in Grammar section, INTERNET I & letter writing section on page 308 in INTERNET II). It is believed that items presented in the text are suitable for the level of learners and meet their present language needs in order to cope up with their examination system. Moreover, learners would remember the materials easily as they are deigned to answer the questions immediately after each main lesson. These materials can help learners comprehend the gist of the lesson and help them to take the end-exams in a better way.

Stimulus/Practice/Revision

Writing and reading skills are certainly a central focus of both INTERNET I & II. Many activities in the syllabus focus on individual work than group-work, role- plays and conversation skills. The materials emphasize the writing activities such as filling forms, writing reports, letter writing, and sentence structure. As these materials do not provide sufficient opportunities for the learners to reflect and use English in their real-life situations, they may not be able to enhance their communication skills. It suggested that allowance is made for revision/testing.

Layout and Flexibility

As far as the flexibility of the textbook materials is concerned, both INTERNET I & II are made of durable paper and the presentation of the information appears to be clear and concise. The textbook materials contain a few charts, photographs and they are incorporated supplementary materials such as classroom cassettes, CD's, a student workbook or a teacher's manual. The type of work assigned for the learners is functional and no pace is given on each page. Another factor that really looks into selections of textbook materials is its cost. In relation to INTERNET I & II, the cost is affordable and every learner can buy it.

Conclusion

To sum up, it is evident that textbook analysis is one of the major concerns in the field of English language teaching. It is strongly believed that English teachers must realize the prime objectives of the textbook materials and need to know what their textbooks are and how best they are designed. Moreover, materials analysis empowers teachers' awareness about their own English language materials and brings about changes in their attitudes, beliefs and improves the teaching and learning situation in their own classrooms. As Tomlinson (2008) points out that most of the course book materials do not provide minimum opportunities for learners to use English in their real life situations. As a result majority of the learners are not able to communicate in

English in their day to day conversations. Therefore, there is need to study and evaluate ELT materials so as to improve teachers' efficacy and English language materials design and development.

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