

# Textbook Evaluation: An Evaluation Plan

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## 1. Reasons for evaluation

A new set of textbooks needs to be evaluated to examine whether the textbooks are as effective as they are expected to be. The effectiveness of the textbooks is measured against certain criteria:

- Meeting the general aims of the course: e.g. improving the students' level of English in the areas of the four language skills and teaching them the basic features of the language.
- Appropriateness to the context they are to be used in: level of the students, the teachers, the classroom environment, and the social and cultural aspects.
- Accountability: value for money.

## 2. The procedure

Any institution should have done a kind of needs analysis or a consultation to choose a certain set of textbooks; it is unlikely that it just decided to try out that set of materials "out of the blue".

As far as the evaluation is concerned, two types of evaluation are to be used, *on page* as well as *material in use* evaluation. That is because a decision has to be made after getting the results of the evaluation: what action should be taken in regard to the new set of textbooks. It seems that comparing the data from both types of evaluation would give a clearer picture of the real situation and give possible answers to some important questions like, are they working or not? If not, why not? Is there something wrong with the textbooks or is it because of other factors that are related to the teachers or the students themselves?

One can have the impression that the textbooks can work very well through *on page evaluation* and one would predict that they could be very suitable and would give the desired effect. On the other hand, when it comes to actually using them in class, it could turn out to be another story.

### 2.1. *On page evaluation*

This is concerned with what the textbooks look like on paper, e.g. examining how they work according to the description provided in the blurb, the teacher's guide and as implied in the tasks and activities. It is what is referred to as the 'theoretical worth of the materials' (Rea-Dickins and Germaine, 1992:29). In general, the *on page evaluation* is evaluating textbooks as they are on the printed page, which has no reference to their actual use in the classroom.

According to the purpose of evaluation, such criteria as the following are to be examined:

1. Do the textbooks represent the authors' claims?
2. Are the textbooks appropriate for the level of students and the context?
3. Do the activities seem to help the students with the basic elements of the four language skills?
4. Does the teacher's guide help the teacher in how the tasks should be handled; are there enough guidelines and hints?
5. Is it possible for the students to use the textbooks on their own; are there clear instructions for what is to be done?

## **2.2. Material in use evaluation**

As apposed to *on page evaluation*, *material in use evaluation* is evaluating the textbooks as they work in real classroom situations to examine how they really work and detect any problems that may occur.

In order for the data to be as valid and as reliable as possible, it is best to have the same criteria or answer the same kind of questions that are examined in the *on page evaluation* and then compare the data from both types of evaluation

Beside those criteria, some other aspects can be examined such as:

- Students' performance in the classroom.
- Students' attitudes towards the new textbooks.
- Teachers' approaches in relation to the use of the textbooks.
- Teacher's understanding of, and attitudes towards, any new approaches that textbooks may present.

## **2.3. Who carries out the evaluation?**

At this point, the issue of "insiders" and "outsiders" arises. It seems that the word "evaluation" is strongly connected with outsiders in the sense that usually the action for an evaluation is issued "from above" and the insiders have to do the "donkey work", as expressed by Alderson and Scott (1992:38). In fact, this seems to be true in many cases where supervisors or administrators, the outsiders, decide to do an evaluation of some sort and the teachers, the insiders, only get informed that they will be observed or that they have to fill in a questionnaire. However, the situation seems to be changing to realise the importance of the active involvement of insiders as well outsiders. The "insiders" have the advantage that they themselves are part of the teaching context and they are aware of, and fully involved with, the students. Therefore, they can provide insights about "how things work in real situations".

It should be clear that what is referred to as an outsider or an insider depends on an awareness of the context and the students, the degree of involvement that they have with the actual teaching process and the immediate contact with the new set of textbooks.

## **2.4. Who is involved in the evaluation?**

Information about the new set of textbooks is collected from different sources depending on the kind of information needed for the evaluation. The following groups are involved in the evaluation process:

### **1. The teachers:**

- Information about the suitability of the textbooks to the teaching / learning context.
- Information about the students' development through using the new textbooks.
- Comments on the teacher's book; is it easy to use? And is it helpful enough?

### **2. The students:**

- Information about whether the textbooks help them in their language development in general.
- Information about whether the materials have an effect on their motivation and interests.

### **3. Programme coordinators and other teachers: (not using the new textbooks) who can be considered as "partly outsiders".**

- Information about the actual use of the new textbooks in real classroom situations through observations.

## **3. The instruments**

The data is collected using different evaluation methods. The instruments for evaluation will vary according to the type of information needed and who is to use it.

**3.1. Tests:** the students can take a placement test at the beginning of the academic year that includes the four language skills as well as grammar and vocabulary. This test is going to be used as one source of data for the student's level of English before the use of the new textbooks. During the academic year, the students can do two or three tests. The tests are based on the same criteria as the placement test, which are set on the course objectives. Then, all test results are compared to look for improvements in the students' level of English.

**3.2. Questionnaires:** there are two types of questionnaires, one for the teachers and the other for the students. The teachers' questionnaire can be given out at

the end of each academic term. The questionnaire includes the teaching aspects:

- Are the textbooks suitable for the teaching / learning context and the learners needs?
- How do the students respond to the new textbooks?
- Are the textbooks of an integrated nature?
- Do the textbooks promote better classroom interaction?

The student's questionnaire can be given at the same times. The questionnaire asks the students to comment on aspects that are related to the learners' point of view and their reaction to the new textbooks. It answers questions like:

- Are the tasks and activities easy or difficult to deal with?
- Are the topics interesting?
- Is the textbook easy to read, follow and use for studying outside the classroom?

**3.3. Observations:** classroom observation seems to be one of the most effective methods to examine the textbooks as they are being used in authentic teaching / learning contexts. The observations are done by programme coordinators and other colleague teachers who are not using the new textbooks. The first observations can take place in the middle of the term to ensure that the teachers and the students get familiar with new textbooks. Then, more observations can be carried out at the end of the term.

One might argue that it is better to have colleague teachers to observe because they are using the textbooks themselves. Nevertheless, this might affect their comments because they might compare their way of teaching with the way their colleagues deal with the textbooks. Therefore, they may not be as objective as possible.

#### **4. Triangulation**

Alderson (1992:284), argues that 'triangulation is particularly important in evaluation. He supports his argument by raising the issue that there is 'No One Best Method' for evaluation. Therefore, it is best to "triangulate" by gathering data from a variety of sources using a variety of evaluation methods to be able to 'confirm findings across methods'. For that particular benefit, triangulation is used because there is a need for precise findings to guide whatever decisions to be made regarding the new set of textbooks. It provides confirmation of findings through comparing the data collected from different sources as well as comparing the data collected by different methods; in this sense triangulation can be a means to test the "validity" of the findings.

## 5. The results

Although the results would be of benefit for all the groups that have participated in the evaluation process, there are differences in the benefits for each group as well as their own needs. First, for an administrator the results would have only one value: that is to help in making a decision about the accountability of the new materials; are they worth the money that was spent?

Second, the programme coordinator would be interested in the implementation side of the materials: are there any changes to be made to the course? Do the new textbooks require workshops for the teachers? Are there any eliminations or adaptations to be made or is there a need for any supplementary materials?

Third, the teachers would be interested in the pedagogical side of the evaluation including such aspects as appropriateness to their teaching context and their students' level and needs and any new teaching ideas that the new textbooks may promote. Although the students are the only group who will probably know nothing about the results of the evaluation, they benefit from the evaluation in the sense that they have themselves participated in providing some data that may help in making the right decisions about the new textbooks that they have to work with.

## References

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