

How to Evaluate an EFL/ESL Textbook- a Problem and a Solution

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Abstract

English is treated almost as a second language in Bangladesh. Teaching and learning English, for this reason, is very important in our country not only in primary, secondary or higher secondary level but also in tertiary and upper tertiary level. For teaching English in a developing country like ours which lacks the sufficient number of skilled teacher, textbook is essential. Textbooks make classes very much effective and focused for the students as well as for the teachers. But to have the desired goal, choosing an appropriate textbook for a language class is essential. How to choose a correct textbook for an ESL/EFL(English as Second Language/ English as foreign Language) class can be a burning question for the teacher. Here in this article we tried to find out an easy but effective way of evaluating the merit of a textbook by using certain criteria with a rating system and thus help the teachers to choose the appropriate textbook for their need.

Key Words: ESL/EFL textbook, effective teaching and learning, evaluation, criteria, rating system, instructional materials.

How necessary is a textbook for an ESL/EFL classroom in Bangladesh? The answer to this question will definitely be a positive one by most of the language teacher of the country. Since in a developing country like ours where learning materials other than the textbooks are difficult to find and so to use, textbooks provide ready made and cheap teaching text, learning tasks and learning materials. In many situations textbook serves as a syllabus and guides the teachers and students in their way of teaching and learning. In Brumfit's words textbooks are "masses of rubbish skillfully marketed" (Brumfit, 1980, p.30). But in an ESL/EFL classroom using textbook can facilitate both the teachers and the students with a more effective and organized teaching and learning process. Teachers depend much on textbooks in making the class room effective. So choosing an appropriate textbook is important. The quality and quantity of textbook have increased dramatically over the recent years making the choice of appropriate textbook for the target learner group for the teachers rather difficult. Having very little time to choose from a vast option which may be common, popular, cheap or all at the same time and with the on going pressure from the representatives of the different publishers most of the textbooks are chosen with little or sometimes no evaluation. The teachers or the educators most of the time go for choosing the most common or popular textbook for their class room which may or may not be the appropriate one.

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Byrds (2001) emphasis on the text being a good fit for the teachers, students and the curriculum. According to Jeremy Harmer, 'If the language, content and sequencing of the textbook are appropriate, the teacher will want to go ahead and use it' (Harmer 1998: p.111). To make the most effective use of a textbook, the teachers must decide which textbook are appropriate for their needs. A teacher needs to determine the extent to which a textbook focuses on and is associated with a coherent set of significant level or age-appropriate student learning goals that the teachers, schools or institutions have identified as integral to the understanding of and progress of the learners towards their goals of language achievements. They must also assess how effectively the textbook's instructional design supports the achievement of these goals (Kulm, et al.1999). According to Richards (1990) 'goal statements refer to elements of the program that are actually going to be addressed by instruction.' (Richadrs1990:p.3). Keeping all these ideas in head, a teacher or instructor must try to evaluate the textbook to have the highest effect. To find out whether the text can serve its purpose or not, the text needs to be evaluated. In evaluating a text, reviewers need to look for certain issues, for example, how completely the contents of the textbook align with the curriculum or syllabus of the course, whether the contents presented are really helpful for the learners in applying them in the real life situation, whether the activities and information presented are coherent and accurate etc need to be examined minutely. Finding can be presented in few report sections (AAAS project (2061)2003:p.1,2):

- i. **Alignment section:** How the curriculum material's content matches with the topics and ideas presented in the textbook for developing the linguistic ideas of the students are examined in this criterion. If the content of the textbook is well suited with the curriculum and the development of the ideas presented in the content is also per requirement we can tell that the alignment of the book is excellent. It can to satisfactory level if the topics and ideas match with the curriculum but the development of idea is not as per requirement. But if none of this can satisfy the evaluator, the alignment of the textbook will be rated as poor.
- ii. **Reality based presentation:** Here whether the topics and key linguistic ideas are supported by practical and useful materials from real life situation including whether these materials are practical, interesting and understandable or comprehensible is examined. We can find the reality based presentation excellent if the material presented is well suited with the language used in the real life which also creates interest among to learners. It can be of satisfactory level if the topics and ideas based on real life but not presented in an interesting way to motivate the students learn the language. But the textbook can have poor reality based presentation if the topics are bookish and not at all interesting for the learners.
- iii. **Accuracy of the text:** Here whether the textbook contains any materials that contain errors, misleading statements or any information that can reinforce commonly held misconceptions are examined. The accuracy level of the book can be called excellent if the content and the idea presented are free from any king of error or misconception. It can be in the satisfactory level if the text of the textbook contains any printing mistake which can be corrected easily. But the accuracy level of the text will be called poor if the content and ideas presented are full of grammatical and conceptual mistakes.

- iv. **Coherence:** This section examines whether the materials presented are coherent with the key ideas and topics. There should be coherence between the key ideas and topics and already learned ideas. Coherence should also be maintained between the key ideas and other related ideas.

If all the above mentioned criteria are present in the content of the textbook we can say that the textbook has excellent coherence. But the coherence of the textbook can be satisfactory if only the first two criteria are present in it. If only the first one or none of the criteria is present we can definitely think that the textbook has poor coherence.

If the findings from these sections are positive (excellent or at least satisfactory), the evaluator can go deep into the matter by analyzing the content which align with the specific learning goal in making 'sightings' in the material specific activities, lessons, exercises and other learning opportunities in the students or teacher materials in which the specific benchmarks and standards are addressed. We must evaluate the quality of these instructional materials presented in the textbook because effective teaching depend much upon the development of instructional design and strategies. Along with these, discussion questions and tasks at the end of each chapter aid the teachers in their personal journeys towards effective teaching. If these instructional materials are of excellent quality, the textbook will certainly serve its purpose.

Whether the materials actually address the learning goals by offering the learners with high quality instructional materials is based on two main bases (Kulm, et al. 1999):

- a. substance and
- b. sophistication

In substance, the reviewers look for whether the activities address the specific substance of a learning goal or if there is only a topic match. The topics or the table of contents of most of the language learning textbook are almost the same – tense, subject-verb agreement, clauses, sentence structure etc. but they can differ greatly in specific ideas, presentation and types of activities they cover. In sophistication the reviewer consider whether the activities are developmentally appropriate. To evaluate the quality of the instructional material both these issues should be considered. To do this we can analyze these issues under seven categories (AAAS project (2061)2003).

Quality of instructional Material

The seven categories presented below are selected by focusing on specific aspects of instructional materials. The criteria can be annotated briefly to provide users with additional guidance. Each criterion is followed by a list of indicator to show the reviewers how well the curriculum materials meet the criterion. A rating system has been followed consisting the categories 'excellent', 'satisfactory', and 'poor'.

1. The first criterion can be called as '**providing a sense of purpose**'. Here the evaluator can find out whether the curriculum material presented in the textbook should attempt to make its

purposes explicit and meaningful to the students. The sequence of lesson activities of the selected textbook should convey a purpose.

There are some research based criteria in evaluating a textbook under this particular criterion:

1.1 Conveying an overall sense of purpose (both unit and lesson):

Whether the materials can provide the students with a sense of purpose for going on with the learning materials is focused here.

The indicators are:

- 1.1.1 The students will need to use any grammatical item or problem or representation presented to them
- 1.1.2 The material encourages the students to think about the purpose of activity
- 1.1.3 The presentation is comprehensible, interesting and motivating
- 1.1.4 Whether the materials convey to the students the relationship between the lesson activities and unit purpose
- 1.1.5 Problems are consistent with the stated purpose
- 1.1.6 Provide opportunity to think about and discuss problem the students face in learning the presented materials

Rating scheme: If the materials meet the indicators form 1 to 6, they can be graded as excellent. The materials can be graded as satisfactory if they meet indicators 1,3 and 5. But the materials will be graded poor if it meets only the first indicator that is indicator 1.

1.2 Justifying lesson/ activity sequences:

Whether the materials are organized in a logical or strategic sequence of lessons or activities or a bunch of activities arranged together is important here.

Indicators:

- 1.2.1 Whether the sequences are done in a logical way for example from simple to complex or common to rare in use etc.
- 1.2.2 Whether the materials convey the rationale for this purpose

Rating scheme: The materials can be called excellent if both the criteria are met. But if they meet only one of the indicators they can be graded as satisfactory. The materials will be poor if none of the criteria is met.

2. The second criterion is ‘attending the ideas students already have about the target language use’:

Already known ideas form a foundation for the subsequent learning and foster learner’s understanding. So it is very important for the materials to be able to alert the teachers to commonly held ideas that are relevant to the key ideas.

Indicators:

- 2.1 Attending the prerequisite knowledge and idea about ‘where and when to use’ the material are required by the learners:

The materials should identify the pre-requisite knowledge which is necessary for learning the key ideas.

Indicators:

- 2.1.1 Each unit contains exercises in the form of ‘warmer’ or ‘lead in’ to check the pre-requisite idea needed to understand the main idea of the unit

2.1.2 The warmers and lead-in's are well suited, interesting and easy to understand for the learners

2.1.3 These are helpful for the learners to associate the pre-learned ideas with the idea to be introduced in the unit

Rating scheme: When all the three criteria are met by the materials they can be accepted as excellent. But if only 1 and 2 are met, the materials can be treated as satisfactory. The materials will be treated as poor when only 1 or none of the criteria is met.

2.2 Attending the level of language the learners can use:

The material should introduce the new linguistic idea in the unit which is only one level higher in terms of complexity in use.

Indicators:

2.2.1 The unit has few exercises in the beginning of the unit which contains materials based on the structures and vocabularies the learners learnt previously

2.2.2 Complexity of the sentence structures and difficulties of the vocabularies to use in the context develop gradually through the unit

Rating scheme: When both the criteria are met the materials can be treated as excellent. The materials will become satisfactory if they meet only the first criteria. But the materials will be treated as poor if they do not meet any of the criteria.

3. Enhancing/facilitating learning environment' can be the next criterion. Whether the textbook can provide opportunities and scopes that can enhance the use and implementation of the curriculum materials for creating an environment suitable for language learning is focused here.

3.1 Providing teacher content support:

Whether the materials are convenient and helpful for the teachers to use them effectively and efficiently to improve the language learning environment for the learners is the main focus here.

Indicators:

3.1.1 Make the teachers aware of whether the language structures have been simplified for students.

3.1.2 The sufficiently detailed answer key of the exercise should provide in the student book for the teachers to understand and interpret various student responses.

3.1.3 Recommend resources for improving teachers understanding of key ideas.

Rating scheme: If all the three criteria are met by the materials they will be treated as excellent materials. But meeting only the first two criteria will make them satisfactory. The materials will be poor materials when only one (1or2) or no criterion is met by them.

3.2 Encouraging curiosity:

Whether the textbook materials are suitable enough to create a class room environment that welcome students' curiosity, rewards creativity and encourages a spirit of healthy questioning is important here.

Indicators:

3.2.1 This includes questions for how to encourage students' questions, guide their search for how to use language elements in a variety of situation effectively, respect their ideas.

3.2.2 provides scopes for class room interaction, e.g. dialogue boxes, role play etc.

Rating scheme: When both the criteria are met the materials will be treated as excellent. But the materials will be satisfactory only if they meet at least one of the criteria. The materials will be treated as poor if none of the criteria is met.

4. Providing support to the teachers and the students to teach and to learn is the next criterion which provides the answer of the question- does the material help the teachers to create a class room community that enables all students to experience success which will provide all different kinds of students with a feeling of belonging in the language classroom.

4.1 Topics and ideas presented in the textbook provides positive feedback to motivate the teachers and learners to teach and learn

Indicators:

4.1.1 Avoids stereotypes that might be offensive to a particular group or minority group.

4.1.2 Suggest alternative ways for the students to express their ideas in their own way during instruction.

4.1.3 Include specific suggestions about how teachers can modify activities for students with special needs. Some suggestions should be given to the teachers to alternate the activities for students with special needs.

4.1.4 Provides strategies to validate students' relevant personal and social experiences with the contexts in which they are to use the target language.

Rating scheme: When both the criteria are met the materials will be treated as excellent. But the materials will be satisfactory only if they meet at least one of the criteria. If only 1 or none of the criteria is met, the materials will be treated as poor.

4.2 Instructional materials and activities referred in the textbook are available and easy to be implemented:

Indicators:

4.2.1 Teaching equipments needed to teach the textbook are readily available

4.2.2 Activities and tasks mentioned in the text are practically viable to be implemented inside the classroom

Rating scheme: When both the criteria are met the materials will be treated as excellent. But the materials will be satisfactory only if they meet at least one of the criteria. The materials will be treated as poor if none of the criteria is met.

5. Engaging students with relevant phenomena is the next criteria. This criterion examines whether the material provides the students with language materials relevant to their need

5.1 Providing variety of structures, grammatical elements, topics and situation to use language is important here.

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Indicators:

5.1.1 Whether the materials are to the right level of the students

5.1.2 Whether the materials are relevant to the topics to be discussed

Rating scheme: When both the criteria are met the materials will be treated as excellent. But the materials will be satisfactory if they meet some of the two criteria. The materials will be treated as poor if any of the two criteria is met.

5.2 Providing vivid examples for the relevant topics

Does the material use activities and language materials to provide the students with vivid examples of the language they are to use in their real life context

Indicators:

5.2.1 Examples are efficient (taken from real life situation and grammatically correct)

5.2.2 There are sufficient amount of examples

Rating scheme: When both the criteria are met the materials will be treated as excellent. But the materials will be satisfactory only if they meet at least some of the two criteria. The materials will be treated as poor if only one of the criteria is met.

6. Developing and using ideas how to use language for communication is our next criterion.

6.1 **Introducing vocabularies and phrases in a meaningful context** is another criterion to evaluate the materials presented in a textbook. It facilitates the teacher with the answer of the question whether the material introduces the vocabularies and phrases in a meaningful way so that the learners can understand how and when to use them.

Indicators:

6.1.1 The material links vocabularies and phrases to relevant real life situation.

6.1.2 The material encourages the learners to be more communicative rather than being conscious about grammatical accuracy.

Rating scheme: When both the criteria are met the materials will be treated as excellent. But the materials will be satisfactory only if they meet at least some of the two criteria. The materials will be treated as poor if only one of the criteria is met.

Excellent: the criterion meeting both the indicators

Satisfactory: the criterion meeting some of the two

Poor: the criterion meeting any one of the two indicators

6.2 Representing ideas effectively: it is needed to ensure whether the material of the text include accurate and comprehensible representation of the target language.

Indicators:

6.2.1 Representation is believable and useful

6.2.2 Representation is comprehensible to students

6.2.3 Representation is explicitly linked to real life

Rating scheme: The materials can be treated as excellent if they include a sufficient number of language tasks that meet indicators 1-3. The materials will be satisfactory if they include some tasks that meet indicators 1-3. But the materials will be treated as poor if they include few items that meet indicators 1-3 but none of them are adequately represented.

6.3 Scopes for practice: whether the material provides task and questions to practice skills or to use the target language in a variety of situation.

Indicators

6.3.1 The material provides a sufficient number of tasks in a variety of contexts

6.3.2 The material includes a variety of games role plays, stimulation and task based communication activities

6.3.3 The material provide the sequence of units determined by any consideration of content, functions or meaning which maintains interest

6.3.4 The materials provide a linguistic variation

Rating scheme: If the materials meet indicators 1,2,3 and 4 they can be treated as excellent. The materials will be treated as satisfactory if they meet indicators 1and 2. The materials can be poor if they meet indicator 4 only.

7. Assessing or evaluating progress of learning is the last criterion. According to Jack C. Richard ‘The primary focus of evaluation is to determine whether the goals and objectives of a language program are being attained – that is whether the program is effective’ (Richards1990:17). So we can easily understand that it is very important to ensure that the curriculum material includes a variety of assessments that apply the key ideas taught in the course.

7.1 Relationship of the assessment to goals:

If the assessment procedures are at variance with the objective of the course there is likely to be harmful effect on learning. Again if the procedures fail to measure accurately whatever they are intended to measure, it will also have a harmful effect on learning, so the assessment procedures should be aligned with the goals.

Indicators:

7.1.1 The materials discover how successful students have been in achieving the objectives/ goals of a course of study through the assessment tasks.

7.1.2 The materials constantly provide an accurate measurement of the abilities of students for which the course is meant.

Rating scheme: If the materials provide a sufficient number of assessment items that meet both the indicators, they will be treated as excellent materials. But if the materials provide some assessment items that meet both the indicators, they can be treated as satisfactory. If the materials provide no more than one or a few assessment items that meet both the indicators, they will be treated as poor materials.

7.2 Testing for understanding of the students of the topics and ideas provided in the course materials:

Whether the materials could assess the understanding level of the students about the implementation of the materials and topics they have learnt in the class

Indicators:

7.2.1 Assessment items focus on understanding the linguistic ideas the students are meant to get the course

7.2.2 Assessment items include both creative and already taught materials as tasks

Rating scheme: If the materials provide a sufficient number of assessment items that meet both the indicators they will be treated as excellent materials. The materials will be satisfactory if they provide some assessment items that meet both the indicators. But the materials will be poor if they provide no more than one or a few assessment items that meet both the indicators.

7.3 Using assessment to diagnose the level of the students:

7.3.1 Whether the curriculum materials embedded some advice or way of using the results of the assessment to find out the weakness and strength of the students to help them to improve from their present level of language.

7.3.2 Whether the materials assists the teachers to interpret the mistakes and responses to find out areas of difficulties.

7.3.3 The assessment materials include assisting placement of students by identifying the stage or part of a teaching program most appropriate to their ability.

Rating Scheme: If the materials provide a sufficient number of assessment items that meet both the indicators they will be treated as excellent materials. The materials will be satisfactory if they provide some assessment items that meet both the indicators. But the materials will be poor if they provide no more than one or a few assessment items that meet both the indicators.

The goal of every teacher is to make teaching and learning process effective so that the students can reach their desired goal of learning the target language. To do so 'A certain set of learning goals and objectives are identified, and assessment is made as to how well these goals are being met during the course of instruction' (Omaggio et al. 1979:254) A teacher after analyzing the textbook by looking at the criteria applying the rating system discussed above can make his or her decision whether to use it or reject. If the teacher finds all the above mentioned criteria 'excellent' or at least 'satisfactory' level, he or she can choose the textbook for his/her EFL/ESL class. But if there are criteria which are not up to mark meeting the poor rating the teacher should give a second thought before choosing the textbook. He or she must look for a better textbook to make the teaching and learning effective. The teacher can also compare the available textbooks and find out the best one he can use inside the classroom for the desired outcome.

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