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A Suggested Eclectic Checklist for ELT Coursebook Evaluation*

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ABSTRACT

Coursebook evaluation helps practitioners decide on the most appropriate coursebook to be exploited. Moreover, evaluation process enables to predict the potential strengths and weaknesses of a given coursebook. Checklist method is probably the most widely adopted way of judging coursebooks and there are plenty of ELT coursebook evaluation checklists available designed for making material selection and evaluation process easier and systematic. As distinct from many other checklist development studies, this study attempts to suggest an eclectic checklist by borrowing items from quite different evaluation instruments available in the literature. Initially, more than thirty ELT coursebook evaluation forms and checklists were determined as a result of extensive review of literature. Afterwards, items were chosen from among those checklists by putting aside several of them on a utilitarian basis, accompanied by the researchers' own items. We recommend that the resulting instrument be used by English language teachers, material developers and researchers.

INTRODUCTION

Coursebooks are a core part of any curriculum as the unique contributors to content learning. They are, perhaps, the most commonly used course materials in transmitting knowledge and skills. The growing popularity of coursebooks can be justified through several pedagogical reasons. Tomlinson (2003), for example, believes that “a coursebook helps provide a route map for both teachers and learners, making it possible for them to look ahead to what will be done in a lesson as well as to look back on what has been done” (p. 39). Not only do they serve as the general framework for teachers to follow in accordance with the curriculum, but they also function as a guide through the courses offering a wide collection of relevant examples and practices regardless of the subject matter. Moreover, Abdelwahab (2013) maintains that the use of a coursebook in a program “can guarantee that students in different classes will receive a similar content and therefore, can be evaluated in the same way” (p. 55). In a sense, the use of coursebooks promotes the standardization in instructional settings. Richards (2001) also highlights the importance of coursebooks and states that any learning program may have no impact if it does not have coursebooks as they provide structure and a syllabus. In English teaching field too, coursebooks are indispensable instructional materials

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having distinctive features. According to Sheldon (1988), coursebooks represent for both students and teachers the visible heart of any ELT programme. Cunningsworth (1995) believes that ELT coursebooks have multiple roles such as helping to present the written and spoken materials, promoting interaction, serving as a reference of vocabulary and grammar, acting as a source for classroom activities and offering self-access work or self-directed learning. Without any doubt, potential of an ELT coursebook, to a greater or lesser extent, affects the learning of English language and skills. As such, it is crucial to decide on the most appropriate ELT coursebook to draw on in a given context, which can only be made possible with a comprehensive and elaborative evaluation.

Approaches to ELT Coursebook Evaluation

Sheldon (1988) mentions two basic reasons to evaluate coursebooks. First, the evaluation will help the teacher or program developer make decisions on selecting the appropriate coursebook. Also, evaluation of the merits and demerits of a coursebook will familiarize the teacher with its probable weaknesses and strengths. What's more, Tomlinson (1996) regards material evaluation as another way of action research that develop our understanding of the ways in which the material works. Needless to say, materials evaluation is also likely to contribute to teachers' professional development by providing them with a critical point of view and enabling them to scrutinize the course material with an academic perspective.

Several models, methods and approaches have emerged in relation to coursebook evaluation. Grant (1987) introduced a succinct evaluative approach called *CATALYST* test; an acronym in which the letters stand for Communicative, Aims, Teachability, Availability, Level, Your impression, Students' interest and Trying and testing. Similarly, Tanner and Green (1998) offer a practical assessment form based on Method, Appearance, Teacher-friendliness, Extras, Realism, Interestingness, Affordability, Level and Skills. Initials of these features recollectively make up the word *MATERIALS*. Though these easy-to-remember models were made up as handy tools to evaluate coursebooks, they may not be quite effective in having a deep understanding on the efficacy and the actual performance of a targeted coursebook. To be more specific, McDonough and Shaw (1993) propose a two-stage model for a thorough evaluation of coursebooks. They suggest that a brief *external evaluation* should be conducted firstly to have an overview of the organizational foundation of the coursebook. Then, it should be followed by a detailed *internal evaluation* "to see how far the materials in question match up to what the author claims as well as to the aims and objectives of a given teaching program" (McDonough & Shaw, 1993, p. 64). In terms of the period evaluation is carried out, Cunningsworth (1995) proposes *pre-use*, *in-use* and *post-use* evaluations. Pre-use evaluation is intended to predict the potential performance of a coursebook. In-use evaluation is conducted while using a coursebook "when a newly introduced coursebook is being monitored or when a well-established but ageing coursebook is being assessed to see whether it should be considered for replacement" (Cunningsworth, 1995, p. 14). Post-use evaluation provides retrospective assessment of a coursebook and also serves to decide whether to use the same coursebook on future occasions. Abdelwahab (2013) suggests three basic methods to evaluate coursebooks. The *impressionistic method*, as the name suggests, involves analyzing a coursebook on the basis of a general impression. He asserts that this method will not be adequate in itself and it needs to be integrated with the *checklist method*, which also covers the main idea of the present paper. The third one, the *in-depth method*, requires a profound scrutiny of representative features such as the design of one particular unit or exercise, or the treatment of particular language elements.

Checklists as Evaluation Tools

A checklist is an instrument that helps practitioners evaluate coursebooks in an effective and practical way. According to Mukundan, Hajimohammadi and Nimehchisalem (2011a), checklists allow for a more sophisticated evaluation of the coursebook in reference to a set of generalizable evaluative criteria. As Cunningsworth (1995) states, one major benefit of using checklists is that they provide a very economic and systematic way to ensure that all relevant items are considered for evaluation. Checklists may be qualitative or quantitative. When designed in the form of quantitative scales, they allow for an objective evaluation of a given coursebook. Qualitative checklists, on the contrary, elicit subjective information on the quality of coursebooks by directing open-ended questions(e.g., Richards, 2001). There are some issues which make the use of evaluation checklists necessary. At the outset, Ghorbani (2011) asserts, a large number of English classes around the world today are using coursebooks which are not chosen by the careful application of objective evaluation criteria. Randomness is the other shortcoming encountered. The procedure for choosing coursebooks in many countries is too often haphazard. Last but not least, teacher-centeredness is dominant in the selection of coursebooks. While this may be understandable given that teachers are the end-users facing the merits and demerits of a given coursebook throughout the whole semester, we should not ignore the fact that students are the other shareholders to be positively or negatively affected by the potential of the coursebook chosen. At this point, the needs and wants of learners should be given careful consideration while selecting a coursebook through applying to students an evaluation checklist of appropriate selection criteria.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

It may be quite challenging for language teachers as the end-users (if they are authorized), school principals and administrators to evaluate and select coursebooks. Though plenty of ELT coursebook evaluation checklists are available in the literature to make coursebook selection and evaluation process easier and more systematic, practitioners may have difficulty choosing from the available evaluation checklists. This is probably due to the fact that some of the evaluation checklists suffer from practicality issues such as being in the awkward length or not allowing for rational scoring. Some of the checklists may include simplistic criteria such as *popularity of the coursebook* and *competence of the author* while some others include ambiguous items that are difficult to make out. At this point, this study is an attempt to come up with a practical ELT coursebook evaluation checklist by drawing on previous research with the thought that different approaches by researchers to ELT coursebook evaluation checklist could be embraced.

METHOD

The present study set out with an extensive review of literature so that previously developed ELT coursebook evaluation checklists could be examined from multiple perspectives and a general understanding could be obtained with regards to the rationale behind preparing checklists. As a result of this preliminary process, over thirty evaluation forms and checklists were determined and twenty three of them were utilized in developing the checklist(for student's book). Featured items from these instruments were brought together, offering a final eclectic checklist (See the appendix). The items borrowed were accompanied by the researchers' own items.

Critical Feedback Phase

As the other building block of the suggested checklist, the draft instrument was subject to ELT researchers' constructive reviews at a conference of English language teachers' association in Turkey. In the light of the feedback received, some of the items were modified. For example, the item "The subject and content of the textbook are *interesting, challenging, and motivating*" was divided into three items: (1) "Are the subject and content of the coursebook interesting?", (2) "Is the content of the coursebook challenging enough to foster new learnings?", (3) "Are the subject and content of the coursebook motivating?". The main motive behind such modifications was that in double-barreled (or more) questions "even if respondents do provide an answer, there is no way of knowing which part of the question the answer concerned" (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010, p.42). What's more, new items were also included to compensate for lack of measurement in technology, self-assessment and methodology. Therefore, the following items were added to the checklist: "Does the coursebook include self-assessment parts?", "Can the coursebook easily be integrated into technology, thereby allowing for individual study outside the school?", "Do the activities and exercises introduce the main principles of CLT?".

THE RESULTING INSTRUMENT

Categorization

There are quite different categories in the checklists developed for ELT coursebook evaluation. For example, Shih (2000) designed a very comprehensive checklist made up of nine categories: general features, content theme and functions, language skills, language components (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary..), layout and physical makeup, teachers' manual, workbook, audio aids and other teaching aids. On the other hand, there is no categorization in Tseng's (2003) checklist which comprises only twenty specific items. There is no certain standard set for the number of segmentation. However, there is no doubt that categorization will allow for a more concrete and systematic evaluation. The resulting instrument of this paper adopted ideally four basic sections: *Subjects & Contents* (10 items), *Skills & Sub-skills* (25 items), *Layout & Physical make-up* (7 items), *Practical Considerations* (14 items).

Content and Features

The suggested evaluation checklist comprises 56 items under four basic sections. Clarity was one of the first considerations in collecting the items. Loaded words were avoided and items were "written in simple sentences rather than compound or complex sentences" (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010, p. 41). Tomlinson (2003) suggests avoiding large, vague, and dogmatic questions that might be interpreted differently by different evaluators. For example, one of the items in Byrd's (2001) checklist is: "the coursebook fits the pedagogical and SLA philosophy of the program/course" (p. 427). Such items, according to Mukundan et al. (2011a) "may be easily discernable for an expert in the area; however, it will not be clear enough for an end-user with a low expertise" (p. 23). Checklist developers, therefore, should strive to incorporate concise and comprehensible items which can eventually serve to constitute applicable evaluation tools.

The other consideration in developing the current checklist was the matter of context. Cunningsworth (1995) remarked that since different criteria will apply in different circumstances, it is best for practitioners to identify their own priorities and draw up their own evaluation checklists. Moreover, Sheldon (1988) explains that "any culturally restricted, global list of criteria can never really apply in most local environments, without considerable modification" (p. 242). Therefore, the suggested checklist was designed to be easily modifiable in accordance with the context where a given coursebook is to be utilized. This was made

possible by not adding narrow context-specific items. The issue of length (the number of items) is the other challenge in developing checklists. According to Mukundan et al. (2011a), most of the checklists in the literature are either too short or too long, which precludes their meeting the requirements of an applicable instrument for evaluation purposes. While some of the evaluation checklists do not include any more than twenty items (Tseng, 2003), a few others contain more than a hundred items (Skierso, 1991; Abdelwahab, 2013). At this point, the resulting checklist having 56 items, is neither too short to allow for a detailed and extensive evaluation, nor too long to apply. Last but not least, the suggested evaluation checklist does not include discriminating elements in terms of gender, race, culture and the like. It further includes an extra blank at the bottom, allowing practitioners to make additional comments on the coursebook. This will be helpful in terms of highlighting points which may not be measured through the evaluation checklist.

CONCLUSION

No coursebook evaluation checklist in the literature is complete. Regardless of the number of items it is made up of, any checklist can be modified by adding or deleting items depending on the circumstances of a given instructional setting. This can be achieved, as Ansary and Babaii (2002) mention, only when one is able to identify specific requirements in a specific teaching situation. What's more, a checklist designed for a particular context might be inapplicable to the other. Herein lies the importance of adopting a modifiable evaluation instrument.

To conclude, the suggested ELT coursebook evaluation checklist is not a result of a scale development study. It rather seeks to suggest a practical alternative for coursebook evaluators and practitioners by putting together items from featured checklists in the field. Despite the content validity provided by sticking loyal to the literature, it still needs to be validated through a pilot study before the actual use in the context where it is to be implemented. Another important point is that though the proposed checklist, along with many others in the field, can serve as a systematic evaluation tool, checklist method might not necessarily be applicable, or enough in itself. In such cases, quantitative evaluation checklists should be accompanied by open-ended interviews and users' comments to make the best judgment of any coursebook.

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Appendix: The Suggested ELT Coursebook Evaluation Checklist

ELT Coursebook Evaluation Checklist			Yes	No
Subjects & Contents	Does the content serve as a window into learning about the target language culture (American, British etc.)? (23)			
	Are the subject and content of the coursebook interesting? (2)			
	Is the content of the coursebook challenging enough to foster new learnings? (5)			
	Are the subject and content of the coursebook motivating? (2)			
	Is the thematic content understandable for students? (3)			
	Is there sufficient variety in the subject and content of the coursebook? (2)			
	Is the thematic content culturally appropriate? (3)			
	Are the topics and texts free from any kind of discrimination (gender, race etc.)? (5)			
	Is there a relationship between the content of the coursebook and real-life situations (society)? (6)			
	Do the topics and texts in the coursebook include elements from both local and target culture? (5)			
Skills & Sub-skills	Reading	Are there adequate and appropriate exercises and tasks for improving reading comprehension? (6)		
		Is there a wide range of different reading texts with different subject content? (7)		
		Are the reading selections authentic pieces of language? (1)		
	Listening	Does the coursebook have appropriate listening tasks with well-defined goals? (8)		
		Is the listening material well recorded, as authentic as possible? (9)		
		Is the listening material accompanied by background information, questions and activities which help comprehension? (9)		
	Speaking	Does the coursebook include speech situations relevant to students' background? (10)		
		Are the activities developed to initiate meaningful communication? (8)		
		Does the coursebook include adequate individual and group speaking activities? (5)		
	Writing	Are models provided for different genres? (11)		
		Do the tasks have achievable goals and take into consideration learner capabilities? (8)		
		Is practice provided in controlled and guided composition in the early stages? (10)		
Vocabulary	Does the vocabulary load (i.e. the number of new words introduced every lesson) seem to be reasonable for the students of that level? (12)			
	Is there a good distribution (simple to complex) of vocabulary load across chapters and the whole book? (11)			
	Do the vocabulary exercises promote internalization of previously and newly introduced items? (13)			
	Are the new vocabulary words repeated in subsequent lessons to reinforce their meaning and use? (1)			
	Is the new vocabulary integrated in varying contexts and situations? (14)			
Grammar	Are the grammar points presented with brief and easy examples and explanations? (15)			
	Is the primary function of new structures for interaction and communication? (14)			
	Do the structures gradually increase in complexity to suit the growing reading ability of students? (12)			

		Are the new structures presented systematically and in a meaningful context? (16)		
		Are the grammar points recycled in the following units? (4)		
	Pronunciation	Is there sufficient work on recognition and production of stress patterns, intonation and individual sounds? (17)		
		Are the pronunciation points repeated and reinforced in subsequent lessons? (13)		
		Does the coursebook cover other sub-skills like note-taking, skimming, scanning, inferring meaning, listening for gist, etc.? (4, 2)		
Layout & Physical Make-up	Is the printing quality high? (11)			
	Does the coursebook look interesting and fun? (18)			
	Does the coursebook include a detailed overview of the functions and structures that will be taught in each unit? (22)			
	Does the coursebook reflect learners' preferences in terms of layout, design, and organization? (19)			
	Does the coursebook contain enough pictures, diagrams, tables etc. helping students understand the printed text? (14)			
	Are the illustrations informative and functional? (13)			
Practical Considerations	Do the size and weight of the coursebook seem convenient for students to handle? (14)			
	Is the coursebook up-to-date(e.g. published within the past 10 years)? (20)			
	Is the coursebook easily accessible? (2)			
	Is the coursebook affordable? (21)			
	Does the coursebook have supplementary materials(tapes, visuals etc.)? (5)			
	Does the coursebook have supporting online materials/tests and e-format? (5)			
	Does the book address different learning styles and strategies? (4)			
	Do the activities and exercises introduce the main principles of CLT? (22)			
	Does the coursebook include self-assessment parts? (5)			
	Can the activities be exploited fully and embrace various methodologies in ELT? (11)			
	Is / are the type/s of syllabus design used in the book appropriate for learners? (4)			
	Can the coursebook easily be integrated into technology, thereby allowing for individual study outside the school? (5)			
	Does the coursebook fit curriculum/goals? (3)			
Are the objectives specified explicitly in the coursebook? (22)				
Is the coursebook designed by taking into account the learners' socially and historically English-free status? (5)				
EXTRA COMMENTS/CRITICISMS ON THE BOOK:				

*According to Ersoz (n.d.), if the number of YES answers is more than 80%, the book is perfect for your situation. If between 60-80%, it can be used in your situation but needs adaptation. If below 60%, the book is not suitable for your situation.

** The numbers at the end of checklist items refer to their writers below.

1. Shatery & Azargoon (n.d.)
2. Litz (2005)
3. Byrd (2001)
4. Ersoz (undated)
5. Demir & Ertaş (2014)
6. Razmjoo (2010)
7. Lawrence (2011)
8. Mukundan et al. (2011a)
9. Cunningsworth (1995)
10. Williams (1983)
11. Mukundan et al. (2011b)
12. Daoud & Celce-Murcia (1979)

13. Rahimpour & Hashemi (2011)
14. Tekir & Arikani (2007)
15. Tok (2010)
16. Peacock (1997)
17. Ghorbani (2011)
18. Halliwell (1992)
19. Garinger (2002)
20. Wen-Cheng et al. (2011)
21. Tanner & Green (1998)
22. Abdelwahab (2013)
23. Skierso (1991)