Evaluation of English Language Textbooks: Some Important Issues for Consideration

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Abstract

The evaluation of textbooks has been talked and written about but most of the discussion has been on predictive evaluation which is associated with the selection of books. Right evaluation of the textbook is important for successful teaching and learning activities. The discussion in this paper will have two main parts, the first with its focus on predictive evaluation and the second on retrospective evaluation of the textbook.

Introduction

When we talk about the evaluation of the textbook most of the teachers are concerned with selection of the textbooks i.e. predictive evaluation. But most teachers are not even aware of retrospective evaluation, which is on-going evaluation of the textbooks which takes place after the book has been selected for use. The evaluation of textbooks is considered important activity in the lives of the English teacher. In countries where selection of textbooks is the responsibility of the teacher the decision making which comes with book selection is important as it involves costs, financial and pedagogical. Wrong decisions will result in selection of inappropriate books which would have adverse effects on teaching-learning and also lead to wastage of financial resources. In countries (like in Malaysia) where book selection is done by a central authority within the Ministry of Education, retrospective evaluation is important so that feedback about the book can be relayed to the central authority so that revision processes can be considered.

Part I: Predictive evaluation

Predictive evaluation is done for the purpose of the selection of books. Traditionally, there are two main types of predictive book selection, one which is an implicit model, and the other the explicit model. The implicit model, also known as the fuzzy model, is one which is based on impressions and aptly named the impressionistic model. This method of evaluation depends very much on teacher intuitions. It is generally considered an effective way of evaluating textbooks, especially if done by experienced teachers. However, the drawback of impressionistic evaluation is that team evaluations cannot be done this way. In the present situation, with increase in populations and the expansion of schools which have resulted in more classrooms for each level, many teachers may teach a

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particular level and this requires team evaluations of textbooks which can only be done effectively by use of a standard checklist.

The explicit model is the preferred alternative to the implicit model. The explicit model can be used quite effectively in situations where many teachers teach a particular level and team evaluations are necessary. Explicit evaluation is done using an evaluation instrument which is usually in the form of a checklist. Instruments come in very many forms, some have open-ended questions as items while others may resemble the likert-style checklist which are in the form of a rating scale. Some of the more popular checklists are the ones developed by Skierso (1991), Cunningsworth (1995), and Byrd (2001). There are numerous textbook evaluation checklists developed around the world and most of these are developed because teachers believe that there is no such thing as a "global" checklist as different learning-teaching situations warrant different approaches in evaluation. The desire for "local" considerations in checklist criteria led to institutions around the world developing their own instruments and this in turn led to a "proliferation" of checklists. Most of these instruments are neither tested for reliability nor validity.

There are some problems faced by teachers while doing predictive evaluation. One main problem is the lack of time which is presented to the teacher assigned to the job. Teachers are usually given a couple of days or sometimes even a few hours to do the job. In most cases a cursory glance through the book is all they have time for. When pressed for time some teachers may be tempted to "seek assistance" from the publishers of the books in contention. There is of course ready assistance provided by the publisher and this comes in the form of descriptions of the content and the potential uses of the book which are elaborately described in the introduction or preface and expertly crafted in the form of a synopsis in the blurb. Most teachers usually are aware of the pitfalls of using the assistance of publishers in deciding on a book only after the decision is made and the books are used. Obviously whatever the publishers claim the book can do are based on biased, non-objective evaluations of the book. They are in fact merely marketing strategies to help sell the book.

Another serious problem faced by teachers doing predictive evaluation is in the use of the evaluation instrument which especially if untested for reliability and validity maybe the representation of the nuances and even eccentricities of the developer. A critical evaluation of some commonly used instruments have shown that they are neither developed for the job nor teacher (or user) friendly. There are many reasons why items in textbook evaluation checklist do not serve the purposes for which they are developed and some of them are listed below:

i) The items in evaluation checklist are too localized and developed for the specific needs of a particular community of teachers for a particular period of time. The Tucker (1975) instrument for instance places importance on "adequacy of pattern practice" which would have been relevant in classes where the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) is the dominant method used to teach English and materials were developed to foster the practice of habit formation through repetitive drills.

ii) Items developed sometimes are difficult to respond to objectively. The Skierso (1991) checklist while being a very comprehensive one with high rater-reliability (Mukundan, 2004) does have items which are difficult to respond to. One such item is the one that is related to structure control in the textbook: To what extent are new structures controlled to be presented and explained before they appear in drills, dialogues or reading material (Skierso, 1991). An item such as this sets unrealistic tasks for the evaluator. It is quite impossible for the teacher to track the use of structures especially in books for upper levels as texts are longer and vocabulary loading is quite high.

iii) Items can create a lot of confusion as they are not easily understood by teachers, especially those inadequately trained or

inexperienced. The Skierso (1991) checklist introduces terms like "abstractness" in the item (To what extent is the level of abstractness appropriate?). Most teachers will not be able to comprehend the item because of the unfamiliar use of the term.

Part II: Retrospective evaluation

Retrospective evaluation of textbooks is also known as in-use evaluation of textbooks. This involves continuous evaluation of the textbook after it is selected and while it is used. Retrospective evaluation of books is done for several reasons some of the important ones being:

i) The book that has been selected can be evaluated throughout the period it is used and re-evaluated to determine suitability. The results of the while-use evaluation can force it out of the classroom if it is found to be unsuitable.

ii) Teachers can use the results of while-use evaluation to make the book more productive and their teaching more effective by identifying parts of the textbook that need adaptation. When the book is used again in another session or term or year in a new class, the teacher would be able to optimize use of the book. Unsuitable parts are deleted and new material found to substitute them. Then other processes of adaptation like simplification are also carried out.

Retrospective evaluation using the composite framework (Mukundan, 2004)

While-evaluation or retrospective evaluation of textbooks is a term-long or session-long process, which means that as long as the textbook is used it will be evaluated. As there is a lot of time to evaluate the book, the process of evaluation can be made more effective by having a system of triangulation of data, where data about the effectiveness of the book can be sought from a number of instruments rather than through the usual method where a single instrument is used. Although, like predictive evaluation, the single instrument approach can be used (where an evaluation checklist is used to evaluate the book), it is far better to use a composite framework where the checklist is accompanied by two other instruments, the concordance software and the reflective journal.

The inspiration to the development of the composite framework for textbook evaluation came from the Richards and Rodgers Model for Methodology (1987) which suggests that Method comprises Approach (the body of theory surrounding a particular method), Design (Teaching Materials) and Procedure (How a particular method works in the classroom). The development of the composite framework recognizes the complexity of methodology as illustrated by the Richards and Rodgers Model where Approach, Design and Procedure are inter-dependent upon each other. The composite framework likewise recognizes the complexity of the evaluation process and uses multiple instruments dependent on each other. Retrospective evaluation would be a year long activity for teachers which could serve many purposes, the two main ones being:

i) Teachers working on the retrospective evaluation project will be discovering through empirical analysis, the strengths and weaknesses of the textbook in the teaching situation. They will then be actively involved in research and professional development.

ii) The findings of the textbook evaluation exercise will allow teachers teaching the same level to collaborate in joint research and be involved in discussion about the project which will increase the level of knowledge of these teachers and enhance their potential for critical enquiry and thinking.

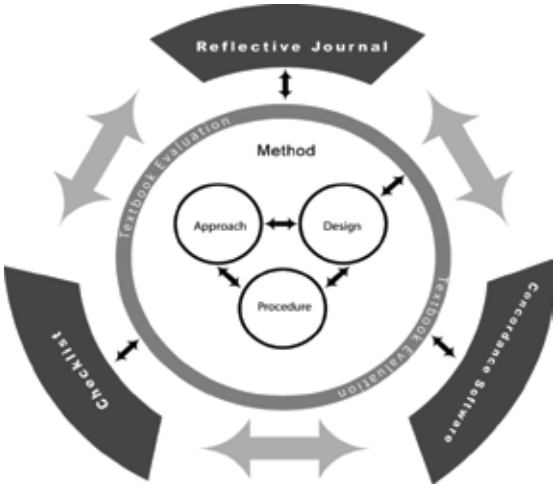

Figure 1: The composite framework for ESL textbook evaluation (Mukundan, 2004)

Activity sequence for teacher-evaluators working on evaluation using the composite framework

i) Using the checklist teachers do team evaluations periodically. Three evaluations spaced over the teaching year would be beneficial. Results of the evaluations are then summarized and documented.

ii) Teachers work on getting the textbook pages to be digitized in the form of textfiles. The entire vocabulary loading of the textbook is then analyzed using concordance software. Essential information like the number of running words (tokens) (figure 2) and different words (types) (figure 3) and their loading and distribution patterns throughout the book can be made explicit to the teacher through the use of the concordance software.

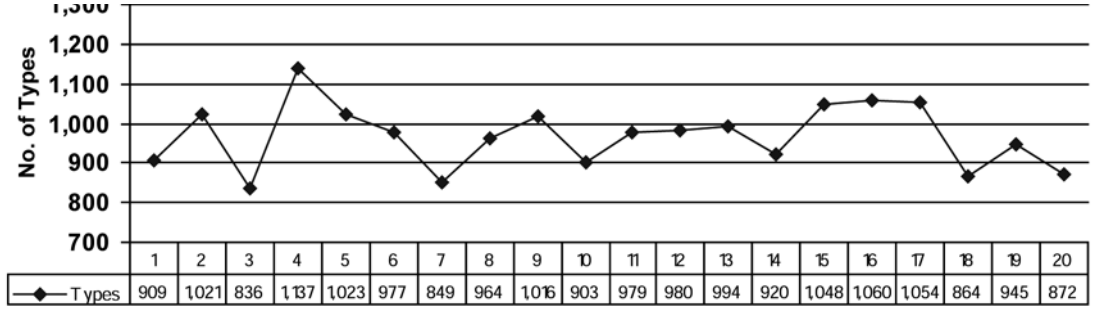

Figure 2: Number of tokens in the form 4 textbook in Malaysian Secondary Schools

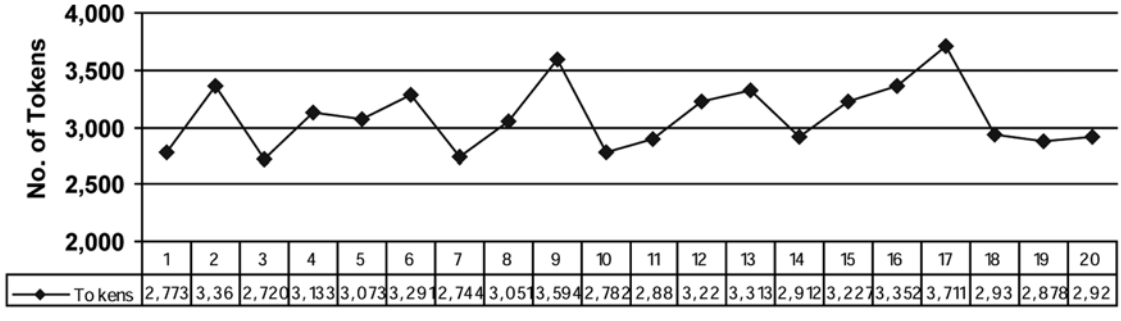

Figure 3: Number of types in the form 4 textbook in Malaysian Secondary Schools

Other information like the repetition and recycling efficiency of words can be investigated through the use of dispersion plots (figure 4) which the software is capable of doing. The figure below shows the dispersion plot for the word "study" and its varieties as investigated in one textbook.

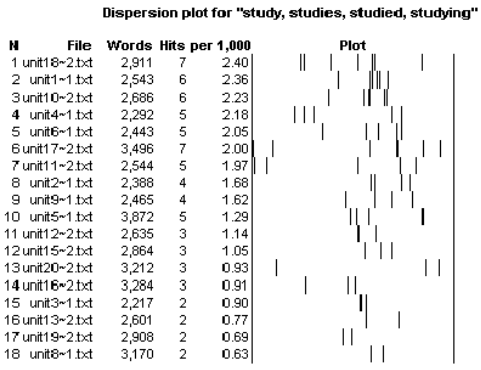

Figure 4: Dispersion plot for the word "study" and its varieties

iii) Teachers keep reflective journals when covering several units or chapters of the textbook. While many teachers complain that they rarely have time for supplementary activities like that of keeping journals or logs, it is important to bring awareness to teachers that keeping journals should not be considered a chore but rather an activity very much like keeping a personal diary.

iv) A final evaluation should be carried out after the teachers have completely used the book. This evaluation will be carried out using data from all three instruments. The checklist will still be the main instrument used for the evaluation of the book. The evaluation checklist will however be supported with data elicited from the two other instruments; the concordance software and the effective journals. For example, an item in the Skierso (1991) checklist which evaluates exercises and activities (To what extent are the activities provided the best calculated to achieve the stated objectives?) would be best evaluated with support data from reflective journals. On the other hand an item in the same checklist which evaluates the distribution of words and structures (To what extent is there an even distribution of grammatical and vocabulary material among the chapters?) would be best evaluated using data generated by the concordance software.

Conclusion

Teachers must be aware that textbook evaluation must be viewed from two perspectives: Predictive and Retrospective. While predictive evaluation is the most common form of evaluation and that which most teachers are aware of, school must train teachers for retrospective evaluation as well. Training of teachers for retrospective evaluation should include training in the use of the checklist, training in the writing of reflective journals and development of skills in the conversion of textbooks into digitized format and in the use of concordance software for analysis purposes.

Once retrospective evaluation is formally established in schools, teachers will become better informed about the strengths and weaknesses of the textbook and are in a better position to decide on aspects of adaptation. The other beneficial aspects of implementing retrospective evaluation would be in the extent to which teachers become involved in their own professional development.

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