

Textbook Selection for the ESL Classroom

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The question of whether and how to use textbooks in teaching English as a second language (ESL) has long been debated among professionals in the field. However, even with the development of new technologies that allow for higher quality teacher-generated material, demand for textbooks continues to grow, and the publishing industry responds with new series and textbooks each year. A textbook can serve different purposes for teachers: as a core resource, as a source of supplemental material, as an inspiration for classroom activities, even as the curriculum itself. Researchers have advocated a variety of approaches to textbook selection (Cunningsworth, 1984; Sheldon, 1988; Skierso, 1991; Ur, 1996), but in practice, the process is often based on personal preference and may be affected by factors unrelated to pedagogy. These may include limited awareness of available texts, budget restrictions, and limited availability of some textbooks. Educators may face a shortage of time and knowledge on the subject, and many previously published checklists for textbook selection are too time consuming to be feasible. Yet with a little additional consideration and attention, the selection process can be enhanced and the outcomes for learners who will use the texts improved.

Steps in the Selection Process

A practical, thorough, and straightforward method for choosing ESL textbooks is to analyze the options according to program issues, going from broad (e.g., goals and curriculum) to specific (e.g., exercises and activities). The strategy behind this technique is to eliminate unsatisfactory textbooks at each stage of analysis so that only the most appropriate are left at the end, making the choice clear and manageable.

Matching the Textbook to the Program and the Course

Prior to selecting a textbook, educators should thoroughly examine the program curriculum. If the goals and curriculum of the program are clear and well defined, the parallels with certain textbooks may become obvious. For example, if one of the goals of the program is to give students an opportunity to interact with authentic texts, then books that use articles written for native English speakers would be appropriate. If the program focuses on developing reading fluency, books designed to support the development of reading skills would be appropriate.

At this point, another decision needs to be made: whether to choose a textbook series or to use individual texts for each course. There are advantages and disadvantages to each choice; educators must prioritize the factors most crucial to their situation. A series has the advantage of standardizing content and approach across levels, guaranteeing consistency of presentation of skills, spiraling of vocabulary, and reasonable progression of text difficulty. However, this regularity can become monotonous and predictable for learners and could potentially cause an increase in negative attitudes toward the textbook or even toward the course itself. Using individual textbooks allows for more precise matching with course objectives and a greater variety in design and content. Yet, there can be serious gaps in the material covered from one textbook to the next; close communication among instructors across levels is essential. If such communication is unlikely due to scheduling conflicts or heavy teaching loads, a textbook series may be a more sound choice.

The next question to consider is how well the objectives of the textbook match the objectives of the course. Ur (1996) identifies the

need for thorough coverage of the course objectives in the textbook. The textbook needs to address a reasonable number of course objectives to make it a worthwhile purchase for both teacher and students. A book that addresses at least half of the course objectives is a good option. While every instructor should supplement the textbook with self-created materials or materials from other sources that reflect the unique needs of the class, a textbook that can be used consistently within that classroom seems more likely to be useful to both the instructor and students.

The next evaluation stage is identifying the appropriateness of the text for the intended learners. Some textbook authors provide a clear description of their intended audience, while others are intentionally vague to try to appeal to a wide range of situations, thereby increasing sales. The textbook should meet the needs of the learners in several ways, not only in terms of language objectives. Students and teachers both want visually stimulating material that is well organized and easy to follow, so layout, design, and organization should be considered. The learners' cultural backgrounds, ages, interests, and purposes in acquiring the second language must also be considered. For example, students in an advanced English for academic purposes (EAP) course, designed to prepare learners for university-level coursework in English, will have a very different learner profile than those in an ESL literacy program. Their purposes in studying English would be quite different, and the textbooks chosen for their classes must reflect this. The students in the advanced EAP course require contact with authentic academic tasks and knowledge about expectations in postsecondary institutions in North America, whereas literacy students require intensive instruction at the word and sentence level. The content of a textbook should also be sensitive to a range of cultural backgrounds and allow for comfortable and safe discussion of cross-cultural experiences and concerns.

Reviewing the Skills Presented in the Textbook

Improving learners' language skills is frequently the main purpose of ESL programs. However, which skills are taught and how they are taught differs from course to course and program to program. Therefore, the effectiveness of each textbook in helping learners acquire the necessary skills must be considered. Rating this effectiveness involves asking questions such as these:

- Does the text focus on the skills it claims to focus on?
- Does it actually teach these skills or does it merely provide practice in the skills students already have?

In terms of the first question, it is important to ensure, for example, that a textbook claiming to teach reading skills focuses on engaging students in critical analyses of different types of texts, rather than focusing primarily on listening or writing skills. An example of the second question would be a listening textbook that provides students ample information on how to develop actual listening skills, such as how to listen for main idea versus detail, to recognize organizational patterns, to take more valuable notes, and so forth. In order to accomplish this, there should be evidence that the text gives students adequate guidance on how to do these things. The individual selecting the textbook must scrutinize the content carefully to ensure that the publishers' assertions are validated by the actual exercises and activities contained in the book.

The importance of cognitive skills should not be overlooked when evaluating a textbook. A text should cover a wide range of these skills,

especially higher order skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Several published evaluation checklists (e.g., Chall & Conard, 1991; Skierso, 1991) utilize Bloom's (1956) taxonomy to assess the processes and skills that textbooks require learners to perform. Textbooks that challenge students and force them to analyze and synthesize information may be difficult, but they are also extremely stimulating.

Reviewing Exercises and Activities in the Textbook

When evaluating the quality of a textbook's exercises or activities, four key questions should be answered:

(1) *Do the exercises and activities in the textbook contribute to learners' language acquisition?* Many exercises included in textbooks are convenient for teachers but don't necessarily contribute to students' language development. Textbooks should include exercises that give students opportunities to practice and extend their language skills. For example, activities that require students to negotiate for meaning in English (e.g., information gaps, jigsaw activities, role plays) may support the development of speaking skills and help students negotiate for meaning in real-life contexts.

(2) *Are the exercises balanced in their format, containing both controlled and free practice?* Controlled exercises refer to those that guide students to a single correct answer such as a fill-in-the-blank grammar activity, whereas free practice involves exercises in which the answers are limited only by the students' creativity and knowledge. This would include open-ended discussion questions. At times, students will require more guidance with an activity, especially when practicing a structure or function for the first time. For this purpose, controlled exercises are effective. However, students should also be given the chance to extend their experience with the language, and free exercises allow this opportunity.

(3) *Are the exercises progressive as the students move through the textbook?* Exercises should build on and reinforce what students have already learned and should progress from simple—both linguistically and cognitively—to more complex and demanding. A textbook should require more from students as their language skills develop so they are continually stimulated and challenged.

(4) *Are the exercises varied and challenging?*

Keeping students motivated and interested as they work through a textbook is much easier if the students see something new in each chapter. Familiarity and routine can be comforting, but too much familiarity can lead to disinterest and boredom. The textbook should fulfill its role as a stimulus for communication and not be simply an organizational tool for the teacher.

Weighing Practical Concerns

One set of considerations remains: practical concerns. These issues, which include availability and cost, are often the deciding factor in textbook selection, and they must be acknowledged. Not all textbooks can be purchased and shipped in a reasonable amount of time, and educators often do not have the luxury of planning months in advance. Those who work within an educational system that requires students to purchase their own textbooks should recognize the economic burden faced by students and should be responsible in their textbook choices in terms of cost.

Conclusion

Decisions related to textbook selection will affect teachers, students, and the overall classroom dynamic. It is probably one of the most important decisions facing ESL educators. The use of an evaluation procedure or checklist can lead to a more systematic and thorough examination of potential textbooks and to enhanced outcomes for learners, instructors, and administrators. The following checklist may be used or adapted as a tool to help ESL educators who are deciding which textbooks may be most appropriate for their classes.

Checklist for ESL Textbook Selection

A. Program and Course	Yes	No
Does the textbook support the goals and curriculum of the program?	—	—
Is the textbook part of a series, and if so, would using the entire series be appropriate?	—	—
Are a sufficient number of the course objectives addressed by the textbook?	—	—
Was this textbook written for learners of this age group and background?	—	—
Does the textbook reflect learners' preferences in terms of layout, design, and organization?	—	—
Is the textbook sensitive to the cultural background and interests of the students?	—	—
B. Skills		
Are the skills presented in the textbook appropriate to the course?	—	—
Does the textbook provide learners with adequate guidance as they are acquiring these skills?	—	—
Do the skills that are presented in the textbook include a wide range of cognitive skills that will be challenging to learners?	—	—
C. Exercises and Activities		
Do the exercises and activities in the textbook promote learners' language development?	—	—
Is there a balance between controlled and free exercises?	—	—
Do the exercises and activities reinforce what students have already learned and represent a progression from simple to more complex?	—	—
Are the exercises and activities varied in format so that they will continually motivate and challenge learners?	—	—
D. Practical Concerns		
Is the textbook available?	—	—
Can the textbook be obtained in a timely manner?	—	—
Is the textbook cost-effective?	—	—

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