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What Is Necessary in Pre-planned Materials?

Mar Gutiérrez-Colon, Ph.D.

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Abstract

The following paper analyzes the role of pre-planned materials in foreign language classes. It starts presenting different views on how class materials should be analyzed. The paper continues showing a specific criteria (Ur's criteria) for analyzing course materials. This criteria will then be re-evaluated by a group of students of the course English Teaching Methodology at the University Rovira i Virgili (Spain). Finally, the results and conclusion will be presented.

Introduction

As an English Language teacher at an English Department in a Spanish University, I am faced with the same dilemma every year: should I choose a course book for my students, should I use materials from various books, or should I create my own materials? After ten years teaching English at various levels and in different situations, I have responded to this dilemma in a variety of ways:

1. I have adapted the grammar units from different books to my students needs, and then I have created my own exercises based on the theoretical approach used in class.
2. I have also chosen these exercises from different books and authors, and even adapted some of them in accordance with my students' needs.
3. Finally, I have sometimes chosen a class book and used it throughout the course, supplementing it with extra information only when I thought my students needed it.

Question after Question

You may think that after so many years of experience, I know exactly what to do every June when I have to submit the English language programme. But every year, when I am told that I am to teach the English Language course, I begin to have many doubts: What are the students going to be like this year? Will they have the same English language level as last year's? Shall I tell them to read the grammar parts and do the activities at home, so I can spend the class on speaking and reading? Should I prepare a combination of activities that cover all four skills? And what about a book? But will they find the topics appealing? If I create my own activities, I can choose the topics that I think they will like the most. But that's a lot of work, and I am no expert in material creation.

Never a Right Solution?

So, there never seems to be a right solution. If I finally decide to use a course book, then I have to decide which one will best suit my students' needs (and mine!). Now I have to start checking all the books that have been published recently to see which one seems best for my course. And at this point, the question is, how can I evaluate a course book? What features are most important?

Relevance of Both Commercial and Teacher-Produced Materials

For Nunan, both commercial and teacher-produced materials are very important because while the syllabus “defines the goals and objectives, the linguistic and experimental content” (1991: 208) materials are the real representations of these specifications. Nunan also cites Richards and Rodgers who suggest that “instructional materials can provide detailed specifications of content, even in the absence of a syllabus” (1991: *ibid*).

Analysis of Course Materials

The following section presents different views on how class materials should be analyzed. This essay presents specific criteria for analyzing course materials. Finally the students of English Teaching Methodology (a subject on the English Language and Literature degree) at the Rovira i Virgili University (Tarragona, Spain), many of whom will become English language teachers, evaluate this taxonomy and the results and conclusion are presented.

Are pre-planned materials necessary?

The end of the 70's was also the end of the grammar-centered curriculum. The syllabuses started to focus on a more communicative approach to language, and this brought about a complete change in both the syllabuses and the course books. Nowadays, most English teachers claim to be using a communicative syllabus.

For Finney the framework that should be applied to ELT in this context, is what she calls an “integrated approach”. She defines this approach as “[...] essentially learner-centered and is an attempted “synthesis of the product-oriented ends-means model and the process-oriented approach” (2002: 74).

Since the learner is the center, that is, the main element and basic subject of the learning process, Finney suggests that the starting point of syllabus design should be a needs analysis. Once this analysis has been made, the goals or learning objectives of the course should be stated, and in what has been called the syllabus design. In her paper, Finney outlines several syllabus frameworks: the structural syllabus, the notional-functional syllabus, and the process syllabus. Then, she defines methodology as the interaction between the teacher and the learners, the activities used in class, and the materials and procedures employed by the teacher. Finally, she states that evaluation “must take place at all stages of curriculum planning and implementation, and involve all participants” (2002: *ibid*).

Crawford also believes that the starting point of an ESL syllabus is learner needs, and centers her work on resource production. She poses a very interesting question that

deserves further thought. She explains that after spending three years developing a set of resources, she started to think about the role of pre-planned materials and now wonders whether teachers really need pre-planned teaching materials or just materials created by the teacher for a learner-centered English language class. She also mentions

the incoherence of many language programs when teachers create their own materials or, as seems more frequently the case, pick and choose from a range of authentic and published materials and worksheets, often originally prepared for other classes (2002: 80).

For her, the main question to be asked is: Do we need pre-planned teaching materials or just teacher prepared materials to implement a learner-centered foreign language program? She also believes that this question has yet to be answered because very little research has been made into the role of textbooks in the language classroom. Nevertheless, the main point for her is what these materials should be like if they are to help teachers with their teaching and students with their learning process. So, what characteristics should effective teaching materials have?

Crawford believes that all teaching materials should present language in context because language “items” cannot exist in isolation (and this includes grammar). To this end, the best material for books are up-to-date and authentic texts. This includes audio visual materials and all those materials that develop all four skills (writing, reading, speaking and listening). As far as the student is concerned, these materials should encourage learner autonomy, and be adaptable to different types of learners and backgrounds. They also need to provide attractive input which engages the student in real communicative situations.

Ur believes that the answer to the question of whether a book is necessary for an English course depends very much on teaching style, the resources available to the teacher, and the way things are done in the school/center where we teach. Nevertheless, she states that she prefers adopting a course book because “I find that a set framework helps me to regulate and time my programme; and, perhaps paradoxically, provides a firm jumping-off for the creation of imaginative supplementary teaching ideas” (1996: 193).

It is interesting that both Ur (1996: *ibid*) and O’Neill (cited in Crawford) use the expression “jumping-off point” to refer to the course book. They both define it as a framework which helps teachers in their classes. O’Neill places particular emphasis on the fact that books should only be “jumping-off points”, never the centre of the English language class.

Garinger (2001) points out that although many new textbooks are published every year, and although they involve considerable economic and professional investment, not enough research is conducted in this field. He believes that this lack of research means that some information about how to evaluate a course book is missing, and this often leads to the wrong choice of a class book. For Garinger, when a teacher tries to evaluate a book, what they mainly do is examine their language objectives.

Garinger also points out that only using a textbook in class is not a good teaching method. The book is necessary to provide a framework for the class, and with this definition Garinger coincides with both Ur and Crawford's idea of a course book as providing jumping-off points.

In his article, Griffiths cites Nunan to express the necessity of using a good course book as a framework for a second language course:

Materials are, in fact, an essential element within the curriculum, and do more than simply lubricate the wheels of learning. At their best they provide concrete models of desirable classroom practice, they act as curriculum models, and at their very best they fulfil a teacher development role. Good materials also provide models for teachers to follow in developing their own materials. (1995: 50)

He asks some questions that include the main points she considers should be taken into account when evaluating a course book. For him, a course book should match learner objectives, facilitate interactive learning, be socio-culturally appropriate and gender-sensitive, age appropriate and visually attractive; it should be up-to-date, relevant to real life, easy to use and finally, teachers should ask themselves how ethnocentric the material is.

Nunan believes that selecting a course book is a very difficult task, because the materials have to cater for the diversity of needs in a language classroom. For him, when trying to choose a course book, we should

Match the materials with the goals and objectives of the programme, and to ensure that they are consistent with one's beliefs about the nature of language and learning, as well as with one's learners' attitudes, beliefs and preferences. (1991: 209)

For Nunan, a comprehensive evaluation of a course book needs to collect what he calls "external data" (rationale, availability, layout, etc) and "data on the actual use of materials in the classroom" (1991: 211). Nevertheless, his opinion about the lack of empirical research in this field is the same as Crawford's, so it is impossible to reach a conclusion.

McDonough and Shaw (1993) suggest that in order to evaluate a course material, first an 'external evaluation' should be made followed by an 'internal evaluation'. The first type of evaluation is the external overview of how the materials are organized: the cover, introduction and table of contents. The second type of evaluation is a careful study of the materials. This internal evaluation presents the grading and sequencing of the materials, the relationship between exercises and tests, and the relationship between exercises and language skills.

Ellis goes further into why so few accounts have been published on evaluations, and asks himself why there are so few post-programme evaluations. His answer is that teachers may not see the need to evaluate a programme after it has finished, because they know if the book has worked or not after using it daily. He also believes that even those teachers who feel that a post-evaluation is necessary are overwhelmed by the task

and so never get round to doing it. He proposes an evaluation of language learning tasks based on two embedded frames: the macro evaluation and the micro-evaluation. According to Ellis, the macro-evaluation can be defined as evaluation that seeks to answer one or both of the following questions:

1. *To what extent was the programme/project effective and efficient in meeting its goals?*
2. *In what ways can the programme/project be improved?* (1998: 218).

The micro-evaluation focuses on specific activities and techniques that seem to work in a specific context or on a particular lesson. In order to make this type of evaluation feasible, he examines several dimensions: approach, purpose, focus, scope, evaluators, timing and types of information.

Having taken into account all these researchers and their conclusions, we get the impression that the question is no longer whether teachers should or should not use pre-planned teaching materials, but what form these materials should take to contribute positively to our teaching process.

Analysis of course materials

According to Ellis, over the last few years interest has been growing in the evaluation of language teaching. For Ellis, this is partly due to the growing interest of applied linguistics in the teaching process, and partly to “the need to carry out large-scale programme evaluations for outside agencies responsible for funding programmes” (1998: 217). Nevertheless, it has led to growing interest in the evaluation of general language programmes, rather than in the evaluation of course materials.

I completely agree with Nunan when he says that choosing the teaching materials for a specific course is not an easy task. The teacher has to make sure that he/she matches the materials with the objectives of the course, and that these materials “are consistent with one’s beliefs about the nature of language and learning, as well as with one’s learners’ attitudes, beliefs and preferences” (1991: 209).

In the second part of this paper, I would like to present some of the schemes that have been developed for evaluating course materials. I will also present the results of a questionnaire that I gave to my students.

Littlejohn and Windeatt propose the following preliminary evaluative questions:

1. *Do the materials extend the learner’s ‘general’ or ‘specialist’ knowledge?*
2. *What view of knowledge do the materials present? What implications might this have for how learners attempt to learn?*
3. *Do the materials develop the learner’s understanding of what is involved in language learning and how they may help themselves?*

4. *How do the materials structure the teacher-learner relationship? What 'frame' if any is placed on classroom interaction?*
 5. *Do the materials develop the learners' general cognitive abilities? Is language learning presented as reproduction or as problem solving?*
 6. *What social attitudes do the materials present?*
- (Littlejohn and Windeatt 1989:174)

The problem of using this taxonomy for evaluating class materials is that we are not evaluating the use of the materials: that is, we do not know the students' answers nor their feedback. These questions can only be asked beforehand, they can be used when trying to choose a specific material, but they can never give us feedback once the materials have been used.

Breen and Candlin (1987) propose a long set of questions (about 35) that can be used as an evaluation model before choosing the materials, during the course and at the end. The questions are divided into two phases [¹]:

Phase One: Initial questions

- I. *What do the materials aim to do and what do they contain?*
- II. *What do the material make your learners do while they are learning?*
- III. *How do the materials expect you to teach your learners in the classroom?*
- IV. *Are materials the only resource in classroom language learning?*

Phase Two: Your learners and the materials

- I. *Are the materials appropriate to your learners' needs and interests?*
- II. *Are the materials appropriate to your learners' own approaches to language learning?*
- III. *Are the materials appropriate to the classroom teaching/learning process?*

This questionnaire is interesting because its varied set of questions can give quite accurate answers to our questions about the materials. Teachers can try to answer them when trying to choose a particular set of materials, but so can students when the course has finished. The results can be extremely helpful in our teaching process. Nevertheless, in my opinion, this questionnaire presents a problem: it takes the course materials for granted. That is, it includes questions on the materials and the students, but these questions will not help the teacher to find an appropriate course book (if that is what the teacher prefers).

In the sections below, the study that has been carried out and the results obtained are introduced,.

¹ I only reproduce the main sections. Each of these sections contains a long set of very specific and detailed questions.

Current study

This study explores what a group of future teachers of English believe to be the main characteristics that a course book should have. This is an attempt to re-evaluate Ur's theory on the most important criteria that an English language book should have.

The novelty of the study is that, although the subjects are not English language teachers, some of them have some experience of teaching English, and all of them have been studying the language for at least ten years. Therefore, they have a great deal of experience in using course materials of all types.

Ur (1996) proposes a general criterion that has been selected from many ideas on the same topic. Although it is not the most thorough, I believe that Ur's taxonomy is very useful mainly because it is short, clear and quick to use. It enables us to "quickly" evaluate a course book and decide whether it is going to be useful in our class or not.

The table below divides the elements she has established into four groups:

1. elements that define the organization of the book (*organization of book*)
2. elements that establish a direct relation between the book and the student's background (*relation to student*)
3. type of materials that appear in the book (*type of materials*)
4. availability in the shops (*availability*)

These are the ratings of her own criteria (numbered from 1 as the most important, to 19 as the least important) classified in one of the four different groups:

Table 1: Criteria for coursebook assessment

Ur's criteria	Group:
<i>1. Objectives are explicitly laid out in an introduction, and implemented in the material.</i>	Organization of book
<i>2. Approach is educationally and socially acceptable to target community.</i>	Relation to student
<i>3. Clear attractive layout; print is easy to read.</i>	Organization of book
<i>4. Appropriate visual materials are available.</i>	Type of

	materials/exercises
<i>5. Interesting topics and tasks.</i>	Relation to student
<i>6. Varied topics and tasks, so as to provide for different learner levels, learning styles, interests, etc.</i>	Relation to student
<i>7. Clear instructions.</i>	Organization of book
<i>8. Systematic coverage of syllabus.</i>	Organization of book
<i>9. Content is clearly organized and graded (sequenced by difficulty)</i>	Organization of book
<i>10. Periodic review and test sections</i>	Type of materials/exercises
<i>11. Plenty of authentic language.</i>	Type of materials/exercises
<i>12. Good pronunciation explanation and practice</i>	Type of materials/exercises
<i>13. Good vocabulary explanation and practice</i>	Type of materials/exercises
<i>14. Good grammar presentation and practice</i>	Type of materials/exercises
<i>15. Fluency practice in all four skills</i>	Type of materials/exercises
<i>16. Encourages learners to develop own learning strategies and to become independent in their learning.</i>	Relation to student
<i>17. Adequate guidance for the teacher; not too heavy preparation load.</i>	Relation to student
<i>18. Audio cassettes</i>	Type of materials/exercises

19. Readily available locally	Availability
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When analysing this table, we can see that the two groups that Ur considers the most important when assessing a course book are the *organization of the book* and the *type of materials* that a particular book offers. Also, according to her criteria for assessing a course book, the questions that teachers ask themselves about the material can be grouped under four headings:

1. coverage
2. texts
3. tasks (activities, exercises)
4. administration (1996: 187)

That is, “any single unit of a course book should cover a fair range of language content and skills” (1996: *ibid*): the texts should be of an appropriate level for the student, interesting and varied; the activities should provide plenty of opportunities for using the target language, with levels to suit all students’ needs; and, finally, the teacher should decide on the methodology used in class (teacher-led questions, group work, pair work, etc.).

Results

This study was carried out with a group of thirteen students of the subject English Teaching Methodology (course 2005-06). These students were in their fourth year of the English Language and Literature degree (*Filologia Anglesa*). This means that they had been learning English for at least ten years, and had used different types of materials in this time. So, in a way, they can be considered experts in this field.

The students were asked to organise Ur’s criteria from what they thought was the most important to the least important. Subsequently, they were asked to rate an English language book that they had chosen, according to Ur’s criteria (see appendix). Nevertheless, this last exercise has not been reflected in the current study.

The following graph shows the students’ answers:

Table 2: Students’ responses to the questionnaire

Ur's order of Criteria ^[2] importance	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
<i>1. Objectives are explicitly laid out in an introduction, and implemented in the material.</i>	4			3	1	1							1	1		1		1	

² According to her order of importance

2. Approach is educationally and socially acceptable to target community.					1				1		1	1	2	1	1	3	1	1	
3. Clear attractive layout; print is easy to read.		1		2	1	2	2	1	1		1		1			1			
4. Appropriate visual materials are available.							1	1			1		1	2	1	2	2	2	
5. Interesting topics and tasks.	1	3	2	2			1	1	1					1	1				
6. Varied topics and tasks, so as to provide for different learner levels, learning styles, interests, etc.	4	2	3			1			1			1						1	
7. Clear instructions.		3	2	1		3	1			1			1		1				
8. Systematic coverage of syllabus.		1			3						1	1	3	1	2	1			
9. Content is clearly organized and graded (sequenced by difficulty)	1	2	2	1	3	1	1	1	1										
10. Periodic review and test sections					1	1	3		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			
11. Plenty of authentic language.			1			2	1				1		2	3	1	1			1
12. Good pronunciation explanation and practice							2	1	1	4		2	1		1		1		
13. Good vocabulary explanation and practice			1			1	1	3	3	1	1	1		1					
14. Good grammar presentation and practice	1		1		1	1	1	3	1	1	2		1						
15. Fluency practice in all four skills				1	2	1				3	4	1	1						
16. Encourages learners to develop own learning strategies and to become independent in their learning.	1	1		1	1			1		1		2	1		1	1		1	1
17. Adequate guidance for the teacher; not too heavy preparation load.				1								2	1	1			4	2	2
18. Audio cassettes									1	1	1		1	1	1	1	2	3	1
19. Readily available locally	1								1				1	1			1	2	6

According to these results, the four criteria chosen by the students as the most important do not coincide with the five most important ones chosen by Ur. The ones chosen by the students were:

- Varied topics and tasks, so as to provide for different learner levels, learning styles, interests, etc.
- Content clearly organized and graded (sequenced by difficulty).
- Interesting topics and tasks.
- Objectives explicitly laid out in an introduction and implemented in the material.

They also indicate that only four criterion were shown the least important ones to take into account when choosing the materials.

Readily available locally

- Audio cassettes (or CD's)
- Adequate guidance for the teacher; not too heavy preparation load
- Appropriate visual materials available.

These numerical results, together with the students' answers to informal interviews, show that the subjects believe that audio material is not necessary because they feel that they can cope with this skill in class by talking to the students in English and listening to songs and watching films of their own choice. They also pointed out that they are not concerned whether the book has appropriate visual materials because they can easily find numerous support materials in the Internet. Their answers also suggest that they are not concerned if the book is (or is not) available locally because their experience as students of English language and literature in Tarragona has taught them how to find and buy books that are difficult to find in their town (or even country) through the electronic bookshops on the Internet. Finally, they feel that they do not need books that provide appropriate guidance for the teacher because, although this would help them with their task as teachers, they feel able to organize an English Language course and exploit the course materials. The subjects believe that they have been prepared for this in the subject English Teaching Methodology and in all the other subjects on their degree course. Basically, the students' answers coincide with Allwright's idea that "we are going to need learning materials, rather than teaching materials". (1981: 14)

It should be pointed out that that two of their most important criteria for choosing a course book belong to the group "organization of the book" and two belong to the group "relation to student". Therefore it seems that the subjects really look for books that suit all students' needs (variety of topics, different levels, clear objectives) and match students' interests and culture. That is to say, the subjects of this study have placed the hypothetical English language student at the centre of their teaching process.

Discussion and Application

Our students of English Language and Literature have chosen the items that situate the learner at the centre of the teaching process. In my opinion, this is an interesting result because, although most of them (if not all) will become teachers of English in the near

future, they are currently still students and, therefore, they have first-person experience of what an ideal book should be.

Therefore, teachers must carefully examine all aspects of the book they would like to use, and compare it against an assessment tool which (and this is very important) places the student at the centre of the teaching/learning process. This means that instead of focusing (only) on the layout of the book, the many electronic exercises we can do with it, and the amount of extra audio and visual material the publishers provide us with, we should also have a close look at where the methodology positions the student.

Through this analysis of textbook evaluation, we hope to have shed some light on the issue of evaluating and choosing a course book. This study hopes to be the pilot study for future studies in this field, taking into account that higher numbers of English language students are needed from all educational backgrounds: Primaria, Enseñanza Secundaria Obligatoria, Batxillerat, University/College.^{3]}

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³ Primary School, Secondary School, University/College.

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Appendix

https://moodle.urv.net - METODOLOGIA DE: Activity 4 - Microsoft Internet Explorer

Archivo Edición Ver Favoritos Herramientas Ayuda

Atrás Búsqueda Favoritos

campus virtual
assignatura del curs 2005-06

INICI » METODOLOGIA DE » Forums » Activity 4

Update this Forum

Everyone can choose to be subscribed
Showedit current subscribers
Unsubscribe from this forum

Dear all,

In order to do this activity, you will have to complete the following three steps:

1. Choose a book for English language Teaching (it can be the one you used at school, for example).
2. Take the "Criteria for Coursebook assessment" which is on page 186 of your photocopies (Ur's book) and rate them according to your personal opinion. That is, re-make the list starting by the element you consider **the most important** (number 1) characteristic to find in a coursebook. **The last one** (number 19) will be the one you consider **the least important** for a book.
3. Now rate the book on the left hand column:
 - v(a double tick)** indicates that the book scores **very high**
 - v (a single tick)** indicates that the book scores **high**
 - x (a cross)** indicates that the book scores **low**
 - xx (a double cross)** indicates that the book scores **very low**

Please, remember that in order to correct this activity, you will have to **show me the book** you are analyzing. That is, you will have to send me this activity within the deadline (**30th April**), but you can bring me the book after the deadline.

If you have any questions, please, let me know. Enjoy your Easter Holidays!

Best,

Inicio GUJA DE HOTE... URV Intranet -... Universitat Ro... https://moodle... Eudora - [In] Articles metod... ES 13:03

Mar Gutiérrez-Colon, Ph.D.
Department of English and German Studies
Universitat Rovira i Virgili
Plaça Imperial Tàrraco
43005 TARRAGONA
SPAIN
mar.gutierrezcolon@urv.cat