

Helping less-experienced teachers of English to evaluate teachers' guides

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This article presents recommendations for an evaluation checklist for teachers' guides intended for less-experienced teachers of English, and for those who lack confidence in their own English proficiency. It is suggested that this fills a gap in the current literature on materials evaluation, which is mainly aimed at an audience of experienced teachers of English. Reasons for evaluating materials are given, followed by a discussion of published checklists, and a revised compilation of their criteria in a concise checklist which makes use of a simple method of priority weighting (see Appendix). The final product can be used by teachers independently, or as an introduction to materials evaluation in teacher training.

Introduction

The following evaluation criteria for teachers' books which accompany published courses are based upon the suggestions made by Coleman (1985) and Cunningsworth and Kusel (1991) for evaluating teacher's guides (TGs); they also include relevant aspects from published textbook evaluation checklists (e.g. Tucker 1975 and Williams 1983). An evaluation checklist which adapts items from the aforementioned articles in order to provide a flexible and 'teacher-friendly' inventory of assessment criteria, is then presented.

Reasons for evaluating TGs

The main reasons for evaluating TGs are: helping teachers to decide on their selection of textbooks with TGs; making them more aware of the content of the TG they use, and helping them to make more effective use of it; making them more aware of its advantages and deficiencies; and subsequently, generating ideas for its improvements. On a broader scale, we can also say that if the material writers take in users' comments, Brumfit's recommendations (1980: 171) for successful programme development—that 'expertise must come from two sources, the local classroom and theoretical basis . . .'—will have been met. There are further underlying benefits to all of these activities, in that they can be used as part of teacher training, and as a way of encouraging teachers to develop their autonomy, and the perceptions they have of their role in the education process.

Previous suggestions for evaluating TGs

Numerous evaluation checklists have been designed to help teachers make a systematic selection of textbooks. They vary in the extent to which they can be adapted to meet specific circumstances. For example, Tucker (1975) provides a useful method of weighting the importance of

criteria on which the evaluation is made so that teachers' priorities and concerns can be taken into account. However, relatively few of these checklists place much, if any, emphasis on the TGs which accompany textbooks. One reason for this is probably that the target audience for those checklists is chiefly made up of teachers with tertiary education and teaching certification, who are thought to require minimal support from the TG, and may never even look at it. In countries with less developed and less widespread education systems, however, many teachers have, at most, an equivalent of 'O' level / GCSE education, little or no formal teacher training, and limited access to resources. It follows that their needs are significantly different from those of the target audience described above.

The evaluation checklist presented attempts to assist the above tasks by synthesizing and developing the criteria outlined by Coleman (1985) and Cunningsworth and Kusel (1991). The checklist consists of ten questions grouped into five sections which concentrate on: assumptions about the nature of language and learning; material content; implementation; evaluation; and presentation. Whilst these topics cover important aspects of judgement criteria for TGs, there are additional areas which are equally worth consideration. The evaluation tool developed by Cunningsworth and Kusel is more detailed in the questions it asks, with a total of 32 questions for investigation, grouped into 12 sections, labelled, for example, 'Objectives and content' and 'Correction and testing'. These sections were further divided according to 'global' and 'detailed' criteria. The 'global appraisal' is an expansion of Coleman's first section (assumptions about the nature of language and learning), and the 'detailed evaluation' is a compilation of the remaining four. Despite the increased number and more explicit questions, however, three shortcomings remain. Firstly, some items appear to be duplicated within the questions, i.e. the questions are not mutually exclusive. One illustration of this relates to the provision of information about language, where in the section concerned with the assumed capabilities and needs of teachers, one question asks 'Does the TG provide enough detailed information on language and methods?' (p. 131). In a later section regarding assumptions about the nature of language and language learning, part of the same question is repeated: 'In what terms is the language content formulated, and *in how much detail?*' (p. 132, emphasis added). This item is covered by Question 3 in the checklist below.

Secondly, as highlighted in both of these examples, some questions deal with two discrete items. This requires users of the checklist to identify the two parts, and to give separate answers for each. To avoid this problem, the checklist below uses closed questions.

Thirdly, a number of essential questions have been left out, such as the three 'technical' aspects listed in Williams' (1983) textbook evaluation checklist: latest [or state of the art] techniques in textbook production and design, quality of editing and publishing, and durability and price (Nos. 21–25 in the checklist below). Issues affecting the design of the

TG—such as whether printing is in colour or black and white (the latter being more appropriate if it is to be duplicated), and the type size—are also omitted.

The authors of the two checklists appear to have overlooked a key issue for English teachers who lack confidence in their proficiency, which is the accessibility of the language used in the evaluation criteria. Coleman refers to the importance of ‘linguistic complexity and clarity’ (p. 52) in the TG, and Cunningsworth and Kusel note that if English is used in the TG it must be in a ‘style direct and comprehensible to non-native speakers’ (p. 137), but neither of the articles is particularly accessible to less experienced users of the language. As noted above, many of the benefits of evaluating TGs relate directly to teacher development, yet the recommendations for evaluation criteria made here will be relatively obscure to many of those who would derive most benefit from them.

Content information Some teachers may have had only a limited general education, and a basic training in English, so it is important to ask questions not only about the ‘terms and amount of detail in which the language content is presented’ (No. 11, Cunningsworth and Kusel’s checklist) and the ‘sufficiency of information about cultural situations represented in the textbook’ (No. 7, *op cit.*), but also about the provision of information on, for example, numeracy, health, and bureaucracy (see No. 5 in the Appendix).

Suggested ‘teacher-friendly’ evaluation checklist for TGs The evaluation checklist (see Appendix) is designed to be used by teachers of English from any background in order to assess the TGs to be used in their teaching environment. It consists of 25 questions divided into four sections, which relate to the author’s assumptions about the teachers’ knowledge and experience in lesson planning, implementation and evaluation, and teacher development, and to technical points about the TG. As with Tucker’s textbook evaluation checklist (1975), provision is made for teachers to weight the questions which they feel are most important to their situation.¹ An explanation of how to weight the criteria is provided at the beginning of the checklist. This gives teachers the opportunity to impose their own priorities during the process of evaluation, which is one of the advantages noted by Chambers (1997: 34) of introducing management decision-making into the coursebook evaluation process.

This checklist allows teachers to compare different TGs for their situation. However, it is recognized that schools will not always have a selection of textbooks and TGs available, so space is provided for comments to be made on each item, allowing teachers to discuss the strong and weak points of individual TGs, and make recommendations for their improvement. All of the questions are closed in order to simplify the evaluation process, and to facilitate the weighting process.

Conclusion This article has provided a checklist for TGs which teachers with diverse levels of experience and language proficiency can use independently to

meet a variety of objectives. It has been formulated by combining and adapting the recommended criteria of two former TG evaluation systems, and the weighting system from a textbook evaluation process. So far it remains untested, in that it has not been piloted by any specific teacher group. The piloting of this evaluation checklist could lead to improvements in the clarity of items and coverage of the list, and if the checklist were expanded to include learners' textbooks, other improvements could follow. This would lead in turn to a detailed and comprehensive method of assessing teachers' guides and learner books simultaneously—a much-needed tool for teachers who are inexperienced, or who lack confidence in their language proficiency, or who have not had the advantage of extensive teacher training.

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Notes

1 Here, for simplicity, the weighting and judging scales are both from 1 to 3.

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Appendix

Evaluation checklist for Teachers' Guides (TGs)

Column A

Before answering the questions about the TGs you are evaluating, read each question carefully, and decide if it is **not important**, **quite important**, or **very important**, for your particular teaching situation. Circle **1**, **2**, or **3**, as appropriate to your circumstances.

If any questions have been left out which you think are important, write them in the spaces at the bottom of the form.

Column B

Read each question again, thinking about one particular TG. Circle **1** if your answer is 'no', **2** if your answer is 'partly', and **3** if your answer is 'yes'. Try to answer each question with a number, but if you are not sure, circle the question mark. Write any comments in the final column.

If you want to compare several TGs, multiple the two numbers you have circled and write the total in the column labelled **Score**. Finally, add all of the numbers in the column labelled **Score**. Repeat the above steps if you want to compare different TGs. The TG with the highest score should be the best one for you.

A How important is this question			Author's assumptions about teacher's knowledge and experience	B Answer to the question				Score	Comments
Not very (1)	Quite (2)	Very (3)		No (1)	Partly (2)	Yes (3)	Don't know		
1	2	3	1 Is the language in the teachers' guide (TG) easy to understand?	1	2	3	?		
1	2	3	2 Does the TG give enough advice on teaching procedures and methods?	1	2	3	?		
1	2	3	3 Does the TG give enough information about the English language?	1	2	3	?		
1	2	3	4 Does the TG give enough information about the cultural aspects of the situations presented?	1	2	3	?		
1	2	3	5 Does the TG give enough information about other topics included in the course, e.g. numeracy, health, bureaucracy, etc.?	1	2	3	?		
1	2	3	6 Does the TG help to give more confidence to teachers who use it?	1	2	3	?		
Lesson planning, implementation, and evaluation									
1	2	3	7 Does the TG provide a plan for every lesson?	1	2	3	?		
1	2	3	8 Are the objectives of each lesson clear?	1	2	3	?		
1	2	3	9 Are the instructions for each lesson plan clear?	1	2	3	?		
1	2	3	10 Is there enough information about answers in the TG?	1	2	3	?		
1	2	3	11 Does the TG suggest alternative activities or plans?	1	2	3	?		
1	2	3	12 Does the TG tell you which parts students may find difficult?	1	2	3	?		
1	2	3	13 Does the TG suggest ways to explain difficult parts?	1	2	3	?		
1	2	3	14 Does the TG give ideas for classroom management?	1	2	3	?		
1	2	3	15 Does the TG suggest ways of evaluating lessons?	1	2	3	?		
Teacher development									
1	2	3	16 Does the TG give information on how people learn languages?	1	2	3	?		
1	2	3	17 Does the TG help teachers to understand more about the different strategies (methods) and styles of learning?	1	2	3	?		
1	2	3	18 Does the TG help teachers to understand why it uses certain activities and methods?	1	2	3	?		
1	2	3	19 Does the TG help teachers to explore different teacher roles in the classroom?	1	2	3	?		
1	2	3	20 Does the TG help teachers to become more confident about developing their teaching skills?	1	2	3	?		
Technical points about the TG									
1	2	3	21 Is the TG's lay-out clear?	1	2	3	?		
1	2	3	22 Is the TG easy to use?	1	2	3	?		
1	2	3	23 Is the TG free of mistakes?	1	2	3	?		

1	2	3	24 Is the TG made well enough to last a long time?	1	2	3	?
1	2	3	25 Is the TG cheap enough for you or your institution to buy?	1	2	3	?
Other questions which you think should have been included							
1	2	3		1	2	3	?
1	2	3		1	2	3	?
1	2	3		1	2	3	?
1	2	3		1	2	3	?
							Total _____