Original Article

An Examination of the Problems in Selecting Materials for Classrooms in Nigeria

FAMOGBIYELE Olaleye Taiwo
6 Mike Akhigbe Way, Jabi District
PMB 543 Garki, Abuja
Nigeria
Email: foolaleye@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Choosing instructional materials (coursebook) in any subject area is a very important task. Selecting one, however, can be a difficult and overwhelming process; and quite often, if care is not taken, what is ended up with are language teaching materials haphazardly selected. This paper is therefore an attempt to give specific principles to serve as guidelines. In addition, it will lend credence to the fact that materials selection process is context specific and that there is no universal checklist that can be used for materials selection in all situations. Finally, the paper concludes that a balance rather than perfection should always be sought after when selecting materials.
Keywords: coursebook selection, process, Nigeria, checklist

BACKGROUND TO MY CONTEXT

Most commentators (Harmer, 1991; Cunningsworth, 1995; Roberts, 1996) agree that the starting point in the selection of any coursebook is, firstly, identifying the aims and objectives of the teaching programme and secondly, analysing the learning teaching situation in which the materials will be used. Roberts (1996, p.382) especially, could not have put it more succinctly: '…there is no point in even beginning to look at materials until one is clear about the exigencies of which they must respond'. What then are these 'exigencies' in my context?

The course is Communication Skills. It is for learners in the various departments in the polytechnic (e.g. business administration, banking and finance etc). The general aim is to make learners become more confident, fluent, and proficient in their everyday use of English language in different situations and also enable them transfer the skills learnt into their various fields. The course is not intensive as it runs for two years. The learners study two hours a week.

The learners for whom the material will be selected are of a lower intermediate level. They have just come out from secondary school and must have passed the General Certificate Examination in English at credit level. It is, therefore, assumed that they can speak and understand English fairly well. A certificate - Ordinary National Diploma – (OND) shall be awarded at the end of two-year training.

The teacher in Nigeria operates in a classroom where he wields enormous control. He is the only source of comprehensible input. Quite often too, he has to contend with large classes. Kano, a state in the Northern part of the country where the writer worked for 10 years is no exception. Kano is predominantly an Islamic state and students' right from age three would have been exposed to Arabic language. The writer's class is made up of about 150 students and Hausa language is the first language of about 90% of the class; however, the medium of instruction is English.

English is the official as well as the second language in Nigeria. It follows, therefore, that the students are largely exposed to the language in all public places. This, then, is the context in which the teaching/learning takes place.

SELECTION OF MATERIALS

In most teaching contexts, and Nigeria is no exception, the coursebook plays a very important role as an aid to teaching and learning. A great many of coursebook selection, Brown (1994, p.15) reiterates, spring from established principles of language learning and teaching. This, he says, constitute an 'enlightened' teaching. Hard as it may seem to belief, many teachers do not realise this. From the writer's experience at the polytechnic, decisions made in selecting teaching materials can be described by what Brown (1994, p.16) calls a 'quick-fix'; or Sheldon (1988, p.240) '*ad hoc* and rushed' approach usually based on 'crude indicators of suitability' (Hutchinson, 1987a, p.37). Take for instance, in choosing a coursebook for the OND classes some years back, the writer was only interested in whether it provided drills on forms and writing skills; whether the materials presented were authentic or interesting to motivate the learners was not a prerequisite.

The scenario above can also be said to be true of a large percentage of teachers of English in this context. Teachers always complained that the efforts put into teaching the language to the students did not justify the outcome; were they to realize that evaluating a textbook goes further than just a 'snapshot impression' (Littlejohn, 1998) or 'impressionistic overview' (Cunningsworth, 1995); and that, indeed, it requires an in-depth evaluation based on sound and informed teaching/learning principle, they would have been in a better position to help the students learn better. Perhaps, one of the reasons why the teachers often evaluate the materials in this way was because they did not know that they needed an informed checklists to evaluate one; or that even if they did, they believed that it would be time consuming. Had it dawned on these teachers that when they do a proper evaluation of the coursebook, they would be able to improve their 'competence in the language and hone their skills' (Williams, 1983, p.254), as well as, develop 'awareness of their own teaching situations' (Hutchinson, 1987a, p.37), they would have done a better job.

The writer, however, would want to believe that the sort of evaluative instrument that most of teachers in this context would feel comfortable with would be one that is 'brief, practical to use and yet comprehensive in its coverage of criteria' (McDonough & Shaw, (1993, p.31); for there is no point in designing this instrument unless it is useable. How then can the teachers make informed decision to select a suitable coursebook? Before this question is answered, let us quickly take a look at some of the problems the writer encountered using the materials selected.

Problems with using the Materials

Even though the writer had correctly diagnosed the learners' needs to be, 1) become more confident, fluent, and proficient in the everyday use of English language in different situations and, 2) able to transfer the skills learnt into their various fields; yet, the materials the writer chose seemed to have failed to achieve the objectives stated above. Looking back now, the writer could see that not all the materials chosen were able to arouse the required level of interest among learners to motivate them. Again, the writer seemed to expect too much from the learners without taken their linguistic level into consideration. This was because the writer was operating on the assumption that learners should have encountered a wide range of vocabulary at their level which would have made the tasks given simple to access. The corollary of this was that learners read slowly and find comprehension difficult because of the complexity of the language. Yet again was the fact that the material chosen seemed to focus on the development of two major skills: writing and reading. The implication was that little emphasis was placed on speaking and listening skills. Still, there was the problem of the material focusing to a large extent on form to the neglect of meaning. Often a great proportion of class time was spent drilling, repeating and repeating. Today, teaching practices have shifted away from this form of teaching. There is therefore need to keep in mind that form, though important, need to embrace meaning.

Having examined some of the problems with the material chosen by the writer, it is important at this stage to look at the principles of teaching/learning upon which the writer would want to operate from now on.

Principles of Teaching/Learning

If teachers accept that materials are to be used as a 'pedagogic device', then there is need for them to establish sound principles upon which their teaching should be based. According to Williams (1983, p.255), teachers need to choose 'only those materials and methods which are based on sound linguistic and pedagogical principles'. Brown, (1994) identifies 12 of such principles which, he says, are prerequisite to sound practice in second language learning: he further grouped them as

cognitive, affective, and linguistic. Some of the general principles the writer would want to espouse are:

- Stimulate motivation not only through the materials used but also through the variety of techniques used.
- Teach language as discourse
- Make the learners use 'authentic' materials.
- Offer learners materials suitable to their levels of attainment
- Make the learners responsible for their learning as much as possible.
- Integrate the four language skills
- Focus on meaning but not to the neglect of form
- Facilitate group work preference, and
- Finally to constantly reflect on my teaching and practices with a view to 'subject them to a critical analysis and if necessary restructure them' (Korthagen, 2001)..

Let us now turn our attention to the analysis of some checklists from which the writer intend to draw up criteria for teaching in this context.

Analysis of some Checklists

Guidance for analysing and evaluating materials have been provided by various scholars using different frameworks (Robinet, 1978 cited in Brown 1994; Tucker 1975; Daoud, 1977; Daoud & Celce-Murcia, 1979; Williams, 1983; Matthews, 1985; Breen & Candling,1987; Hutchinson, 1987a, 1987b; Sheldon, 87, 1988; Wlliiams, 1983; Dougill, 1987; Skierso, 1991; Harmer,1991; Cunningsworth, 89, 95; McGrath 2002; McDonough & Shaw, 1993)**.** Each of these frameworks, they suggest, help teachers make practical and informed decisions upon which the choice of the most appropriate coursebook can be based.

Tucker (1975), checklist appears to be a systematic method of evaluation and was probably the first to base his on certain criteria rather than questions. Daoud, (1977) checklist contains 45 questions under various headings. Sheldon, (1988) is a blend of ratings and comments. Breen & Candlins (1987, p.13). provide questions rather than criteria and they propose that teachers 'derive their own criteria from these questions' Cunningsworth (1989), checklist contains both numerical and descriptive responses but that of 1995 is, however, different in that it is a presentation of checklist requiring 'Yes' and 'No' answers.

Checklists do take different approaches depending on the writer. Some employ qualitative while others quantitative approach; and still, others are a blend of the qualitative and quantitative approach. Chambers (1997), for example, employs quantitative approach while Low (1989), can be described as qualitative. However, Cunningsworth (1989) and Sheldon (1988), is an admixture of both. In the same vein, some of the evaluation criteria are weighted while others are not: Tucker (1975), Wlliiams, 1983, Cunningsworth (1989), for example, proposed methods where evaluation criteria are weighted; while Matthews, 1985, Dougill, 1987, McDonough & Shaw, (1993)**.** did not. Again some preferred a two-tiered evaluation system. Daoud (1977), suggested a two-stage model and so did Breen & Candling (1987), and Matthews (1985). Their stages can be likened to McDonough & Shaw's (1993) 'external' (macro) and 'internal' (micro) evaluation. The former is concerned with looking at materials outwardly and gaining a general impression of the suitability of the materials for the audience while the latter deals with in-depth investigation.

A general problem with these checklists is that some of them are too detailed and time consuming; and as such are not suitable for quick use by evaluators. In fact 'the labour they impose upon users' (Roberts, 1996, p.381) is great. For example, the writer wonders how feasible it is to use, say, Daoud's (1977), 45 questions for evaluative purposes; or Cunningsworth's (1989) 52 criteria not to talk of Skierso's (1991), incredibly, 65 sources for checklist. It is instructive to note that many of the systems advocated for selecting materials are too complex to be used by average teachers: Matthew (1985), for example, is hardly practicable in the context where teachers themselves evaluates and select both materials; and even, the adoption of either the qualitative or quantitative approach is not critique-free. The former is often criticized as being difficult to be evaluated objectively and time-consuming, and the latter for not always being accurate.

 One question thrown up at this stage, given the plethora of checklists and approaches, is how best can one arrive at an informed checklist suitable to carry out material evaluation in ones context?

Before this question is answered, it is pertinent to establish the principles used in designing the checklist.

Checklist Design Principles

To arrive at this checklist, it is desirable to lay down some principles that should guide the presentation of a framework that will serve this context. This framework should take into consideration the approaches and principles of language learning highlighted earlier on; and also the cautious note offered by Roberts (1996, p.382) that teachers should be sensible and 'give little room for subjective interpretation'.The principle advocated for this context is called **FABPEC**.This principle is highlighted and explained below.

Focus – the checklist questions should be focused and not multifaceted. If a question is supposed to ask about say, phonology, it should end there and should not include points regarding, say, vocabulary.

Accuracy – questions should not be ambiguous or misleading in any way

Brevity – the checklist should contain questions that are not wordy. Nothing makes easy reading than a brief and concise question.

Practicability – There is no purpose in going all the way to establish this framework if it is not practicable and can be easily administered. In essence practicality, perhaps, is the most important consideration

Economy – The whole checklist should be economical in terms of time and money spent so as not to hinder the process of evaluation. Teachers may possibly avoid using the framework if they consider it time wasting; and the administrators, if they know that it is going to gulp a lot of money.

Clarity – While it is true that we advocate brevity, under no circumstances should clarity be sacrificed on the altar of brevity. In other words, the checklist should have questions that are clearly stated and understood.

Having said that, it is time to answer the question raised earlier on how best teachers can arrive at an informed checklist suitable to carry out material evaluation in the context.

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION CHECKLIST

A worthwhile checklist, Robert (1996, p.383) says, must come forth from professional judgment; one 'based on reason, experience and intimate knowledge of a particular teaching/learning situation that can be easily articulated and defended.' The writer's criteria in drawing up this checklist is guided by the need to eliminate all the problems highlighted earlier on in the section dealing with problems encountered using materials selected in the context. For example, learners' interest need to be aroused, materials must be at appropriate linguistic level and so on. The checklist is also expected to be a 'qualitative yardstick…[which] would seem to be central to coping with 'gaps' via subsequent supplementation and adaptation' (Sheldon, 1988, p,242) In addition it will be brief, practical, to use, and still be comprehensive in its coverage of criteria.

 Time, no doubt, is going to be a crucial factor in this context if the evaluative instrument is going to be successful. In view of this, the writer proposes a two-phase checklist; one which Robert (1996, p. 385) rightly observes, 'saves time and effort'. In the first stage (the macro), the evaluator will screen out what McGrath (2002) calls 'unsuitable materials' and in the secondly phase the materials will be put under scrutiny to see whether they match the needs of the students. Here then is what is proposed:

Phase 1

1) Is the material expensive?	Y/N
2) Is the material well-written and fairly recent?	Y/N
3**)** Does the material fit into a research-based framework for the concepts and skills to be taught?	Y/N
4) Does the material integrate the four language skills?	Y/N
5) Does the material stimulate motivation for real-life language use?	Y/N
6) Does the material make learners responsible for their own learning?	Y/N
7) Does the material present activity in proper context?	Y/N
8) Is the material appropriately challenging and at the right level?	Y/N
9) Does the material focus solely on form to the neglect of meaning?	Y/N

Phase 2

1) Is the material culturally relevant /appropriate to students' need?	Y/N
2) Does the material offer multiple pedagogical strategies (cognitive and metacognitive) for students?	Y/N
3) Is the material suitable as an example of a particular discourse type?	Y/N
4) Is the learners' interest taken care of in the content of the material presented?	Y/N
5) Does the material provide adequate skill practice?	Y/N
6) Does the course book suggest a variety of assessment approaches: portfolios, projects and informal and formal assignments and tests?	Y/N
7) Does the material fit into coherent units that build conceptual understanding?	Y/N
8) Do the topics provide opportunities for interdisciplinary learning?	Y/N
9) Does the material encourage students' discussion and reflection?	Y/N

EVALUATION

So far it could be seen that selecting textbooks is a 'challenging task' (Cunningsworth, 1995) The process necessitates that the evaluator looks 'below the superficial feature of materials' (Hutchinson, 1987a:37) or better still inside the 'Trojan Horse to see what lies within' (Littlejohn, 1998:190). Even at that, the process still remains 'fundamentally a subjective, rule-of-thump activity, and has no near formula, grid, or system [which] will ever provide a definite yard stick' Sheldon (1988) nor frameworks by which they can be 'unerringly judged'. (Sheldon, 1987)

The checklist, as can be seen, makes use of 'Y/N' questions. It is a two phase checklist. It is expected to be fast and effective in use and also 'provide 'exit points' at different stages of the macro evaluation, especially, when the material is found not to fulfil criteria deemed essential. In other words, for the questions asked in the first phase, there can be no compromise. If, for instance, question 1, which has to do with the material being expensive, gets the answer 'No', the stage automatically provides an 'exit point' for the evaluator.

However, the evaluator should not fail to realize that sometimes in making final decision on the materials, s/he has to compromise because no coursebook is ever perfect. Flexibility is demanded. This can come in the area of micro evaluation. For example, in terms of appropriateness of materials the evaluator can almost never match the needs of all the learners in a group. So, in most cases, the option will be to select relatively better materials rather than looking for the best since 'evaluation is basically a matching process: matching needs to available solutions' (Hutchinson 1987). (See appendix 1 for diagrammatic representation).

CONCLUSION

This paper began by arguing that the ability of teachers to choose an appropriate coursebook is very important and that its potential for influencing the way they operate in classroom is great. Next, it was shown that checklists for evaluating materials are full of choices and alternatives. However, these checklists must be tailored to 'matching needs' (Hutchinson, 1987). The implication of this is that there is 'no single all-purpose approach to evaluation' (Low, 1989). It is, indeed, a case of compromise between professional and contextual factors. Finally, criteria for the evaluation of the checklist and how it can be used was presented. Getting to this stage is by no means an easy task. Swales, (1980) cited in Sheldon, (1987) captures the complexity thus: "the textbook is a 'problem' evincing a complex of difficulties in its creation, distribution exploitation and, ultimately, evaluation.' Having come this far, it is hoped that 'we [teachers/evaluators] can be committed to [the] checklist...' (Sheldon, 1988).

Appendix 1:
PHASE 1(Macro-Evaluation)

Is the material expensive?

Yes Cont.   No → Exit

Is the material well-written and fairly recent?

Yes Cont.   No→ Exit

Does the material fit into a research-based framework for the concepts and skills taught?

Yes Cont.   No→ Exit

Does the material integrate language skills?

Yes Cont.   No→ Exit

Does the material stimulate real-life communicative interaction?

Yes Cont.   No→ Exit

Does the material make learners responsible for their own learning?

Yes Cont.   No→ Exit

Does the material present activity in proper context?

Yes Cont.   No→ Exit

Is the material appropriately challenging and at the right level?

Yes Cont.   No→ Exit
PHASE 2 (Micro-evaluation)

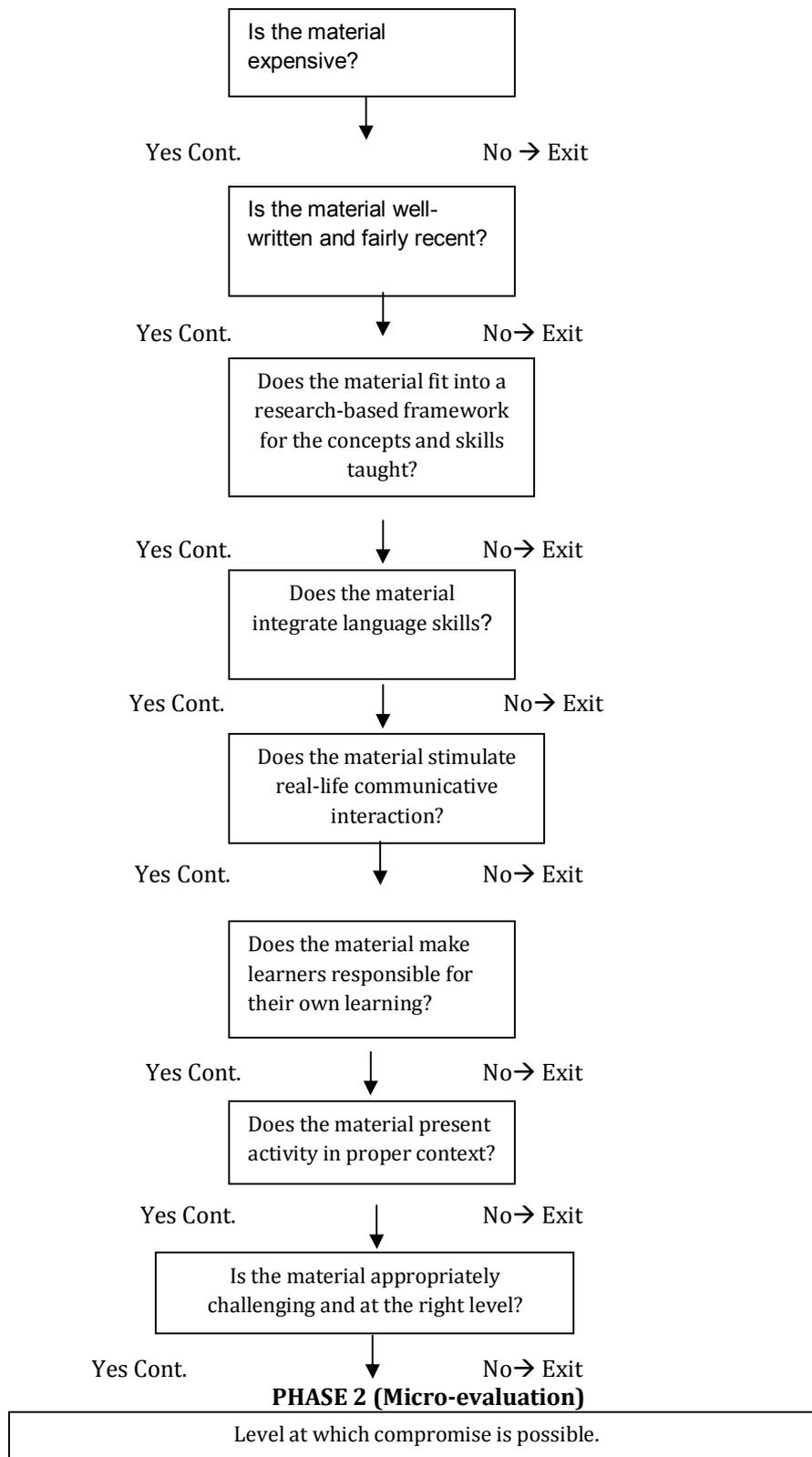Level at which compromise is possible.

Figure 1. An overview of the materials evaluation process. Adapted from McDonough and Shaw, (1993)

REFERENCES

1. Breen, M. P. and Candlin, C. (1987). Which materials? A consumer's and designer's guide. In Sheldon, L. E. (Ed). *ELT textbooks and materials: problems in evaluation development*. Oxford: Modern English Publications in association with the British Council. pp.13-28.
2. Brown H. D. (1994). *Teaching by Principles: an interactive approach to language pedagogy*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents. pp.135-155.
3. Candlin, C. N. and Breen, M. P. (1979). Evaluating, adapting and innovating language teaching materials. In Yorio, C. Perkins, K. and Schacter, J. (Eds.). *On TESOL '79*: *The learner in focus*. Washington, D.C.: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages. pp. 86-108
4. Chambers, F. (1997). Seeking consensus in coursebook evaluation. *ELT Journal* 51, (1):29-35.
5. Cunningsworth, A. (1984). Evaluating and selecting EFL teaching materials. London: Heinemann. pp. 1-14
6. Cunningsworth, A. (1987). Coursebooks and conversational skills. In Sheldon, L. E. (Ed). *ELT textbooks and materials: problems in evaluation development*. Oxford: Modern English Publications in association with the British Council. pp. 45-54
7. Cunningsworth, A. (1995). *Choosing your coursebook*. London: Heinemann. pp. 1-14.
8. Daoud, A. (1977). Evaluating an English language textbook. Work-papers in teaching English as a second language, 11, 113 -17.
9. Daoud, A. and Celce-Murcia, M. (1979). Selecting and evaluating a textbook. In. Celce-Murcia, M. and McIntosh, L. (Eds.). *Teaching English as a second or foreign language*. Cambridge, MA: Newbury House Publishers. pp. 302-307.
10. Dougill, J. (1987). Not so obvious. In Sheldon, L. E. (Ed). *ELT textbooks and materials: problems in evaluation development*. Oxford: Modern English Publications in association with the British Council. pp. 29-36.
11. Harmer, J. (1991). *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Harlow, Essex: Longman. pp. 277-285.
12. Hutchinson, T. (1987a). What's underneath? An interactive view of materials evaluation. In Sheldon, L. E. (Ed). *ELT textbooks and materials: problems in evaluation development*. Oxford: Modern English Publications in association with the British Council pp.37-44.
13. Hutchinson, T. and Waters, A. (1987b). *English for Specific Purposes: A learning-centred approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
14. Korthagen, F. A. J. (2001). Reflection on reflection. In Korthagen, F. A. J. (Ed.). *Linking practice and theory: the pedagogy of realistic teacher education*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. pp. 51-68.
15. Littlejohn, A. (1998).The analysis of language teaching materials: inside the Trojan Horse. In Tomlinson, B. (Ed.). *Materials development in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp.190-201.
16. Low, G. (1989). Appropriate design: the internal organisation of course units. In R. K. Johnson (Ed.). *The second language curriculum*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp.136 – 54.
17. Matthews, A. (1985). Choosing the best available textbook. In A. Matthews, M. Spratt and L. Dangerfield (Eds.). *At the chalk face*. London: Edward Arnold. pp. 202-206.
18. McDonough, J. and Shaw, C. (1993). *Materials and methods in ELT: A teacher's guide*. Oxford: Blackwell.pp.63-79.
19. McGrath, I. (2002). *Material evaluation and design for language teaching*. Edinburgh: University Press. pp.104-117.
20. Rea-Dickins, P. and Germaine, K. (1992). *Evaluation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 28-34.
21. Roberts, J. T. (1996). Demystifying materials evaluation. *System* 24 (3):375-389.
22. Sheldon, L. E. (1987). Introduction. In Sheldon, L. E. (Ed). *ELT textbooks and materials: problems in evaluation development*. Oxford: Modern English Publications in association with the British Council. pp.1-10.
23. Sheldon, L. (1988). Evaluating ELT textbooks and materials. *ELT Journal*, 42 (4): 237 – 246.
24. Tucker C. A. (1975). Evaluating beginning textbooks. *ELT Forum*, (13): 355–361
25. Ur, P. (1996), *A Course in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.pp183-187.
26. Williams, D. (1983). Developing criteria for textbook evaluation. *ELT Journal*, 37(3): 251 – 5.