

The Role of Textbooks in a Language Program

Jack C. Richards

Textbooks are a key component in most language programs. In some situations they serve as the basis for much of the language input learners receive and the language practice that occurs in the classroom. They may provide the basis for the content of the lessons, the balance of skills taught and the kinds of language practice the students take part in. In other situations, the textbook may serve primarily to supplement the teacher's instruction. For learners, the textbook may provide the major source of contact they have with the language apart from input provided by the teacher. In the case of inexperienced teachers textbooks may also serve as a form of teacher training – they provide ideas on how to plan and teach lessons as well as formats that teachers can use. Much of the language teaching that occurs throughout the world today could not take place without the extensive use of commercial textbooks. Learning how to use and adapt textbooks is hence an important part of a teacher's professional knowledge.

Advantages and limitations of textbooks

The use of commercial textbooks in teaching has both advantages and disadvantages, depending on how they are used and the contexts for their use. Among the principal advantages are:

1. They provide structure and a syllabus for a program.

Without textbooks a program may have no central core and learners may not receive a syllabus that has been systematically planned and developed.

2. They help standardize instruction.

The use of a textbook in a program can ensure that the students in different classes receive similar content and therefore can be tested in the same way.

3. They maintain quality.

If a well developed textbook is used students are exposed to materials that have been tried and tested, that are based on sound learning principles, and that are paced appropriately.

4. They provide a variety of learning resources.

Textbooks are often accompanied by workbooks, CDs and cassettes, videos, CD ROMs, and comprehensive teaching guides, providing a rich and varied resource for teachers and learners.

5. They are efficient.

They save teachers' time, enabling teachers to devote time to teaching rather than material's production.

6. They can provide effective language models and input.

Textbooks can provide support for teachers whose first language is not English and who may not be able to generate accurate language input on their own.

7. They can train teachers.

If teachers have limited teaching experience, a textbook together with the teacher's manual can serve as a medium of initial teacher training.

8. They are visually appealing.

Commercial textbooks usually have high standards of design and production and hence are appealing to learners and teachers.

However there are also potential negative effects. For example:

1. They may contain inauthentic language:

Textbooks sometimes present inauthentic language since texts, dialogs and other aspects of content tend to be specially written to incorporate teaching points and are often not representative of real language use.

2. They may distort content.

Textbooks often present an idealized view of the world or fail to represent real issues. In order to make textbooks acceptable in many different contexts controversial topics are avoided and instead an idealized white middle-class view of the world is portrayed as the norm.

3. They may not reflect students' needs.

Since textbooks are often written for global markets they often do not reflect the interests and needs of students and hence may require adaptation.

4. They can deskill teachers.

If teachers use textbooks as the primary source of their teaching leaving the textbook and teacher's manual to make the major instructional decisions for them the teacher's role can become reduced to that of a technician whose primary function is to present materials prepared by others.

5. They are expensive

Commercial textbooks may represent a financial burden for students in many parts of the world.

Both the benefits and limitations of the use of textbooks needs to be considered, and if the textbooks that are being used in a program are judged to have some negative consequences, remedial action should be taken, e.g. by adapting or supplementing books or by providing appropriate guidance and support for teachers in how to use them appropriately.

Evaluating Textbooks

With such an array of commercial textbooks and other kinds of instructional materials to choose from teachers and others responsible for choosing materials need to be able to make informed judgments about textbooks and teaching materials. Evaluation however can only be done by considering something in relation to its purpose. A book may be ideal in one situation because it matches the needs of that situation perfectly. It has just the right amount of material for the program, it is easy to teach, it can be used with little preparation by inexperienced teachers, and it has an equal coverage of grammar and the four skills. However the same book in a different situation may turn out to be quite unsuitable. It contains too little material; it is not sufficiently challenging for

teacher and students, and has elements in it (such as a grammar syllabus) that is not needed in the program. Before one can evaluate a textbook, therefore, information is needed on the following issues:

1. The role of the textbook in the program

- Is there a well developed curriculum which describes the objectives, syllabus and content of the program or will this be determined by the textbook?
- Will the book or textbook series provide the core of the program, or is it one of several different books that will be used?
- Will it be used with small classes or large ones?
- Will learners be expected to buy a workbook as well or should the textbook provide all the practice students need?

2. The teachers in the program

- How experienced are the teachers in the program and what is their level of training?
- Are they native speakers of English? If not, how well do they speak English?
- Do teachers tend to follow the textbook closely or do they use the book simply as a resource?
- Do teachers play a part in selecting the books they teach from?
- Are teachers free to adapt and supplement the book?

3. The learners in the program

- Is each student required to buy a book?
- What do learners typically expect in a textbook?
- Will they use the book in class and at home?
- How will they use the book in class? Is it the primary source of classroom activities?
- How much are they prepared to pay for a book?

It is also necessary to realize that no commercial textbook will ever be a perfect fit for a language program. Two factors are involved in the development of commercial textbooks: those representing the interests of the author, and those representing the interests of the publisher. The author is generally concerned to produce a text that teachers will find innovative, creative, relevant to their learners' needs, and that they will enjoy teaching from. The author is generally hopeful that the book will be successful and make a financial profit since a large investment of the author's personal time and effort is involved. The publisher is primarily motivated by financial success. However, in order to achieve a profit, publishers generally recognize that a book must have qualities of excellence that will distinguish it from its competitors.

At the same time, the publisher will try to satisfy teachers' expectations as to what a textbook at a certain level should contain. For example, if an introductory ESL textbook does not include the present continuous in the first level of the book, teachers may feel that it is defective and not wish to use it. In an attempt to make an author's manuscript usable in as large a market as possible, the publisher often has to change it substantially. Some of these changes are necessitated by the fact that teachers with very different levels of experience, training, and teaching skill might be using the book. Exercises should have explicit goals, procedures for using activities should be obvious and uncomplicated, and teachers should not have to spend much time working out how to use the material. In addition, content that would not be welcome in particular markets may have to be removed. As a consequence, much of the "flavour" and creativity of the author's original manuscript may disappear. In using textbooks, therefore, teachers invariably have to put back some of the creativity that may have been lost in the process of textbook publication.

Criteria for Textbook Evaluation

Cunningsworth (1995) proposes four criteria for evaluating textbooks, particularly coursebooks:

1. They should correspond to learner's needs. They should match the aims and objectives of the language-learning program.
2. They should reflect the uses (present or future) which learners will make of the language. Textbooks should be chosen that will help equip students to use language effectively for their own purposes.
3. They should take account of students' needs as learners and should facilitate their learning processes, without dogmatically imposing a rigid "method".
4. They should have a clear role as a support for learning. Like teachers, they mediate between the target language and the learner.

The type of evaluation a textbook receives, however, will also reflect the concerns of the evaluator. One teacher may look at a book in terms of its usability. The teacher is primarily interested in whether the book works easily in her class, can be used flexibly, and could easily be adapted. Another teacher may look at a book much more critically in terms of its theoretical orientation and approach. If it is a book that teaches conversation skills what theory of conversation is it based on? What kind of syllabus is it based on and what is the validity of the activities it makes use of? Two teachers evaluating a writing text may likewise look at it from very different perspectives. One may subscribe to a process-oriented view of writing and look for activities that practice such processes as generating ideas, drafting, reviewing, revising, and editing. Another may be more concerned to see that adequate treatment is given to different conventions for organizing different kinds of texts, such as narrative writing, expository writing, and descriptive writing. In any language program therefore it is unlikely that a published checklist can be used without adaptation as a basis for evaluating and choosing textbooks. Based on the factors in each situation questions specific to that situation need to be generated around the main issues involved in textbook evaluation and selection:

- program factors – questions relating to concerns of the program
- teacher factors – questions relating to teacher concerns
- learner factors – questions relating to learner concerns
- content factors – questions relating to the content and organization of the material in the book
- pedagogical factors – questions relating to the principles underlying the materials and the pedagogical design of the materials, including choice of activities and exercise types

Adapting Textbooks

Commercial textbooks can seldom be used without some form of adaptation to make them more suitable for the particular context in which they will be used. This adaptation may take a variety of forms.

1. Modifying content

Content may need to be changed because it does not suit the target learners, perhaps because of factors related to the learners' age, gender, social class, occupation, religion or cultural background.

2. Adding or deleting content

The book may contain too much or too little for the program. Whole units may have to be dropped, or perhaps sections of units throughout the book omitted.

For example a course may focus primarily on listening and speaking skills and hence writing activities in the book will be omitted.

3. Reorganizing content

A teacher may decide to reorganize the syllabus of the book, and arrange the units in what she considers a more suitable order. Or within a unit the teacher may decide not to follow the sequence of activities in the unit but to reorder them for a particular reason.

4. Addressing omissions

The text may omit items that the teacher feels are important. For example a teacher may add vocabulary activities or grammar activities to a unit.

5. Modifying tasks

Exercises and activities may need to be changed to give them an additional focus. For example a listening activity that focuses only on listening for information is adapted so that students listen a second or third time for a different purpose. Or an activity may be extended to provide opportunities for more personalized practice.

6. Extending tasks

Exercises may contain insufficient practice and additional practice tasks may need to be added.

The ability to be able to adapt commercial textbooks in these ways is an essential skill for teachers to develop. Through the process of adaptation the teacher personalizes the text making it a better teaching resource as well as individualizes it for a particular group of learners. Normally this process takes place gradually as the teacher becomes more familiar with the book since the dimensions of the text which need adaptation may not be apparent until the book is tried out in the classroom. When a number of teachers in a program are teaching from the same textbook it is useful to build in opportunities for teachers to share information about the forms of adaptation they are making.

Monitoring the Use of Materials

No matter what form of materials teachers make use of, whether they teach from textbooks, institutional materials, or teacher-prepared materials, they represent *plans* for teaching. They do not represent the process of teaching itself. As teachers use materials, they adapt and transform them to suit the needs of particular groups of learners and their own teaching styles. These processes of transformation are at the heart of teaching and enable good teachers to create effective lessons out of the resources they make use of. It is useful therefore to collect information on how teachers use course books and other teaching materials in their teaching. The information collected can serve the following purposes.

- To document effective ways of using materials
- To provide feedback on how materials work
- To keep a record of additions, deletions, and supplementary materials teachers may have used with the materials
- To assist other teachers in using the materials

Monitoring may take the following forms:

1. Observation

Classroom visits to see how teachers use textbooks and to find out how materials influence the quality of teaching and interaction that occurs in a lesson.

2. Feedback sessions

Group meetings in which teachers discuss their experience with textbooks.

3. Written reports

The use of reflection sheets or other forms of written feedback in which teachers make brief notes about what worked well, what didn't work well, or give suggestions on using the materials.

4. Reviews

Written reviews by a teacher or group of teachers on their experiences with a set of materials and what they liked or disliked about them.

5. Students' reviews

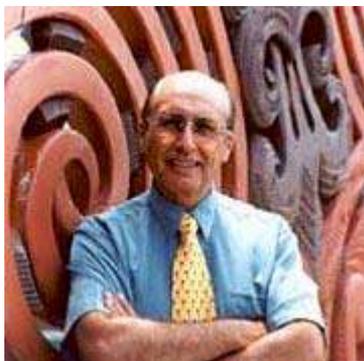
Comments from students on their experience with the materials

Conclusions

Despite the impact of new technologies, textbooks will doubtless continue to play an important role in language teaching and provide a useful resource for both teachers and learners. Good textbooks serve to turn the guidelines in the official government syllabus into a rich source of content, texts, and activities that would be beyond the capacities of most teachers to develop on their own. The use of textbooks should not be seen as reflecting a deficiency on the part of the teacher, any more than the use of computer-based materials would be so regarded. Textbooks should be regarded as one of the many resources teachers can draw upon in creating effective lessons, but teachers need training and experience in adapting and modifying textbooks as well as in using authentic materials and in creating their own teaching materials.

Reading List

Cunningsworth, A. 1995. *Choosing Your Coursebook*. Oxford: Heinemann.



Jack C. Richards is an Adjunct Professor at SEAMEO RELC. His most recent book is *Curriculum Development in Language Teaching* (Cambridge 2001).