

Developing an English Language Textbook Evaluation Checklist: A Focus Group Study

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Abstract

English Language Teaching (ELT) textbook evaluation checklists are instruments that help teachers select the most appropriate books for their learners. This paper presents a phase of an on-going project proposed out of the need for a valid, reliable and a practical checklist. The phase includes a focus group study designed to further refine a checklist previously developed by the present researchers (Mukundan, Hajimohammadi, & Nimehchisalem, 2011). More specifically, the participants in the focus group (n=6) helped the developers improve the items of the checklist in reference to their clarity and inclusiveness. The study commenced in the form of an unstructured interview in which the participants brainstormed on the evaluative criteria that should be considered in evaluating ELT textbooks. This was followed by a structured interview in which the participants were provided with a copy of the checklist. They were free to reword, delete or add items that they considered necessary. As a result of this study, 14 items were added to the checklist while two were reworded. The findings are expected to be useful for English language teachers, ELT material developers and evaluators as well as curriculum developers. Further study is required to improve the instrument.

Keywords: English language teaching material development, textbook evaluation checklists

1. Introduction

The choice of language teaching materials can determine the quality of learning-teaching procedure. As a part of the materials used in the language classroom, the textbook can often play a crucial role in students' success or failure. Therefore, particular attention must be paid to evaluate such materials based on valid and reliable instruments. One of the common methods to evaluate English Language Teaching (ELT) materials is the checklist. An evaluation checklist is an instrument that provides the evaluator with a list of features of successful learning-teaching materials. According to these criteria, evaluators like teachers, researchers as well as students can rate the quality of the material.

A review of the ELT material evaluation checklists reveals that they all have a global set of features. For instance, Skierso's (1991) checklist considers the characteristics related to 'bibliographical data', 'aims and goals', 'subject matter', 'vocabulary and structures', 'exercises and activities', and 'layout and physical makeup'. These domains are mostly in line with those in Cunningsworth's (1995) checklist which include 'aims and approaches', 'design and organization', 'language content', 'skills', 'topic', 'methodology', and 'practical considerations'. Although the headings of the sections in the two checklists appear to be different, an examination of the items will show that they are more or less the same. For example, Skierso (1991) refers to the cost-effectiveness of the textbook in the 'bibliographical data' section while Cunningsworth considers it in the 'practical considerations' section.

Review of the available checklists indicates their validity, reliability or practicality problems (Mukundan & Hour, 2010). Therefore, there is a need for developing a checklist that has an inclusive account of the construct domain of the criteria, accounts for consistency of the scores created by its items, and aims for economy. For this purpose, the present researchers developed a textbook evaluation checklist on the basis of several well-established instruments (Mukundan, Hajimohammadi, & Nimehchisalem, 2011). The present paper reviews the process of evaluating this checklist in a focus group study. The two research questions addressed in this study were:

1. Are the sections and items of the current checklist clear enough for language teachers as its end-users?
2. Do the sections and items of the current checklist inclusively account for the characteristics of a good textbook?

The method and findings of the study are presented in the following sections.

2. Method

One of the ways to develop evaluation checklists is through a qualitative method. The method allows the developer to gain a deep understanding of the construct under investigation. To offer an example, in the United States Bartlett and Morgan (1991) developed their 'textbook selection checklist' based on their interviews with 50 participants. In this way, they were able to perceive an in-depth picture of the learning-teaching context at hand. Focus group study is an interactive interview involves a number of experts who are familiar with the research context. The reason for using a focus group study was that it could provide a practical method to validate an instrument in the process of its development before it is used (Weir, 1993). Experts' views on the construct and wording of the items would enable the researchers to realize certain crucial issues that had been neglected in the development of the checklist. As for the size of the focus group, different researchers have varying opinions and it can range between three and fourteen depending on the nature of the research (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002; Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2002). In the case of complex studies where the group members are experts, it is advisable to have small focus groups; the participants may be offended if they do not have sufficient time to express their opinions (Morgan, 1995). For similar reasons, a group of medium size (n=6) was chosen for the present study.

The focus group participants included six PhD candidates (four females and two males) of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) in the University Putra Malaysia (UPM). They were involved in teaching English language for a period of 5-28 years in different universities, language institutes, and/or schools in Malaysia and/or Iran. Experienced participants were selected because they would be well-aware of the characteristics of an effective textbook, and therefore could help the researchers better in improving the quality of the checklist. They all had experience of evaluating or selecting English language textbooks. The focus group interview took around two hours. It started by the participants introducing themselves. First, in the form of an unstructured interview they brainstormed on the criteria to be considered in evaluating English language textbooks. The second stage was a structured interview, in which the participants were given a copy of the tentative checklist that had been previously developed by the researchers (Mukundan et al, 2011). A group leader was in charge of conducting the study. He was also experienced in teaching and evaluating textbooks at a variety of levels in language institutes and universities. The interview was recorded using a high-quality voice recorder. After the focus group meeting, the recording was transcribed.

3. Unstructured Interview Results

The present and the following sections discuss the modifications that were made to the checklist as a result of the focus group study. The Appendix presents the checklist before and after it was revised. The results of the unstructured interview in which the participants were free to share their views on the important evaluative criteria to be taken into account in evaluating textbooks are reported in this section. The researchers examined the transcripts, and in reference to the focus group participants' statements, they added a number of criteria to the checklist. These added items are discussed in this section. The items that were mentioned by the focus group but had been ignored in the development of the checklist are listed below with the location of the new item indicated in brackets in front of each:

1. cultural accessibility (added as item 6, part I)
2. appropriateness of size (added as item 13, part I)
3. printing quality (added as item 14, part I)
4. teacher's guide (added as item 16, part I)

5. recency (added as item 7, part II)
6. variety of topics (added as item 8, part II)

These evaluative criteria had to be rephrased in the form of statements that could be added to the checklist. As for the first criterion, cultural accessibility, initially the developers decided to word the item as ‘The textbook is compatible to the learners’ cultural background.’ However, after the transcript was analyzed more closely, the item was rephrased as, ‘It is culturally accessible to the learners’. The reason is that there may be a textbook with a content not compatible to the learners’ background but with well-defined cultural elements that the learner can readily access. Since the item was relevant to ‘Compatibility to learners’, it was added as the sixth item in the first part of the checklist.

The second criterion, which was suggested, concerned the size of the book. As a result, the item ‘Its size is appropriate’ was also added under the sub-category of ‘physical and utilitarian attributes’ in the first section. The other item concerned the printing quality. The statement ‘The printing quality is high’ was added to the first section as the fourteenth item to indicate this feature. In addition, one of the participants pointed out the importance of a teacher’s guide: “The novice teachers need to have a teacher’s book to prepare for the next class.” To account for this, the item ‘There is a teacher’s guide to aid the teacher’ was added to the end of the first section.

There were two criteria that were added to the second section of the checklist. The first related to the recency of the textbook. Therefore, the seventh item (The book is up-to-date) was under the significance of this matter that was added to the checklist. The next criterion was ‘variety of topics’. It was the final feature raised by the focus group participants. Variety of topics in a textbook can make the content more appealing to the learners. Furthermore, it causes the learners to be exposed to different words, sentence structures and background information that they may need in their prospective academic fields. For this purpose, the item ‘It covers a variety of topics from different fields’ was added to the second section of the checklist.

There were issues raised by the participants that were disregarded. For instance, it was suggested to add items that addressed promoting autonomous and discovery learning. However, the developers assumed such matters relate to classroom procedures that are often controlled by the teacher rather than by the textbook. Therefore, they would be more relevant for teacher observation sheets.

4. Structured Interview Results

As mentioned previously, at the second stage of the study the participants were each given a copy of the checklist and were asked to comment on its clarity and inclusiveness. As a result of this phase of the study, some items (8) were added to the checklist, while others (3) were revised. These changes are discussed in this section. In items 8, 10, and 11, the inserted words have been underlined while the deleted words have been stricken through. The items that were added or revised are listed below:

1. It is compatible to the socio-economic context. (added as item 5, part I)
2. The book contains fun elements. (added as item 9, part II)
3. Instructions are clear. (added as item 11, part II)
4. Activities motivate students to talk. (added as item 16, part II)
5. Length is appropriate. (added as item 18, part II)
6. Models are provided for different genres. (added as item 21, part II)
7. Words are contextualized. (added as item 26, part II)
8. Grammar is introduced explicitly ~~and reworked incidentally throughout the book.~~ (item 30, part II)
9. Grammar is reworked implicitly throughout the book. (added as item 31, part II)
10. It is ~~learner friendly with no complex charts~~ easy to learn. (item 33, part II)
11. They ~~are learner friendly~~ have clear instructions. (item 34, part II)

The first item that the focus group suggested to be added to the checklist concerned the issue of the compatibility of the textbook to the social and economic background of the learners. Admittedly, the checklist already had items on the suitability of the book to the learners’ background knowledge and culture. However, as the participants recommended, there was need for an item that accounted for the learners’ background in a broader sense. Therefore, the item ‘It is compatible to the socio-economic context’ was added as the fifth item to section one.

Another component that had been neglected in the development of the checklist was the existence of ‘fun elements’ in the book. As pointed out by one of the participants, these elements would include songs, riddles, games, jokes, and the like. They argued that such elements can contribute to the motivation of the learner. As a result, the item ‘The book contains fun elements’ was added as the ninth item to the second section of the checklist.

The next item that the group recommended to be added to the instrument was an item on the clarity of the instructions for the listening tasks. A short statement focusing on this feature was added to the second section of the checklist as the 11th item. ‘Activities motivate students to talk’ was another item that was added to the second section of the checklist. “A language class often has diverse types of learners with various attitudes towards language learning,” one of the participants mentioned. He added, “It’s sometimes very hard to make some students talk, and, I think, a good speaking task should be able to motivate them to participate in speaking tasks, like role-play.” The issue of motivation is among the major factors affecting learners’ success in ESL situations (Dörnyei & Schmidt, 2001; Gardener, 2001). A related issue was raised in the case of reading activities. One of the experts pointed out the case of her own reading classes in which her learners had lost their motivation due to the lengthy passages in the reading activities in a particular book. Following her suggestion, the item ‘Length is appropriate’ was included as the 18th item to the second section.

The feature that was suggested to be added to the part on writing activities concerned providing the learner with suitable models. According to the principles of genre-based approach to teaching of ESL writing, scaffolding (i.e., gradually removed supportive teaching) learners’ creativity can help learners see how writers write (Hyland, 2003; Matsuda, 2003). As one of the focus group members asserted, models work like ‘templates’ that students can follow to produce successful written pieces. Following this point, the developers added the item ‘Models are provided for different genres’ to the second part of the checklist as the 21st item. ‘Words are contextualized’ was the final item that added to the sub-section on vocabulary. According to the literature on ESL vocabulary instruction, contextualization of new words is of crucial importance and can result in superior retention of newly acquired vocabulary items (e.g., Qian, 1996).

Another problem that was raised about the checklist concerned an item on grammar (Grammar is introduced explicitly and reworked incidentally throughout the book, item 30, section II). Clearly, the item is evaluating two different constructs at the same time (i.e., (1) introducing grammar explicitly and (2) reworking grammar implicitly). As one of the participants mentioned, it is possible to find a book that introduces grammar explicitly but fails to rework it throughout the book. In such cases, the evaluator will find it hard to assign a reliable score for the given item because of its construct validity problem. To solve this issue the item was split into two parts as items 30 and 31 (Grammar is introduced explicitly; Grammar is reworked implicitly throughout the book).

The final changes that were made to the checklist related to the wording of two of items 33 (It is learner-friendly with no complex charts) and 34 (They are learner friendly). Two of the members in the focus group pointed to the vague meaning of the word ‘reader-friendly’. They argued the word may be interpreted differently by different people. Therefore, it was decided to reword the aforementioned items. Item 33 was rephrased as ‘It is easy to learn’, and item 34 was reworded as ‘They have clear instructions’ to account for this problem.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed at testing a qualitatively developed textbook evaluation checklist on the clarity and inclusiveness. For this purpose a focus group study was held in two sections. First the participants were asked to brainstorm on the evaluative criteria that should be considered in developing a checklist. At the second stage, they were given a copy of the checklist and were asked to comment on its clarity and inclusiveness. Overall, based on the comments of the focus group, 14 items were added to the checklist while two were revised. As it was expected, the discussion with the prospective users of the instrument helped the developers improve the clarity and inclusiveness of the items. This supports the effectiveness of focus group studies. The interactive nature of the method allows the participants present their ideas freely and unobtrusively. The findings of this research can be useful for ESL researchers and teachers in general as well as ELT material developers and evaluators in particular. Curriculum developers and syllabus designers may also find the results of the study insightful. The checklist at this stage can be used with more confidence for evaluating textbooks; however, further study is in progress to empirically test the reliability and validity of this instrument. It is also necessary to survey the views of a larger number of experts in the area on the validity and reliability of the checklist.

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Appendix: A tentative checklist for textbook evaluation

I. General attributes	
A. The book in relation to syllabus and curriculum	
1. It matches to the specifications of the syllabus.	① ② ③ ④
B. Methodology	
2. The activities can be exploited fully and can embrace the various methodologies in ELT.	① ② ③ ④
3. Activities can work well with methodologies in ELT.	① ② ③ ④
C. Suitability to learners	
4. It is compatible to background knowledge and level of students.	① ② ③ ④
5. <u>It is compatible to the socio-economic context.</u>	<u>① ② ③ ④</u>
6. <u>It is culturally accessible to the learners.</u>	<u>① ② ③ ④</u>
7. It is compatible to the needs of the learners.	① ② ③ ④
8. It is compatible to the interests of the learners.	① ② ③ ④
D. Physical and utilitarian attributes	
9. Its layout is attractive.	① ② ③ ④
10. It indicates efficient use of text and visuals.	① ② ③ ④
11. It is durable.	① ② ③ ④
12. It is cost-effective.	① ② ③ ④
13. <u>Its size is appropriate.</u>	<u>① ② ③ ④</u>
14. <u>The printing quality is high.</u>	<u>① ② ③ ④</u>
E. Efficient outlay of supplementary materials	
15. The book is supported efficiently by essentials like audio-materials.	① ② ③ ④
16. <u>There is a teacher’s guide to aid the teacher.</u>	<u>① ② ③ ④</u>

II. Learning-teaching content	
A. General	
1. Most of the tasks in the book are interesting.	① ② ③ ④
2. Tasks move from simple to complex.	① ② ③ ④
3. Task objectives are achievable.	① ② ③ ④
4. Cultural sensitivities have been considered.	① ② ③ ④
5. The language in the textbook is natural and real.	① ② ③ ④
6. The situations created in the dialogues sound natural and real.	① ② ③ ④
7. <u>The material is up-to-date.</u>	<u>①</u> <u>②</u> <u>③</u> <u>④</u>
8. <u>It covers a variety of topics from different fields.</u>	<u>①</u> <u>②</u> <u>③</u> <u>④</u>
9. <u>The book contains fun elements.</u>	<u>①</u> <u>②</u> <u>③</u> <u>④</u>
B. Listening	
10. The book has appropriate listening tasks with well-defined goals.	① ② ③ ④
11. <u>Instructions are clear.</u>	<u>①</u> <u>②</u> <u>③</u> <u>④</u>
12. Tasks are efficiently graded according to complexity.	① ② ③ ④
13. Tasks are authentic or close to real language situations.	① ② ③ ④
C. Speaking	
14. Activities are developed to initiate meaningful communication.	① ② ③ ④
15. Activities are balanced between individual response, pair work and group work.	① ② ③ ④
16. <u>Activities motivate students to talk.</u>	<u>①</u> <u>②</u> <u>③</u> <u>④</u>
D. Reading	
17. Texts are graded.	① ② ③ ④
18. <u>Length is appropriate.</u>	<u>①</u> <u>②</u> <u>③</u> <u>④</u>
19. Texts are interesting.	① ② ③ ④
E. Writing	
20. Tasks have achievable goals and take into consideration learner capabilities.	① ② ③ ④
21. <u>Models are provided for different genres.</u>	<u>①</u> <u>②</u> <u>③</u> <u>④</u>
22. Tasks are interesting.	① ② ③ ④
F. Vocabulary	
23. The load (number of new words in each lesson) is appropriate to the level.	① ② ③ ④
24. There is a good distribution (simple to complex) of vocabulary load across chapters and the whole book.	① ② ③ ④
25. Words are efficiently repeated and recycled across the book.	① ② ③ ④
26. <u>Words are contextualized.</u>	<u>①</u> <u>②</u> <u>③</u> <u>④</u>
G. Grammar	
27. The spread of grammar is achievable.	① ② ③ ④
28. The grammar is contextualized.	① ② ③ ④
29. Examples are interesting.	① ② ③ ④
30. Grammar is introduced explicitly and reworked incidentally throughout the book.	① ② ③ ④
31. <u>Grammar is reworked implicitly throughout the book.</u>	<u>①</u> <u>②</u> <u>③</u> <u>④</u>
H. Pronunciation	
32. It is contextualized.	① ② ③ ④
33. It is learner friendly with no complex charts easy to learn.	① ② ③ ④
I. Exercises	
34. They are learner friendly have clear instructions.	① ② ③ ④
35. They are adequate.	① ② ③ ④
36. They help students who are under/over-achievers.	① ② ③ ④

Key to track-changes: Insertion (underlined), ~~Deletion~~ (stricken through)

Correction Table

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Location	Comment	Response
p.4, section 4 (structured interview results), items 8-11	<p>There are some correction problems as follows in your original paper. Please correct those and send the fresh paper for publication:</p> <p>8. Grammar is introduced explicitly and reworked incidentally throughout the book. (item 30, part II)</p> <p>9. Grammar is reworked implicitly throughout the book. (added as item 31, part II)</p> <p>10. It is learner friendly with no complex charts easy to learn. (item 33, part II)</p> <p>11. They are learner friendly <u>have clear instructions.</u> (item 34, part II)</p> <p>Note: <u>Insertion</u> (underlined), Deletion (stricken through)</p>	<p>These items were revised by the focus group. In order to highlight this, the last sentence of the first paragraph of section 4 was revised. Additionally, the note following the items [Note: <u>Insertion</u> (underlined), Deletion (stricken through)] was deleted. Instead a sentence was added to the end of the paragraph:</p> <p>...These changes are discussed in this section. The items that were added to the checklist are listed below <u>In items 8, 10, and 11, the inserted words have been underlined while the deleted words have been stricken through.</u></p> <p><u>The items that were added or revised are listed below:</u></p> <p>...</p> <p>...</p> <p>Note: <u>Insertion</u> (underlined), Deletion (stricken through)</p>