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Choosing Materials

Harwood (2010) comments that very often teachers do not choose their own coursebook or other materials, because in many contexts they are prescribed at a higher level, for example by the institution's administration or by a Ministry of Education. If you are in this situation, you may want to move straight to Chapter 3. Nonetheless, we hope you decide to read on as a basic knowledge and understanding of selection criteria can help teachers to understand why materials are successful or not in particular contexts and to make smart decisions about adapting materials.

In this chapter, we first consider how criteria for selecting materials can be developed through a *needs analysis*. We then look at how these criteria can be utilized in selection *checklists*. Finally we show how to select materials based on a *best match*.

REFLECTIVE BREAK

- Is it usual for teachers in the context in which you work to choose materials for learners?

- If yes, what problems do these choices create?

- If no, who chooses them and based on what criteria?

Developing Criteria

As we all know, learning and teaching English is a complex business. The *local context* strongly influences how this learning and teaching gets done. There are a number of specific aspects of this local context that must be considered when choosing materials: the age of the students, the number in the class, the learners' level(s), how learning is usually managed (teacher-fronted or experiential or something in-between), motivations for learning, and available finances, to name but a few. Choosing materials is essentially finding the best match between the local conditions and the materials available.

Before materials can be chosen, it is sensible to conduct a needs analysis. Traditionally associated with English for specific purposes (ESP), a needs analysis helps the teacher to identify the key features of the local context that must be addressed by the materials (and which will feed into the selection criteria discussed below). As the teacher, you can provide much of the basic contextual information for the needs analysis, such as the course hours, class numbers, and age of students. Other information, such as suitable topics of study or the money available to pay for materials, may have to come from other informants, such as the school administration or the students themselves.

A key aspect of the needs analysis should be a consideration of the *systems* and *skills* the students need to meet their goals. Systems are composed of grammar, vocabulary, phonology, and discourse, while skills are composed of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In many situations, students must pass exams that assess knowledge of grammar and vocabulary but put less emphasis on students' pronunciation, for example. In other contexts, students might be learning English for a specific purpose, to study a subject through English or to develop their academic English skills. For these students, developing strong reading and writing skills will be of particular importance. A needs analysis will identify the learners' needs in these areas so that materials can be selected that support successful learning.

The students' interests should also be a consideration. What are their leisure pursuits, their family norms, their beliefs, and dreams? This area is often called *cultural appropriateness*. In our experience, it is often the topics of materials that alienate, confuse, offend, or bore learners rather than the language learning activities. One aspect of cultural appropriateness is the degree to which the materials reproduce and endorse particular views of English speaking worlds with regard to race, age, gender, and social class, among other things (see Gray, 2013). This is often called the hidden curriculum, as the coursebooks are covertly teaching culture as well as language. A teacher and teacher educator in Mexico describes how this critical approach can be taken into the classroom:

❖ Some coursebooks do not consider how the students' beliefs and their own socioeconomic situation and culture fit (or not) the language or the culture of those countries where the language they are learning is spoken. Here in Mexico, some English teachers try to include activities to analyse these aspects in order to make students aware of the similarities and differences so students do not find the information in the book completely alien to their world.

Asking students (or colleagues) about the topics they are interested in discussing (and those they are not) can inform the needs analysis. Students can either brainstorm topics they wish to discuss, or the teacher can present topics, taken from materials under consideration, for students to rank. Teachers can also interrogate the materials to see

what kind of cultural world they promote: Do they understand this world and are they happy to endorse it? Often, locally produced materials provide a better fit with students than internationally produced materials in terms of topic and cultural appropriateness.

As well as students' interests, it is important to also consider the teacher's interests and preferences. Nigel Harwood (personal communication), who has written extensively about materials, makes an important observation about the teacher's role in their selection:

❧ The degree of fit between the materials and the teacher should be considered in the needs analysis. For instance:

- How adaptable/flexible are the materials (so the teacher can shape them to meet learners' needs)?

- How much guidance and support do the materials give to the teacher? (Are there accompanying teacher's notes? If so, do these help develop the teacher's knowledge of the target language/skill?)

- How closely does the teacher's preferred pedagogical approach align with that of the materials?

The teacher's preferences, then, should not be forgotten. Like the students and the institution, the teacher is an important stakeholder.

The *add-ons* of the materials are a further consideration. Coursebooks in particular now come with a large array of additional resources. While a teacher's book might be a reasonable expense, do students also need the CD-Rom, the workbook, and other additions that publishers now provide? Tomlinson, Dat, Masuhara, and Rubdy (2001), and Masuhara, Haan, Yi, and Tomlinson (2008) have all been critical of the "unwanted increase in the number of components of coursebooks" (Tomlinson, 2012, p. 149), and it is worth considering if they are both essential and useful.

A needs analysis can be produced in tabular form to summarise the information. A brief example is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Needs Analysis

Criterion	Notes
Student profile	
Age of students	16+
Level(s) of students	Intermediate
Number in class	32
Course details	
Course hours overall	90 hours
Length of lessons	60 minutes, three times a week
Purpose of course	Taking final year exam to gain university entrance
Language focus	
Grammar	Very important—coverage of tenses and determiners in particular required for exam. As well as explanations, plenty of exercises are required.
Vocab	Very important—specified areas are: travel and transport, school life, describing likes/dislikes and careers. Vocab should be recycled throughout materials.
Phonology	Less important—speaking worth 8% of exam. Students struggle with stress and intonation, which is examined.
Discourse	Not important—basic discourse markers already taught.
Skills focus	
Reading	Very important—traditional comprehension activities feature in exam. Particular focus on inference required.
Writing	Important, but students only required to write discursive essays. Guidance on paragraphing would be helpful.
Listening	Important—listening worth 12%. Students need practice in listening to dialogues in particular.
Speaking	Not important—exam composed of students talking about daily lives and plans for future; already covered.

Developing a Checklist

Many writers have developed checklists over the years to support teachers in selecting materials (see, e.g., Sheldon, 1988; Cunningsworth, 1995). David Falvey (personal communication), coauthor of the Market Leader Business English series (Cotton, Falvey, & Kent, 2011), published by Pearson, describes his experience of using one of these:

> ✤ When I was a director of studies and choosing materials for a language school, I found it useful to remind myself of checklists of evaluation criteria. The first checklist I used was Alan Cunningsworth's, which looked at language content, selection and grading of language items, presentation and practice of new language items, developing language skills and communicative ability, supporting materials, and motivating the learner. I actually prefer Cunningsworth's 1995 checklist to recent lists, which insist on including the new buzzwords of "critical thinking" and "21st century skills." Content, grammar, and skills are important to all students so Cunningsworth's evaluation criteria have some validity I think.

Published checklists, therefore, can be a valuable resource. However, they have also been criticised from a number of perspectives as "too demanding of time and expertise to be useful to teachers, too vague to be answerable, too context bound to be generalisable, too confusing to be useable and too lacking in validity to be useful" (Mukundan & Ahour, as cited by Tomlinson, 2012, p. 148). Rather than adopting an existing checklist, we suggest that teachers develop their own checklists based on the criteria they have developed in their needs analysis. While this might at first appear daunting, a checklist has a number of advantages: key features of the materials can be identified; materials can be compared; decisions can be defended based on the results from the checklist; and criteria can be refined for later selection processes. In developing checklists, we have found the four constructs of *analysis*, *evaluation*, *general*, and *specific* useful.

Tomlinson (2012, p. 148) explains the difference between *analysis* and *evaluation*. In a comprehensive overview of materials, he suggests that analysis is fairly objective in that it identifies stable features such

as the stated aims of the materials (e.g., to develop spoken fluency in discussing family relationships) and the contents (e.g., the number of listening activities and the type of listening texts). The information generated by an analysis is verifiable; if two teachers carry out an analysis of material, similar results will be found. Evaluation, on the other hand, is subjective, as it focuses on the effects of the materials in use (e.g., the activities engage the learners in speaking). It is unlikely that two teachers using the same material will evaluate them in the same way as evaluation will depend on a number of variable contextual factors, such as the age of the students, the size of the class, the climate, the teaching style, and so on. Analysis is nearly always carried out before material is selected while evaluation should be carried out before, during, and after using the materials.

Reflective Break

- In the coursebook you are using, count the number of reading activities.

- Make a list of their type and number (analysis).

- Then choose one reading activity. How effective would it be with students you know (evaluation)?

General criteria are "essential features of any good teaching-learning material" (McGrath, 2002, p. 31), the kind that appear on the Cunningsworth (1995) checklist discussed above. Of course, there may be some debate about what these essential features are, but most teachers will agree that materials should be attractive, accurate, have clear instructions, provide an answer booklet, and include useful activities. *Specific* criteria relate to the teacher's own context (McGrath, 2002) and focus on the aspects of the materials that will make them successful in that context. Specific criteria for a private school with small classes committed to developing communicative skills will be very different from specific criteria for a large class of teenagers developing examination skills.

Matching Materials and Criteria

Table 2 shows four of the criteria for selection identified in the needs
analysis. These are labeled according to the four constructs: analysis,
evaluation, general, and specific. As some criteria are more important
than others, a differentiation is made between essential and desirable
criteria. Finally, columns are added for three sets of materials (called
here 1, 2, and 3). Use Table 2 to find the best match between materials

Table 2. Example of Selection Criteria

Criterion (taken from Table 1)	Example	Material 1 Yes/No/ Partly	Material 2 Yes/No/ Partly	Material 3 Yes/No/ Partly
Analytic general (essential)	Vocabulary is recycled throughout	N	Y	P
Evaluative general (essential)	The activities will support students in developing paragraphing skills.	P	N	Y
Evaluative specific (essential)	The topics are suitable for teenage learners in large high school classes.	N	Y	N
Analytic specific (desirable)	Some units provide pronunciation practice of stressed and unstressed syllables.	Y	Y	Y

and criteria by assessing the materials based on whether the criteria is met, not met, or partially met. The assessment could, of course, be a numerical value (for example, 4/5).

From the example in Table 2, we see that it is likely that Material 2 will be selected, as it meets two of three essential criteria and also the desirable criterion. Importantly, the selection process also helps the teacher to identify areas not met by the coursebook. Material 2 does not cover paragraphing skills, and so supplementary material will need to be identified or produced to support learners in this important area.

Conclusion

This chapter has suggested a process for materials selection based on a consideration of the teacher's local context and the needs of the students. It has suggested that a checklist provides a clear, staged, and coherent approach and one that can be repeated and refined. However, selecting materials is only the first stage in the process. As we suggest above, it is the teacher's responsibility to evaluate the materials before, during, and after using them to ensure that they really do effectively support the learning and teaching process.