

MATERIALS EVALUATION
IN THE LANGUAGE CLASS¹

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Resumen. El siguiente estudio presenta un instrumento para una evaluación vasta y profunda de un manual para la enseñanza de inglés como lengua foránea o como lengua extranjera. El instrumento se puede aplicar a cualquier manual para la enseñanza de lenguas en el mercado, con las adaptaciones necesarias. Con el fin de validar el instrumento, se aplicó al manual *Interactions I: Integrated Skills* (McGraw Hill. New York: New York), el cual se utiliza en muchas instituciones de enseñanza de inglés alrededor del mundo. De hecho, los autores de este estudio lo hemos usado por más de cuatro años, en la Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica. Aplicamos el instrumento con dos propósitos: por un lado lo quisimos poner a prueba y, por otro lado, quisimos evaluar este importante libro de texto.

Palabras clave: instrumento, evaluación, libro de texto, enseñanza de lenguas.

Abstract. The following study presents an instrument for a deep and vast evaluation to ESL and EFL textbooks. The present instrument can be applied to any textbook in the market, though for some books, modifications would have to be made. During the current study we applied the instrument to the following textbook: *Interactions I: Integrated Skills*. McGraw Hill. New York: New York. This textbook is used in many different schools around the world. As a matter of fact, we have been working with this textbook for over four years, in the Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica. The purpose of applying it is twofold: on the one hand we want to put the instrument to test and on the other hand to scrutinize this important textbook.

Keywords: instrument, evaluation, textbook, language teaching.

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1 Introduction

According to our research, and in our understanding, most ESL/EFL teachers have been puzzled, at some point of their career, when choosing the right textbook for their classes. Most professionals researched or asked seem to agree on the fact that there is not enough and well-systematized material to evaluate textbooks. The current paper presents an instrument to evaluate ESL and EFL textbooks. It consists of a rigorous checklist to scrutinize the different areas of the content and format of a textbook. The checklist should be as complete as necessary to examine all the important areas. Namely, we refer to areas such as the four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing), plus other important subareas such as (culture, grammar, vocabulary, evaluation) as well as the format areas of (layout, organization, attractiveness to the teacher and the students and the teaching approach). During the current paper this instrument is presented, and as well, is put into practice to evaluate a textbook.

The current instrument was applied to the following textbook: Interactions 1, Integrated Skills. This is a theme-based, three-level, four skills ESL/EFL series designed to prepare students for academic content. The series combines communicative activities with skill building exercises in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and grammar to boost students' academic success. This series of textbooks has been used by the Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica for a good number of years. These books are the main bibliography in a program offered to thousands of students who receive ESL training by this school.

This university trains over a thousand students every semester in an eight-hour course per week. The goal of the university is to prepare the upcoming professionals to have a good command of the English language. All of this is due to the imperative need of English-proficient professionals the country has, as the result of the growing number of international companies that are opening their branches in the country, as well as the multiple outsourcing call centers. Because of the importance of this venture, we consider a paramount task to use this instrument with a two-fold purpose: to evaluate the textbook used in this program and test our own textbook evaluation instrument.

2 How to choose an appropriate textbook (Literature review)

When teachers or administrators go to educational bookstores to look for textbooks for their English courses, it is motivating to find the many options we have nowadays. However, what seems to be an advantage at the beginning might turn into a challenge. The reason is simple: How to know if we are choosing the right option? In his article: ESL Textbook Evaluation Checklist, Joshua Miekley states some of the challenges we face when choosing the most appropriate textbook for our ESL/EFL course.

While the quality of ESL reading textbooks has improved dramatically in recent years, the process of selecting an appropriate text has not become any easier for most teachers and administrators. Program directors and classroom teachers are under pressure to adopt new reading textbooks on a fairly regular basis, and often on a short notice. While publishers' representatives may

provide some informed assistance, their need to sell new products clearly influences their recommendations (Miekley, 2005:1).

Miekley states very valid points that make us meditate and wonder about a solution, or at least good help to go about this challenge. Other authors have similar opinions about this issue.

As teachers, many of us have had the responsibility of evaluating textbooks. Often, we have not been confident about what to base our judgments on, how to qualify our decisions, and how to report the results of our findings. It seems to us that to date textbook selection has been made in haste and with a lack of systematically applied criteria (Hasan and Babaii, 2002: 1).

Most English teachers with some experience would have to agree with Hasan Ansary and Esmat Babaii; it is not easy to tell which book would be the best option. Sometimes we let nice-looking and colorful textbooks convince us with their look, and on the other hand, overlook the pedagogical quality of good books because they are not attractive in their look. The appearance is definitely important, but is just one more of the many aspects that need to be evaluated.

A successful English course should be formed by many features. Among those, firstly, there should be motivated learners, secondly, well-prepared teachers who know how to mediate the knowledge. And thirdly, a fundamental aspect is to have a great and appropriate textbook. The well-functioning of these elements assures successful end results in ESL and EFL courses. Being the importance of textbooks in a language course so great, administrators, curriculum designers, and teachers should count with tools to evaluate the textbooks they use in their course programs. Brian Tomlinson comments in his book: *Materials Development in Language Teaching some valuable aspects*.

The complex nature of modern-day materials, and the extent to which their extent is now widespread, necessitates a means of closely analysis materials so that we can see 'inside' them and take more control over their design and use. As one of the main 'Tools of the trade' in language teaching/learning, it is important that we understand the nature of the materials with which we work. One of the downsides of the professional production of contemporary material is that, for many teachers and learners, materials appear as faits accomplis, over which they can have little control (Tomlinson, 1998: 205).

Most administrator coincide that they would like to have the most pertinent materials to develop their courses, nevertheless, they also agree that in most occasions, the best they can do is to ask the professors, who will give the courses, to choose the textbook they consider the most appropriate in the market. However, by just a flip look or the recommendation of a book seller it is hard to determine what is really suitable to reach the best results. This instrument is an attempt to provide those in charge of making the decisions, a more scientific and standardized way to assess the textbooks. Additionally, Carl H. Jonhson in his article 'Choosing Materials that Do the Job' adds very important insights to this topic.

The importance of text materials in foreign language classrooms is a crucial issue and choosing a textbook and supplementary materials becomes a major area of concern for every foreign language teacher. While factors both external and internal to the school narrow the possibility of

choice, several points must be considered in the selection process. The procedure suggested here includes the following items: (1) some pre-evaluation and pre-choice considerations affecting the reality of materials selection, including external and internal factors that may govern choices to be made; (2) a case study detailing the procedures followed in a fairly large metropolitan school district's organizational approach to textbook evaluation and choice; and (3) the practical realities of the evaluation process for the teachers who are evaluators, choosers, and users (Johnson, 1989: 67).

We agree with the statement Johnson makes, that when you as the teacher or somebody else chooses a book, it comes to represent most of the curriculum. Therefore, administrators and teacher should have high-quality tools to be able to do an objective evaluation. Unfortunately, that is not a reality in most cases; many of us, teachers, have had the frustrating experience of having to teach a class with a book that we consider inappropriately chosen. It is a challenge when you as the teacher need to cover the content of a book that does not fit the topics and functions you want or need to develop. It is even worse when the book is so uninteresting that learner feel the inadequacy and question or express dislike for the textbook.

In most schools textbook are chosen without a previous exhaustive evaluation. It would be optimal if a commission with the preparation and the appropriate criteria were assigned to decide on the textbook. They ought to make the decision based on the students' needs and the context among other important aspects dictated by the goals they want to get.

3 Let's use our instrument (Main Body)

The checklist, which is included in the appendix, includes over eighty evaluation items to assess the different areas of a textbook. All the items use quantitative adjectives, next to the adjectives a range of number is given to help the evaluator have a more concise understanding of the adjective: almost always (99%-91%), usually (90%-51%), sometimes (50%-11%), almost never (10%-1%), never (0).

As a matter of practice, the checklist was applied to the following textbook: *Interactions I: Integrated Skills*. As we applied this instrument, we learned a lot about the textbook. We realized of some preconceptions we had about this textbook by just seeing the physical part. Even though we have used it for more than four years, the instrument helped us see it in a more objective way. We should confess that the result was much more favorable for the textbook than we had anticipated.

Below there is a brief explanation of the results; for a deeper analysis check the instrument in the appendix. For future reference, we will refer as almost always as the first, usually as the second, sometimes as the third, almost never as the fourth and never as the fifth.

3.1 *Speaking*

The results, in this area were pretty positive: seven out of ten items got the first grade, two got the second grade one got the fourth grade. This is the item that got a low grade.

3.2 *Listening*

The results, in this area were pretty favorable as well; ten items were asked in this section: five got the first grade, two got the second grade, one got the third grade, one got the fourth grade and one got the fourth one.

3.3 *Reading*

The results, in this area were pretty favorable as well; seven items were asked in this section: four got the first grade, one got the second grade, one got the third grade and one got the fourth grade.

3.4 *Writing*

The results, in this area were pretty favorable as well; five items were asked in this section: three got the first grade, one got the second grade and one got the third grade.

3.5 *Culture*

The results, in this area were intermediate; six items were asked in this section: one got the first grade, one got the second grade, two got the third grade and one got the fourth one.

3.6 *Grammar*

The results, in this area were pretty favorable as well; six items were asked in this section: three got the first grade, two got the second grade and one got the third grade.

3.7 *Vocabulary*

The results, in this area were intermediate; five items were asked in this section: one got the first grade, two got the second grade, one got the fourth grade and one got the fourth one.

3.8 *Evaluation*

The results, in this area were intermediate; four items were asked in this section: three got the second grade and one got the third grade.

3.9 *Layout*

The results, in this area were pretty favorable as well; ten items were asked in this section: the first grade got five, the second grade got two, the third grade got one, the fourth grade got one and the fourth one got one.

3.10 *Organization*

The results, in this area were pretty favorable as well; three items were asked in this section: two got the first grade and one got the fourth grade.

3.11 *Attractiveness to the teacher and the students*

This part of the checklist was given to the students who are using the book; thirteen items were asked in this section to 34 students. This gives a total of 442 answers. Out of the total 67 were given to the first grade, 156 were given to the second grade, 178 were given to the third grade, 19 were given to the fourth grade and 15 were given to the second grade. For a brief look, check the next chart:

100%-91%	90%-51%	50%-11%	10%-1%	0%
Almost always	Usually	Sometimes	Almost never	Never
67 =(15.4%)	156= (35.8%)	178 =(40.9%)	19= (4.3%)	15= (3.4%)

3.12 *Appealing to the teacher*

The results, in this area were intermediate; five items were asked in this section: the first grade got two and the second grade got three.

3.13 *The teaching approach*

The results, in this area were intermediate; four items were asked in this section: the second grade got three and the third grade got one.

4 **Conclusions**

Regarding the evaluation applied to the Interaction 1 Integrated skills:

a. The instrument placed this textbook in an intermediate scale. The results varied according to the area that was scrutinized. The activities that work the four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) obtained a high grade.

b. In the subareas of: (culture, grammar, vocabulary, evaluation), the evaluation was what we call intermediate, meaning that it got some positive and some negative grades.

c. The format areas (layout, organization, attractiveness to the teacher and the students and the teaching approach), did not get a favorable grade. Neither the teacher, nor the students expressed to have a good perception of the book; on the contrary, many expressed their concern because the textbook was not appealing.

d. This instrument helped us understand that this is an appropriate book in terms of content. The exercises meant to practice the four basic skills are appropriate and useful. However, the book has a big deficiency on the area of format and attractiveness. Neither the students nor the professors had a positive opinion about the textbook on this area. Interestingly, this area, which can be overlooked by the authors, is affecting the whole perception of the textbook.

e. We discovered that book could have a great improvement if just the layout were improved, real pictures were added and the exercises had a connection with the real world.

Appendix: Evaluation Instrument

1	Are the instructions for the exercises clear?	X				
2	Do the exercises connect the students to the real-world use of the language?		X			
3	Is the language used in textbook clearly stated?	X				
4	Are the speaking exercises communicative?	X				
5	Are there contextualized examples for speaking?	X				
6	Are the exercises in agreement with the level of the students?		X			
7	Do the exercises have information gap, choice and feedback?	X				
8	Do the exercises link to the curriculum goals?	X				
9	Are there enough speaking exercises in pairs, triads, groups, etc?	X				
10	Are the speaking exercises motivating through using photographs, pictures, foot-notes, and colorful images?				X	
	Reading					
1	Does the book present clear readings and passages to the learner?	X				
2	Does the textbook show readings with current idiomatic expressions?	X				
3	Is the text readable for the level the ss are on?	X				

4	Are the readings presented along with clear and colorful pictures to facilitate comprehension?					X
5	Do the readings have a convenient length?	X				
6	Do the readings outstand the new vocabulary somehow?	X				
7	Are the topics of the readings appealing to the learners?		X			
8	Do the readings include current topics?			X		
9	Do the readings provide enough clear exercises for the students?		X			
10	Do the readings have a pre, while and post reading exercise?	X				
	Listening					
1	Are the listening exercises concrete to the students?	X				
2	Are the instructions clear to apply the exercises?	X				
3	Do the exercises provide current issues?			X		
4	Are the exercises produced finely tuned?	X				
5	Do the exercises integrate the skills?	X				
6	Do the exercises provide a model example to help the students apply them?		X			
7	Do the exercises motivate students by using radio and T. V. programs and current music?					X
	Writing					
1	Are the writing exercises instructions presented clearly?	X				
2	Do the exercises provide previous examples to help the students?	X				
3	Do the writing exercises promote the students to be autonomous writers?			X		
4	Does the textbook present a glossary for consulting?	X				
5	Does the exercise let the student work with what he/she is living in his/her own environment?		X			
	Culture					
1	Do the exercises contemplate the target language culture?	X				
2	Is the target culture implicit within the entire book?		X			
3	Is the culture demonstrated by using definitions, images, photos, newspaper etc?			X		

4	Are the pictures and people in the textbook multicultural and multi ethnic?					X
5	Is the material up-to-date?			X		
6	Is the material accurate?		X			
	Layout					
1	Is the mix between print and white space balanced so that readability is enhanced and appropriate?	X				
2	Is the content graded according to the needs of the students or the requirements of the existing syllabus (if there is one)?		X			
2	Is the textbook present motivating thoughts?		X			
3	Does the font have an appropriate size?	X				
4	Does it include authentic pictures?					X
5	Do the pages have appropriate headings to guide the learners?	X				
	Organization					
1	Are the illustrations and other graphical design elements appropriate for their age and educational level?				X	
2	Does the book have an index, appendices, or other section that are usable by the students?	X				
3	Is the ordering of material done by topics or themes that are arranged in a logical fashion?	X				
	Grammar					
1	Are the grammar exercises presented in a good complexity-ascending fashion?	X				
2	Is the grammar presented through the whole unit?	X				
3	Are the exercises supported by enough examples?			X		
4	Are the grammar structures contextualized?		X			
5	Do the exercises provide enough exercises to work on?		X			
6	Is the grammar recycled through the whole textbook?	X				
	Vocabulary					
1	Are there exercises to introduce new vocabulary?	X				

2	Are there enough exercises to work with vocabulary?		X			
3	Does the book give some strategies to work with new vocabulary?		X			
4	Are the lists of new words shown in a motivating way?				X	
5	Is the vocabulary presented by using realia through the entire text?					X
	Approach					
1	Is it learner-centered?	X				
2	Is the approach eclectic?	X				
3	Is the approach easy to recognize by the teacher?		X			
4	Does it use communicative language teaching?		X			
5	Is the approach consistent through the whole textbook?	X				
6	Does the book state the approach to use, somewhere in the textbook?	X				
7	Is the approach of the textbook consistent with the school's approach?	X				
8	Do the exercises promote critical thinking?	X				
	Attractiveness to the learner					
1	Does the book look attractive to you?					
2	Is the distribution between text and pictures, and the blank spaces well-balanced?					
2	Is the font of this book appropriate?					
3	Do you consider the price of this book appropriate? Around \$14.					
4	Is this an easy to follow book?					
5	Do you feel motivated by the presentation of this textbook?					
6	Are the examples presented, interesting to you?					
7	Are the topics presented in the book within your interests?					
8	Does the book have photos of famous people or people who are familiar to you?					
9	Aren't the readings presented interesting to you?					
10	Aren't the grammar practices presented interesting to you?					
11	Aren't the listening practices presented interesting to you?					
12	Does each grammar structure presented					

	have sufficient exercises that help you manage it?					
	TOTALS	67 = (15.4%)	156 = (35.8%)	178 = (40.9%)	19 = (4.3%)	15 = (3.4%)
	Appealing to the teacher					
1	Is there a teacher's manual that guides the teacher?	X				
2	Do most of the exercises fit the approach the teacher inted to use?		X			
3	Does the book match the objectives of the course?		X			
4	Can the teacher add or skip some exercises from the book?	X				
5	Does the textbook have supplementary material, photocopiabls, tests?		X			
	Evaluation					
1	Do the exercises give home activities?		X			
2	Does the textbook include any kind of assesment exersices?			X		
3	Are the tests (if existing) appropriate for the approach the teacher is using?		X			
4	Are answers to the tests included in the textbook the ss have?		X			

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