

EVALUATING AND SELECTION EFL TEACHING MATERIALS

Alan Cunningsworth

**With A Glossary of Basic EFL Terms
by Brian Tomlinson**

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Preface

The aim of this book is to put forward and discuss in a practical fashion some ideas on how to analyse EFL coursebooks and other teaching materials in a systematic and meaningful way. Such an analysis is a useful tool in evaluating the potential of a coursebook when matched against the learning objectives of those who might use it. It is also possible to evaluate course material in general terms, without reference to a specific group of learners, by using generally accepted principles of language teaching as a basis for evaluation. In many cases however, teachers will wish to evaluate more specifically, having a particular type of learner, or even a definite class, in mind. This book is intended to help the teacher, and course director, with both general and specific evaluation.

Four basic principles for evaluating ELF teaching materials are outlined in the introductory Chapter 1 and an example is given of how to use these principles in practice. My aim in Chapters 2 to 8 is to discuss from a number of different perspectives the criteria which will assist us in a detailed analysis of course materials and which will help us to build up as full a picture as possible of the material which we wish to evaluate. Each of these chapters represents a different perspective, focusing on one aspect of analysis and evaluation. There is also a progression from one chapter to the next. We begin with an analysis of the kind of English being presented by the teaching material (the language content) and develop through consideration of selection and grading, teaching methodology and testing procedures to factors directly connected with the psychology of the student and his approach to learning. So we begin by looking at what is being taught (the language content) and then go on to consider how it is taught, and finish by relating these perspectives to the psychology of the learner. In Chapter 9 there are some practical suggestions for adapting and extending course book activities.

The criteria for evaluation which are discussed in Chapters 2 to 8, are reproduced in Chapter 10 in the form of an easy-reference checklist of questions we must ask ourselves about a coursebook in order to build up a picture of its potential use and value.

I am not aware of any book in the field of English language teaching which attempts to deal with materials evaluation in detail, and the present book, deriving largely from work done with students on teacher-training courses over a number of years, is intended to go some way towards filling the gap.

When dealing with this subject, one inevitably embraces a wide field of study including needs analysis, syllabus design, the methodology of teaching, theories of learning and the theory and practice of testing. In an effort to be as comprehensive as possible within the limits of a short book, I have on occasion dealt with certain areas somewhat briefly rather than omit them altogether. I hope that the references in the text together with the bibliography will provide suggestions for further reading where the reader wishes to go more deeply into a particular topic.

AJC
March 1983

Abbreviations and terminology

A Glossary of Basic EFL Terms is provided on pages 80 to 102. This includes the terminology used in this book but also covers other terms that readers may come across in their studies or work in teaching English as a foreign language.

These abbreviations are used in the text and expanded in the glossary:

EFL English as a foreign language

ESP English for special purposes

TEFL Teaching English as a foreign language

L1 first language (mother tongue, native language)

L2 language being learned.

Where the words *he*, *his* etc. are used in the text in a general sense, they are not intended to discriminate or distinguish in terms of sex, and should be read as meaning *he* or *she*, *his* or *her*, etc.

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the great debt which I owe to my students over a period of years, during which time they have made valuable comments and suggestions on procedures to be used in materials evaluation and have helped me to develop and refine the criteria put forward in this book.

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I Coursebooks and Language Learning

1 Teachers and coursebooks

Most teachers of English use a coursebook. Some may use one coursebook only, taking their students through it from beginning to end, whilst others, who perhaps have more freedom and are happier when creating their own teaching programme, will take texts and exercises from several different books, adapting them where necessary and supplementing them with original material they have produced themselves. It is rare however to meet a teacher who does not to a greater or lesser extent draw on published teaching material, and this state of affairs is hardly surprising as producing original materials is a difficult and time-consuming process. Moreover, it would not make practical or economic sense for teachers to spend long hours duplicating one another's efforts by creating huge quantities of individually-produced material.

Published coursebooks are normally written by experienced and well-qualified people and the material contained in them is usually carefully tested in pilot studies in actual teaching situations before publication. Teachers can therefore be assured that coursebooks from reputable publishers will serve them well. If properly selected and used, I used the word *serve* advisedly because coursebooks are good servants but poor masters. The teacher should use the coursebook actively, by which I mean that the teacher should formulate objectives with the needs of the learners in mind and then seek out published material which will achieve those objectives. No teacher should permit the coursebook to set the objectives, let alone allow 'teaching the coursebook' to be the objective.

Teachers who express their teaching objectives in terms such as 'finishing unit 16', 'doing the first eight chapters' or 'reaching page 81' are acting as a servant of the coursebook rather than as its master (unless of course they are only using a convenient shorthand for well thought-out objectives). The teacher who makes active and positive use of his course materials on the other hand is the one who, firstly, has established and defined his objectives (probably in terms of what the students should be able to do in English, and then in terms of the structures, vocabulary, etc. necessary to equip them to do it) and, secondly, actively searches out teaching materials which will positively help in achieving these objectives. It is to this, second, kind of teacher that the contents of this book will I hope be useful.

There is a plethora of English language teaching material available on the market, covering many different aspects of language learning and language use. It ranges from comprehensive general courses, in several volumes and supported by visual and taped material, to specialised books which concentrate on one aspect of English, such as intonation, or one specific skill, such as writing. Other books deal with special kinds of English such as the language of medicine or engineering. Yet others offer exercises for certain stages in the learning process, such as practice exercises to give students greater ease in manipulating grammatical structures which have already been presented initially elsewhere.

Faced with this mass of teaching material, what should the teacher do when she has to make a choice and select a particular book or course from what is

available? Does he choose the book with the nicest illustrations? Or does he choose the one that is the most comfortable to hold? Or should he perhaps go for the cheapest? Certainly these are not unimportant considerations, but there are many other factors involved that have at least equal claim on the teacher's attention. As in most decision making, the key lies in asking the right questions and evaluating the answers.

2. Good courses and bad courses

We may ask ourselves the obvious questions, 'Is course X a good course or a bad course? Is it better than course Y?' What makes a good course and what makes a bad course? It is certainly possible to identify courses which follow sound principles of language teaching and courses which are perhaps less soundly-based. The general principles which are outlined later in this chapter will provide us with some useful guidance here. But these questions can really only be answered by another question, 'Good for what and bad for whom?' In other words, we are not attempting to make absolute judgements in the abstract; we are concerned with making relative judgements, taking the learning situation into consideration. Even the more general kind of evaluation, where the teacher does not have a particular class or group of students in mind, will have as one of its aims to identify the type of learner for whom the coursebook would be suitable, taking into account age, nationality, native language, interests and objectives of the possible users. Size of class, availability of equipment and the amount of money available to spend on books will also be important factors.

English is taught in an enormously wide variety of situations throughout the world and a course suitable for adult learners in small groups in northern Europe is most unlikely to be suitable for a very large secondary school class in Africa. Some courses are quite specific about the kind of learner they cater for, and many coursebooks are written for learners of a particular age and native language who live in a specific cultural context. Courses produced according to the specifications of a national ministry of education for use in, say, secondary schools fall into this category and the writers will be familiar with the interests, backgrounds and abilities of the pupils who will use the material. An example of this is the *Nile Course for the Sudan* by M.R. Bates (Longman 1979). Because it draws on and relates to the life and culture of the Sudan, we may expect that it would be less useful elsewhere, and would not be suitable at all for use in countries which differ markedly from the Sudan.

Many courses however are general, not only in that they attempt to teach all aspects of English but also in that they are designed to satisfy a general world-wide market and are meant to be as usable in Chile as they would be in China. Such courses do not have one particular group of learners in mind and therefore usually take an English-speaking country as a setting along with corresponding sets of cultural values.

3 What the coursebooks say about themselves

As we have seen, different courses have different aims and claim to reach different objectives, so let us take a look at what some of the coursebooks say about themselves. We shall gain an impression of the potentially confusing variety of aims and methods that abound in the world of English language teaching materials.

Encounters aims to provide an interesting, useful and systematic introduction to the English language for complete beginners and for students who have learned a little English but need to make a fresh start.

(From *Encounters* by J. Garton-Sprenger et al (Heinemann Educational Books))

Kernel One is a course in English for complete or near beginners.

Kernel One has a careful structural progression with specific communicative aims.

(From *Kernel One* by R. O'Neill (Longman))

Starting Strategies is a new beginners' course for students aged 14 or over... It presents a totally new approach to language learning for students as it takes account of basic communication needs as its first priority.

(From *Starting Strategies* by B. Abbs and I. Freebairn (Longman))

This course is designed for... the learner who feels that learning English is difficult and that it has hitherto been irrelevant to his experience.

The main aim of the course is to provide the learner with the language he might need to take an active part in a wide range of social situations.

(From *Strategies* by B. Abbs, A. Ayton and I. Freebairn (Longman))

Kernel Lessons Plus is designed to:

- 1 provide material and exercise for, and promote the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing;
- 2 provide a graded progression of structures and patterns at the pre-advanced level of learning;
- 3 provide material for the systematic revision of structures that should have been learned before;

(From *Kernel Lessons Plus* by R. O'Neill (Longman))

The purpose of this book is to give overseas students the opportunity to practise with current informational English. It also gives a very practical introduction to many basic aspects of modern British life.

(From *Practical Information* by B.J. Thomas (Edward Arnold))

Our aim in writing this course has been to provide students who are learning composition-writing with detailed guidance in language and subject matter, but at the same time to leave them with the opportunity for personal expression.

(From *Guided Course in English Composition* by T.C. Jupp and J. Milne (Heinemann Educational Books))

A large number of people are learning English not to study the language itself but to study other subjects through English. *Reading and Thinking in English* is based on the belief that a special kind of course is required for students of English whose main need is to gain access to information through English. The course has been designed for a wide range of learners whose needs can be described as 'English for Academic Purposes'.

(From *Reading and Thinking in English* (O.U.P.))

The aim of this new edition of *Advanced English Practice* remains the same as that of the original edition: to provide a variety of language material for foreign students at advanced level... The book provides ample material for consolidating the student's grasp of fundamentals and for revising those structures that students constantly have difficulty in mastering, before proceeding to a more mature examination of structure and vocabulary.

(From *Advanced English Practice* by B.D. Graver (O.U.P.))

... units begin with a short statement of what is to be learnt; exercises ask for thought as well as language manipulation, and situations are mentally provoking and illustrative of varieties of English... Each unit covers a set of related grammar points well known for their difficulty for most learners.

(From *English in Mind* by C. Toff and T.S. Creed (Macmillan))

INSIGHT

Provides practice material suitable for any programme of intermediate language study where the aim is the improvement of both oral and written skills.

(From *Insight* by D. Byrne and S. Holden (Longman))

This book teaches some of the intonation patterns used in conversation... It consists of ten units, each of them about particular aspects of the functions and interactions of conversation.

(From *Using Intonation* by V.J. Cook (Longman))

Three main perspectives on English language teaching can be identified from these extracts:

- (a) *The communicative (or functional) perspective* which views language as above all a medium of communication between people.
- (b) *The structural perspective* which sees language as a system of grammar and vocabulary.
- (c) *The skills perspective* which emphasises the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

A further dimension is added when reference is made to the specialised needs of the learners, for instance those whose needs are English for academic purposes.

Coursebooks are in no way bound to adopt one approach to the exclusion of all others, and indeed many do try to achieve a working balance between them. However these perspectives are useful tools for the analysis of course materials, and I shall be developing them and exploiting them later in this book.

4 Some principles for materials evaluation

Despite the various approaches, of which we have seen some examples, and the even greater variety of learning/teaching situations in which students and teachers find themselves, there are certain general principles, based on good language-teaching practice, which will help us in our task of evaluating coursebooks. These principles underlie many of the more specific points which will be made in the subsequent chapters of this book.

4.1 Relate the teaching materials to your aims and objectives.

It is very important that the teaching materials used should take the learner forward as directly as possible towards his objectives. The objectives should be decided first, in line with the overall aim of the teaching programme, and then materials should be sought which can be related to these objectives. The aims of a teaching programme should determine the course materials to be used and not vice-versa.

4.2 Be aware of what language is for and select teaching materials which will help equip your students to use language effectively for their own purposes.

Our teaching must have at its base a consideration of what our students need to learn, that is, what they will do with English on completing their course. This involves the teacher in looking beyond the confines of the classroom into the outside world, and focusing his or her attention on the use that the individual learner will make of what he has learned, in a situation which is not primarily a learning situation. What we are looking at here is essentially the distinction between participation in a language drill, a coursebook dialogue or a role-play on the one hand, and on the other hand the ability to carry through a real transaction, the ability to express one's feelings or attitudes about real things or events to people who in no way form part of a formal learning situation. This distinction is not an entirely clear-cut one: for example, students taking part in a simulation in the classroom may indeed be effecting transactions and expressing attitudes

which, within the artificial framework of the activity, are examples of genuine communication; equally, a foreign learner using English outside the classroom may occasionally be corrected by a well-intentioned listener. The essential difference however remains: in one case we have language used primarily in a learning situation and in the other we have language used primarily for communicative interaction.

There is without the slightest doubt a place in English language teaching for the drill and the coursebook dialogue and, indeed, that place will often be a large one. But we should always remember that such activities are a means to an end and never an end in themselves. The real aim of language teaching is to bring the learner to a point where he can use the language for his own purposes, and this goes far beyond manipulating structure drills.

4.3 Keep your students' learning needs in mind.

By *learning needs* I mean not so much the actual language to be learned as the way in which it is selected, graded, presented and practised. In order to learn effectively and efficiently, students should meet only small pieces of new language at one time, what we might call *learning units*. These learning units should be related to each other in such a way that the learner can relate new language to what he already knows and can build up his knowledge of English by adding new learning units to his existing body of knowledge.

But learning needs are not limited solely to considerations of the language. Learners have intellectual and emotional needs too. Learning a language is difficult and demanding (teachers can easily overlook this) and students need to be encouraged and stimulated as they progress. This is largely the teacher's job, but course materials can help by using subject matter that is intellectually stimulating and to which the students can relate personally. It is also important that materials should be usable with whole classes of learners, with small groups, and with individuals. This is because students need to be catered for both as individuals and as members of a group. Within the space of one lesson, a student may act alternately as an individual and a group member, depending on several factors including the sort of exercise he is doing, the skills that are being practised and his own learning strategies.

4.4 Consider the relationship between language, the learning process and the learner.

All three are vital aspects of language teaching and it is essential that teaching materials should keep all three constantly in view and never become so pre-occupied with one that the others are lost sight of. It must be said that much traditional teaching material put out in the 1960s places considerable emphasis on language and on the desired linguistic performance of the learner, but tends to neglect the learner as an individual by imposing rigid teaching methods and presupposing equally rigid learning processes. What we do know about language-learning processes leads us to believe that there is no one 'best' way of learning and that learners adopt different learning strategies, often switching strategies from time to time.

Certain more recent approaches to language learning tend to concentrate very heavily on the individual, on the individual's desires and feelings, but neglect rather to come to grips with some of the linguistic difficulties inherent in language learning. Learning activities, no matter how interesting and involving,

will not be of much help to the learner of English unless they present and practise English in a systematic and comprehensive way so that new language items can be assimilated by the learner. There is currently something of a tendency to use activities for their own sake, because they are enjoyable or because they 'work' as activities, without due regard to their value as language-learning exercises. Of course the things our students do in class should be interesting and enjoyable, but they should also be carefully examined in terms of their language-teaching potential.

5 The principles in practice

A case study of *Encounters*

In order to illustrate what we might expect to find in a well-designed general course, and at the same time to look at the principles in practice, I will examine some characteristics of *Encounters* (Garton-Sprenger *et al.*, 1979), a course for beginners comprising ten units each of seven lessons plus a Language Study section, and see how the application of our general principles for evaluation throws into focus significant features of the course. Coursebooks vary considerably and the features of *Encounters* which will be identified are not the only ones which would be acceptable: they are included here for the purpose of giving practical examples. Other courses can be shown to meet our expectations in other, equally appropriate, ways.

The overall aims and objectives of *Encounters* are clearly stated in the introduction to the Teachers' Book. The course is intended for complete beginners or false beginners (those who have learned a little English but need a fresh start). It is a general course suitable for learners from about age fifteen onwards (although this is not stated in the Teachers' Book) and provides work for about 180 hours of study. The potential application of this coursebook is therefore very wide. It is intended for use in a world context and was not designed with one particular country in mind. The cultural background is British, but not strongly so, and the book has an international flavour but is oriented towards the western world.

The learning objectives are expressed primarily in terms of communicative functions within the range of three main themes:

Talking about yourself as an individual

Talking about physical surroundings

Interaction between the individual and the environment

These themes have been selected on the basis of their usefulness to the learner, their intrinsic interest and the amount of complexity and unpredictability that an elementary learner can cope with.

- ✱ The communicative functions, such as greetings, requests, apologies and suggestions, derive from the main themes, and had been selected before the language forms (structures, vocabulary, etc.) were decided on. The writers put it this way in the Teachers' Book:

We consider that the language functions... should be chosen *first*, and the linguistic content, the structures, should be finalised at the *second stage*. In this way the learner practises and is made aware of the way English is used from the outset of the course as well as building up a systematic understanding and mastery of language forms.

The language forms which realise these functions:

have been selected on the basis of their range of use and of linguistic simplicity and structural grading: (...) The process of syllabus design has been one of continually choosing and modifying both forms and functions so that they fit together and represent as useful and as simple a progression for the learner as possible. (...) The final language syllabus consists of one syllabus of functions and one of structures, and the structural syllabus serves the purposes of the functional one.

The objectives of the course, then, are to take the beginner and equip him to use English in a limited range of situations, determined by the three main themes. The language he learns will be useful and have communicative potential, but it will also be structurally relatively simple and will be graded as the course progresses according to increasing complexity. The basis on which the course is designed combines usefulness and application in the outside world with 'learnability' in the classroom, and therefore seems to be realistic and practicable. It is interesting to note how the writers have implicitly concluded that, at an elementary level at least, a functional syllabus without reference to structures would be as unworkable in the classroom as a structural syllabus without reference to its communicative potential would be unusable in the outside world.

Given that few teachers would disagree with the underlying assumption that language is learned in order to be used, it is up to the individual teacher to decide whether the aims of the coursebook match up with his own teaching aims. Our **first principle** (4.1) requires the coursebook to match the students' learning objectives, so we must now ask ourselves: does the coursebook teach the sort of communicative abilities, in the sort of situations that we want? Is what the coursebook writers consider interesting actually going to be comprehensible and acceptable to our students? If learning to express functions such as introducing yourself, describing places, asking for and giving directions, expressing likes and dislikes, apologizing and making suggestions is relevant to our students' needs and interests, then *Encounters* may well, in terms of its objectives, be suitable. Such functions are so universal that it is hard to imagine many learners who will not need to use them at some stage in their lives, but the actual situations in which the functions are expressed will differ according to cultural background. In evaluating the material we need to decide whether the settings used in the coursebook are sufficiently close to those in which the students will find themselves to be meaningful and acceptable.

We should always bear in mind however that, as the writers of *Encounters* point out:

textbooks are only an aid to the language-learning process, which also depends upon individuals, their needs and their relationships in the classroom. Teachers and students find their own ways of using a textbook to suit these circumstances, and to suit their own methods of learning.

No coursebook will be totally suited to a particular teaching situation. The teacher will have to find his own way of using it and adapting it if necessary. So we should not be looking for the perfect coursebook which meets all our require-

ments, but rather for the best possible fit between what the coursebook offers and what we as teachers and students need.

Encounters, as we have already seen, puts considerable emphasis on *using* English, and therefore should satisfy the demands of our *second principle* to select materials which will help equip students to use language effectively for their own purposes. At the presentation stage, the writers state that:

the aim... of each lesson is to show the learner how the new language is used.

This is done by presenting new language items in a clear context:

the aim is the demonstration of the target language functions in an authentic context

and on completion of the presentation section the students should understand how English is used to convey a particular function, as well as understanding the new structures and vocabulary presented. In other words, structures and vocabulary are learned in context so that the student learns not only what they are but also how to use them. At the practice stage a wide variety of activities are used to give the students adequate practice in using what they have learned in realistic situations.

Let us take one lesson of *Encounters* (Lesson 22) and see how this works out in practice. The lesson is reproduced on pages 10 and 11. The communicative aim is two-fold:

Enquiring about and stating likes and dislikes

Expressing disagreement

and the new structures used to realise these functions are:

Questions introduced by auxiliary DO Do you like...?

Questions introduced by WHO Who's...?

Short answers Yes, I do/No, I don't

Statements of agreement and disagreement So do I/I don't

The initial presentation is through a dialogue, put in context by the introductory paragraph which the teacher reads and discusses with the class, ensuring that the relationship between the speakers is fully understood. The dialogue does not contain many examples of new structures, the reason given being that it must appear realistic, and that in real language use we meet a variety of structures rather than the same one or two repeated several times. (Compare this with a mechanical language drill!) What the dialogue does achieve is to exemplify in a natural way the functions which are being taught.

Each function and new structure is then practised in controlled exercises cued by visuals. These controlled exercises however are not just mechanical drills because they allow the student, within the linguistic framework of the vocabulary and structures available to him, to express his own likes and dislikes and to agree and disagree as he wishes.

The Survey activity adds a further dimension by setting up a situation where students gather information from each other and about each other, necessarily asking and answering questions, and then record the answers in writing. These activities, within the context of the classroom, are genuinely communicative and give students the opportunity to use English to a purposeful end even at a stage when their range of structures and vocabulary is severely limited.

LESSON 22

Talking about likes and dislikes (1)
Books and films

Sam Miller is a student at art college in London. Jill Archer is also a student. Jill is at London University and she is studying Spanish. Sam and Jill do not know each other very well. One day they meet in a bookshop.

SAM: Hello, Jill.
JILL: Hi, Sam. How are you?
SAM: Fine. What are you looking at?
JILL: *Small is Beautiful*. It's a book about modern society.
SAM: How boring!
JILL: No, it isn't. It's very interesting. What kind of books do you like?
SAM: Detective stories.
JILL: So do I.



PRACTICE



Study

Kinds of books

Detective stories



Art books



Books about society

Books about ...

Kinds of films

Westerns

Comedies



Ask each other

Examples:

Do you like detective stories?

Yes, I do. No, I don't.

Do you like horror films?

Yes, I do. No, I don't.



Romantic novels



Tell each other

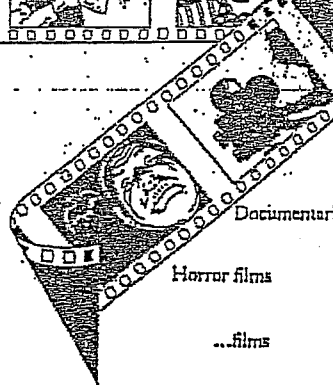
Examples:

I like detective stories.

So do I. I don't.

I like westerns.

So do I. I don't.



Documentaries

Horror films

...films