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Researching Both Macro-level and Micro-level Issues of English Language Teaching (ELT) Textbooks and Materials

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ABSTRACT

Unlike traditional textbooks such as biology and history textbooks, which are designed to lead students to master a specific academic discipline, the fundamental purpose of English Language Teaching (ELT) textbooks is to help students master linguistics skills by using examples from different aspects of daily life. Given the significance of language textbooks, a number of studies were conducted to research the language textbooks from different perspectives. Many of these studies have contributed at a macro level on textbooks compilation and evaluation or at a micro level on special content or core vocabulary in textbooks. This paper aims to demonstrate a comprehensive classification of recent studies researching both macro-level and micro-level issues of ELT textbooks and materials. This paper recommends further studies based on this classification.

KEYWORDS: Textbook Evaluation, Textbook Analysis, Marco-level, Micro-level

1 INTRODUCTION

English Language Teaching (ELT) textbook publishing has been a multi-million dollars industry around the world for a long time (Johnson et al., 2008; Sheldon, 1988). The exponential increase in the ELT materials on the market suggests the high popularity of ELT textbooks (Cunningsworth, 1995; Ellis, 1997; Johnson et al., 2008). Unlike traditional textbooks such as biology and history textbooks, which are designed to lead students to master a specific academic discipline, ELT textbooks used to teach English as second language (ESL) and English as foreign language (EFL) do not play the same role (Byrd, 2001). What is learned and practiced in such textbooks is language itself (Kleckova, 2004). The fundamental purpose of ELT textbooks is to help students master linguistics skills using examples from different aspects of daily life, such as making purchases in a supermarket or ordering in a restaurant (Kleckova, 2004).

There has been vigorous debate for and against textbook-based teaching (Allwright, 1981; Brumfit, 1979; O'Neill, 1982). Brumfit (1979) and Allwright (1981) argue that although textbooks can help teachers, they take away their initiative and fail to meet the needs of individual students and the complex language learning process (McGrath, 2002). However, an equally well-known statement by O'Neill (1982) presents a number of counterarguments and claims that the textbook is a convenient aid. To summarize the arguments, we can conclude that textbooks not only provide a structure for teaching, but also reinforce what the teacher has taught and offer support for learning outside the classroom such as preparation and revision (Grant, 1987; Hutchinson & Torres, 1994; O'Neill, 1982; Ur, 1996). The importance of textbooks also lies in the representation of new approaches to language teaching, which contribute to teachers' professional development (McGrath, 2002; Nunan, 1991; Edge & Wharton, 1998). The current situation of the ELT classroom also reflects that English language textbooks have become a central component in classroom practice (Zacharias, 2005). Whether they are being used in conjunction with other texts or materials or as a sort of surrogate curriculum, textbooks tend to affect the teaching and learning process in the classroom (Britton, Woodward & Binkley, 1993; Hutchinson & Torres, 1994; Tomlinson, 1998; Zacharisa, 2005). Furthermore, foreign language textbooks are the fundamental carrier of knowledge in primary and secondary schooling in non-English speaking regions. They provide essential data for us to understand how knowledge is constructed through multiple resources.

Given the significance of language textbooks, a number of studies were conducted to research the language textbooks from different perspectives. Many of these studies have contributed at a macro level on textbooks compilation and evaluation (e.g. Tomlinson et al., 2001; Chen 2005) or at a micro level on special content or core vocabulary in textbooks (e.g. Gouverneur, 2008; Sznajder, 2010). This paper aims to demonstrate a comprehensive classification of recent studies researching both macro-level and micro-level issues of ELT textbooks and materials.

2 RESEARCHING MACRO-LEVEL ISSUES OF TEXTBOOKS: TEXTBOOK EVALUATION

Evaluation of materials and textbooks is a procedure that involves measuring the value (or potential value) of a set of learning materials (Tomlinson, 2003, p.15). Different approaches to, and principles of, materials evaluation, have been presented in book-length publications (e.g. Byrd, 2001; Candlin & Breen, 1980; Cunningsworth, 1995; Ellis, 1997;

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McGrath, 2002; Tomlinson, 2003). In this paper, I synthesize the previous literature with respect to three types of materials evaluation and discuss each type individually.

2.1 Three types of materials evaluation

Materials evaluation is defined as “a procedure that involves measuring the value (or the potential value) of a set of learning materials” (Tomlinson, 2003, p.15). There are a number of different types of materials evaluation in terms of different factors, such as purposes (Tomlinson, 2003, p.23). Material evaluations can be used to help a publisher select a publication or help teachers select textbooks for teaching. Cunningsworth (1995) is one of the first educators to define three types of materials evaluation—pre-use evaluation, in-use evaluation and post-use evaluation—which were further developed by Tomlinson (2003) and Reinders and Lewis (2006). Pre-use evaluation involves making predictions about the potential value of materials to users. In-use evaluation (or whilst-use evaluation) measures the value of materials whilst using them or whilst observing them being used (Tomlinson, 2003, p.23-25). Lastly, post-use evaluation measures the actual effects of the materials on the users (Tomlinson, 2003). According to Ellis (1997), evaluation of materials that are about to be used is predictive, while a retrospective evaluation is designed to examine materials that have actually been used (p.36-37). Therefore, pre-use evaluation is predictive while in-use and post-use evaluation is retrospective. These three types of material evaluation are also complementary and a comprehensive observation of teaching and learning materials can be obtained from combining them.

2.2 Existing proposals for evaluating materials

Numerous evaluation checklists have been designed to help teachers measure the value of textbooks and to make a systematic selection (e.g. Byrd, 2001; McGrath, 2002).

2.2.1 Existing proposals of pre-use evaluation

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Of the three types of materials evaluation, predictive pre-use evaluation has been the focus of attention for a long time (e.g. Byrd, 2001; Skierso, 1991). A number of approaches to pre-use evaluation have been developed by researchers since the 1970s. They have ranged from limited and uni-dimensional guidelines involving making impressionistic judgments to systematic and multidimensional approaches providing in-depth investigation, proposing universal checklists, and developing specific criteria according to specific needs and contexts.

Candlin and Breen (1980) are two of the pioneering researchers developing approaches to materials evaluation. In their article (1980), teaching materials are evaluated based only on the appropriateness of textbooks for the purposes and methodologies of particular curriculums (Candlin & Breen, 1980, p.178). However, they did not suggest further analysis and evaluation of the content of materials. Later, Williams (1983, p.252) proposed four criteria to evaluate the content of textbooks, namely presenting up-to-date methodology, providing guidance for non-native teachers, matching learners’ needs (only on linguistic content) and fitting with social-cultural environment. However, the importance of context analysis is omitted and the needs of teachers and students that textbooks should satisfy are limited. With the development of research and academic enquiry in language teaching, a much more comprehensive evaluation checklist was developed by Skierso (1991). He suggested that detailed background information about not only students but also instructors and institutions should be collected before evaluation. Practical aspects like the layout and physical makeup of the textbooks; organizational elements such as grading, recycling and sequencing of subject matter; and psychological and psycholinguistic factors such as promoting learners’ critical thinking and helping them develop communicative competences are all given great importance.

Since pre-use evaluation involves making predictions about the potential value of materials for their users, any pre-use evaluation is subjective (Ellis, 1997; McDonough & Shaw, 2003; Tomlinson, 2003; Tomlinson et al., 2001). Thus, what experts and educators attempt to do is evaluate textbooks as systematically as possible to compensate for this. The concept of “systematic evaluation” was first proposed by Byrd (2001). He provided a comprehensive yet reasonable checklist for guiding the selection of textbooks and points out that the suitability between textbooks and curriculum and students and teachers must be addressed in the evaluation system. Future checklists and criteria were also developed on the basis of this “systematic” principle.

Since Candlin and Breen’s (1980) interactive and step-by-step guidelines for textbook evaluation, which envisaged the “overall usefulness” of the materials and a “more searching analysis” of a certain group of students and classroom situations, experts and evaluators have attempted to organize evaluation checklists into two or more levels or stages. Hutchinson (1987) pointed out his interactive evaluation process which involved a subjective and objective analysis of the extent to which the materials match the nature of the teaching situation. More recently, McDonough and Shaw (2003) advanced two complementary stages of materials evaluation: an external evaluation which offers a brief “overview” of the materials including the “blurb,” the introduction, and the table of contents, and a closer more detailed internal evaluation involving the examination of at least two units of a book to investigate eight criteria such as presentation of the skills.

The principle of being systematic and multidimensional is further developed in McGrath’s (2002) proposal. Based on previous literature and his observation on materials evaluation, he provided a systematic approach to evaluating materials, not only taking various factors (teachers’ and students’ needs and the context) into consideration, but also offering a four-stage evaluation system, which includes examination of context, needs analysis, textbook analysis, first-glance evaluation and close evaluation.

More recently, unlike some checklists and questionnaires that involve making general and impressionistic judgments, Rubdy’s (2003, p.45-47) framework of materials evaluation tends to provide a more in-depth analysis to “look beneath the surface” and to discover dynamic features of material design. It covers a range of principles and detailed criteria including those relating to psychological validity concerning learners’ autonomy, their self-development and creativity, and pedagogical validity such as the usefulness of teachers’ guidance. Rubdy also highlighted the significance of process and content validity relating to materials authenticity, cultural sensitivity and organizational factors.

On the other hand, when other researchers attempted to develop evaluation checklists and approaches, which can be used in various contexts, Tomlinson (2003) advanced a procedure for developing criteria to match the specific circumstance of a particular evaluation, which not only helps evaluators to clarify their principles of language learning and teaching but also ensures that future evaluation is systematic.

2.2.2 Existing proposals of in-use and post-use evaluation

The fact that pre-use evaluation is a fundamentally subjective, “rule-of-thumb” activity has led to the need and increasing importance of evaluating materials retrospectively (Ellis, 1997; Sheldon, 1988, p.245). However, it is surprising that there are very few published accounts of retrospective evaluations of course materials, and very little information about how to conduct them (Ellis, 1997). Ellis (1997) presented a systematic and manageable way of conducting a retrospective micro-evaluation of a particular task in the textbooks. By using methods such as analysis of the task, classroom observation, language tests and teachers’ questionnaires, micro-evaluation is able to assist teachers in determining whether material is

worth using, which task works and which do not, and how to modify the materials to make them more effective for future use (Ellis, 1997).

2.3 Empirical studies of materials evaluation

However, all the studies reviewed above have methodological issues. Instead of being developed based on empirical research with a solid supporting theory, most of the evaluation principles and checklists are based on authors' personal experiences and preferences. This leaves the generalizability of the results of these studies open to question (Chan, 2001). The questions of whether these checklists can be used in real evaluation situations, which objectives can be or cannot be achieved by using them and what problems evaluators will encounter need to be answered. However, surprisingly, very few published works have focused on empirical research of materials evaluation—the following studies are six of them.

2.3.1 Empirical studies of pre-use evaluation

Chan (2001) analysed three ESL composition textbooks for advanced students mainly by calculating the frequencies of four variables (linguistic skills, textual organization skills, writing strategies and type of exercise) and sub-variables in each textbook and their percentages in proportion to investigate the approaches and theoretical bases adopted in ESL textbooks. Instead of using evaluation checklists proposed by researchers, Chan (2001) adopted a completely different way to evaluate these textbooks. He compared the approaches and theoretical bases adopted in the textbooks with the research results of, and recently emerging issues in, the second language teaching field. For example, the current approach of teaching writing was found in the textbooks but the issue of plagiarism when writing an academic paper was not addressed. In this way, Chan (2001) found the gap between textbook development and research insights and recommended the future direction to fill this gap. This evaluation strategy adopted in Chan's study is related to the principle advanced by Tomlinson (2003, 2008): since ELT textbooks play a role in helping students to learn a second language, Tomlinson (2008) assumed that textbooks should be driven by principles of language acquisition. Thus, previous research findings and principles in learning theory, second language learning and second language teaching can serve as a solid foundation for developing the criteria to evaluate textbooks (Tomlinson, 2003).

Another empirical study was conducted by Tomlinson and his team (Tomlinson et al., 2001) to evaluate eight adult textbooks published by major British publishers. They developed a list of 133 evaluation criteria, including published claims, flexibility, syllabus, pedagogic approach, topic content, instructions, teachability and specific aspects such as appearance and illustration, and then graded textbooks on a scale of 0 – 5 for most of the 133 criteria and wrote evaluative comments for each of the major criteria. Ultimately, four out of eight textbooks were recommended due to their potential to motivate both teachers and learners, and both positive and negative trends in textbooks development were identified and discussed. From my point of view, this study made two contributions on how to evaluate materials. Firstly, the criteria used in this study were developed from research into what learners, teachers and administrators want from textbooks. This pre-evaluation step acknowledges the importance of a prior analysis of contextual and learner factors as well as teachers' expectations as underlined by many experts and evaluators (e.g. Cunningsworth, 1995; McDonough & Shaw, 2003; McGrath, 2002; Skierso, 1991). Since the purpose of ELT textbooks is to help students master linguistic skills (Kleckova, 2004), learners' needs, such as proficiency level, preferred learning styles and their interests, should be regarded as the basis of criteria during material evaluation (McGrath, 2002, p.18-19). Moreover, as teachers are mediators between published material and learners, their views need consideration and study to determine what to evaluate (Masuhara, 1998). Information will also be needed on institutions and specific programmes to evaluate whether a textbook suits the specific context

(McGrath, 2002, p.21). McGrath (2002, p.20) also proposed the need to consider factors such as teachers' language competence, their familiarity with the target language culture, their attitude toward teaching and learners, and their time available for preparing, and so on. Therefore, the analysis of the context, learners' needs and teachers' factors is a necessary and significant pre-evaluation stage for evaluating textbooks systematically. Secondly, as mentioned above, experts and evaluators attempt to evaluate textbooks as systematically as possible to compensate for the subjective decision-making in pre-use evaluation. In this empirical study conducted by Tomlinson and his colleagues (Tomlinson et al., 2001), however, researchers managed to conduct a systematic evaluation by establishing a team of experts and teachers from different countries and backgrounds, by evaluating textbooks in isolation from each other, and by averaging their scores. Besides developing systematic criteria and checklists, integrating several evaluators' perceptions is an effective method for carrying out an objective and rigorous pre-use materials evaluation.

More recently, Johnson and his colleagues (Johnson et al., 2008), using think-aloud protocols, investigated different textbook evaluation techniques used by one novice and two experienced ELT teachers to help point to more effective means of evaluation. They found that less experienced teachers took account of either the teachers' or the students' needs while the experienced teacher managed to consider how the textbook fits into a long-term programme of preparation for academic study and how other teachers might relate to it. In all, an experienced teacher's approach to evaluation aligns with the criteria proposed by a large number of experts and affirms that textbooks need to be both learner-friendly and teacher-friendly (e.g. Byrd, 2001; Campbell et al., 1998; Grant, 1987, Skierso, 1991). Due to the benefits of knowing how experienced evaluators actually operate and how teachers recognize their own evaluation preferences and styles Johnson et al. (2008) recommended a research-informed approach to teacher training for developing teachers' materials evaluation skills. From my point of view, it is likely to eliminate the novice teacher's personal style and creativity if he or she is taught all the characteristics an expert possesses. The valuable way to train teachers is to underline the basic principles that the experienced teachers stick to but the novice teachers ignore and teach them how to develop systematic evaluation criteria and checklists according to their own teaching style and the learning style of their own students. This point is similar with the one made by Tomlinson (2003) that evaluation criteria should be developed for specific purposes and specific contexts.

It is easy to see that all of these pre-use evaluations were conducted by developing evaluation criteria either from previous research results in second language learning and teaching, from a context and needs analysis of students and teachers, or from the teacher's own experience and preferences. None of these pre-use evaluations have used the evaluation checklists proposed by previous studies. There is a huge gap between experts' proposals and empirical research. However, consciously or not, some principles presented by experts and educators were more or less adopted in these empirical pre-use evaluation studies. For instance, the notion that textbooks should be driven by principles of language acquisition as proposed by Tomlinson (2008) was adopted in Chan's (2001) study. It can be further assumed that evaluation criteria proposed by experts are valuable. Therefore, it calls for future research to apply proposed criteria in a real context to investigate the effects and problems of those criteria.

2.3.2 Empirical studies of in-use and post-use evaluation

In addition to empirical studies of pre-use evaluation, this section reviews one in-use evaluation and two post-use evaluations.

Chen (2005) conducted an in-use evaluation focusing on pragmatic discourse markers in textbooks. The researcher used role playing in different situations with both native students

and non-native students and compared the different usages of discourse markers used by two different groups. The researcher then checked whether the most frequently-used discourse markers used by native students were included in the currently used textbook, finding that none of these markers appeared in a total of 29 requested situations out of 6 volumes, which could be the cause of non-native students' low uses of them. The researcher used her own research results on the different performance between native speakers and non-native speakers as the criteria to evaluate textbooks, which can be a very innovative and useful direction for future material evaluation research. However, it can also be very risky if the research findings are questionable due to invalid factors used in the study. This research also highlights the significance of "situation" in language learning and teaching, as the results are based on the discourse markers used in requested situations (e.g. request-making) (Chen, 2005, p.8). This highlight also emphasizes the earlier discussion of the notions of "context" and "situation" in textbook design and language education, which was discussed in the previous section.

Al-Hajailan (1999) carried out a comprehensive post-use macro evaluation of ELT textbooks at the third-grade secondary level in Saudi Arabia using multiple data resources including a questionnaire-based study, interviews with seven teachers and administrators, and content-analysis of the textbook. A large-scale questionnaire-based study was conducted to collect teachers' and students' perceptions of the textbooks. The content analysis of the textbooks, interviews of seven teachers and administrators, and open-ended questions in the questionnaire provided insights on the quality of the textbooks. Although this research successfully investigated the strengths and the weaknesses of the textbooks, which were found to be very useful for textbook development and curriculum development, it took a lot of time and involved a great many teachers and students as well as administrators and therefore would be more suitable for evaluating textbooks in wider circulation used by larger populations of students. However, it also found that retrospective evaluation can be very straightforward and the results can be very convincing if based on empirical data.

Kleckova (2004) addressed two aspects of visual elements in ELT material evaluation, the placement of headings and the number of columns. Three two-page prototypes of EFL teaching materials were created by the researcher and a graphic designer. They used the most common visual element identified in their previous analysis, and specified three special tasks requiring that only columns and headings be studied to complete the tasks. They then conducted a questionnaire-based study to gather the students' preferences for the three prototypes. The study demonstrated students' preferences for one-column designs over two-column designs and their preference for both the marginal and flush left headings in the one-column design. Student preferences observed in this study can serve as criteria to evaluate textbook design. This study provides an effective method of textbook evaluation by getting feedback from textbook users after using different textbooks for a short time.

Although there is a gap between empirical studies and expert proposals, the studies reviewed in this paper prove the potential importance and effectiveness of retrospective evaluation.

3 RESEARCHING MICRO-LEVEL ISSUES OF TEXTBOOKS: TEXTBOOKS ANALYSIS

Research on textbook analysis has become more prevalent across disciplines and academic areas (e.g., Gouverneur, 2008). In the field of language textbook research, the research using the micro approach can focus on different aspects of the textbooks. I will review previous studies and categorize them based on orientations toward on lexical words, social issues reflected in the textbooks, and visual elements in the textbooks.

First, several studies focus on lexical words in the textbooks. For example, following the recent interest in phraseology in language learning materials, which focuses on the vocabulary content of a language syllabus, Gouverneur (2008) analysed the two high-frequency verbs *make* and *take* in three sets of English for General Purposes (EGP) textbooks at the intermediate and advanced levels. Similarly, focusing on vocabulary in language textbooks, some studies compared the vocabulary in a corpus of study textbooks to a corpus of reference textbooks (e.g., He, 2010; Sznajder, 2010). For instance, He (2010) compared the vocabulary in Chinese foreign language textbooks with the vocabulary list used in a Chinese proficiency test. Sznajder (2010) examined metaphorical words and phrases in a business English textbook and contrasted them with the metaphors identified in a sample corpus of business periodical and journal articles.

Second, some textbook research is oriented toward social issues. Several researchers examined gender stereotyping in Hong Kong English textbooks. For example, Lee and Collins (2008), compared ten recently published books with ten published in the late 1980s and early 1990s and found that women appeared more frequently in the former and that greater use was made of gender-inclusive pronouns and the neutral address title “Ms,” but the “male-first” phenomenon and the visual under-representation of women was still prevalent in recent textbooks. Analysing the content and language of a current Hong Kong English language textbook series for grade one students, Yang (2012) found that males and females were almost equally represented and were portrayed in a similar range of activities. All these examples of textbook research tend to be more lexical than grammatical. We need a study to explore the contents of textbooks from a functional perspective.

Lastly, various studies tend to be orientated towards visual literacy and explore the visual resources of textbooks or the relationship between images and texts in textbooks. Guo (2004) developed a theoretical framework for the analysis of two types of visual display common in biology textbooks (e.g., schematic drawings and statistical graphs) using O’Toole’s (1994) and O’Halloran’s (1999) models and applying them to explore the metafunctional meanings of different semiotic elements in biology texts. Based on the multimodal convention of meaning making that understands visual and linguistic semiotic modalities are codependent, Baldry and Thibault (2006) investigated how the codependence of verbal and visual resources in science textbooks produce multimodal meanings. Coffin and Derewianka (2009) analysed the layout of school history textbooks multimodally using Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) signifying system. Working in the area of research on materials and assessment for language learning, and focusing on the relationship between text and image, Unsworth and his colleagues (2006-2008: e.g. Unsworth & Chen, 2008) examined factors affecting difficulties in students’ multimodal reading. Chen (2010) studied English textbooks used in mainland China and investigated how the visual and verbal semiotic resources are co-deployed to construe the evaluative stance of the textbooks. Weninger and Kiss (2013) analysed both texts and images in EFL textbooks to explore the cultural content of language teaching materials. Although they claimed to conduct quantitative research, their study lacked an analytical framework and did not use statistics. What we need now is an analytical framework to explore the images in the textbooks that produces both qualitative and quantitative data.

4 CONCLUSION

This paper presents a comprehensive classification of recent studies researching both macro-level and micro-level issues of ELT textbooks and materials. On one hand, the historical trend of using past proposals to evaluate textbooks is identified and the gap between these proposals and empirical research is identified. In terms of the three types of materials evaluation identified above, although empirical studies proved in-use evaluation and post-evaluation significant and effective, pre-use evaluation would be more common in a real

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situation because teachers face the difficulty of choosing a large number of different textbooks before using them and because it also helps to identify specific aspects of the materials that require adaptation (Rubdy, 2003). Thus, we need effective evaluation checklists and instruments proved by empirical studies, rather than based on an expert's experiences. As discussed at the beginning of this section, these three types of evaluation are complementary and can be used to obtain a comprehensive view of evaluations. On the other hand, three recent directions of researching micro-level issues of textbooks are reviewed. Further studies exploring the linguistics features of the verbal texts included in the textbooks are needed to fill the research gap. When researching visual resources of the textbooks, we need an analytical framework which enables us to explore the images in the textbooks both qualitatively and quantitatively.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Nancy Guo is an Assistant Lecturer of PolyU SPEED. She obtained her PhD degree in Linguistics at Department of English, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Her research interests include language education, material design, literacy development, language and communication and multisemiotic studies.

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