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Pedagogical Implications of an EFL Materials Evaluation

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In EFL classrooms, how do teachers and learners react to language learning materials that have been selected and are in use? What do students focus on when given an opportunity to provide personal and anonymous feedback? What are the implications for classroom teaching? This paper reports on a study evaluating classroom language learning materials post-implementation. Fifteen EFL teachers and 1,216 learners in a Japanese university responded to questionnaires to determine the suitability of listening and reading textbooks within a core English program. Results identify and compare teachers' and learners' reactions and perspectives. The study uncovers pedagogical issues and shows how the process of materials evaluation may be used as a tool to enhance instructional practice. It also highlights the need for more feedback and accountability within EFL classrooms and has ramifications for curriculum development.

教師と学習者は英語のクラスで採用され使用されている教材に対してどのような反応を示すであろうか？もし学生が個人的かつ無記名のフィードバックの機会を与えられたら、どのような感想を述べるであろうか？そしてそのフィードバックのティーチングへの意義は何であろうか？本論文はクラスで使用された語学学習教材の使用後評価の研究に関するものである。日本の大学の必修英語プログラムにおいて、英語教師15名と学習者1216名がリスニングとリーディングの教科書の適合性を測る目的でアンケートに回答した。教師

と学習者の反応と見解が比較検討され、教育上の問題点が指摘された。また教材評価のプロセスが指導法を改善するツールとなり得る可能性も示唆された。併せて英語教育においてフィードバックと教材の教育効果評価の必要性が明らかとなり、カリキュラム開発上の関連性も示唆される。

A central message in current literature on materials evaluation is the “need to find out more about what learners and teachers want from language learning materials” (Tomlinson, 1998, p.341). Rather than appraisal of materials by apparent value, appeal, or hope that they might work, there is a need for more systematic feedback from materials users; however, to date, there has been little published on post-use/post-course materials evaluation (Ellis, 1998). This investigation aims 1) to determine the suitability of two new core textbooks within an innovative curriculum, and 2) to address a specific problem—a gap in the extent to which teachers and administrators are accountable for decisions within curriculum planning. To help inform decision-making in any given context, both teachers and students are uniquely situated as the most obvious users to provide firsthand feedback of materials (Brown, 1995). First, this paper examines and describes participants’ reactions to a range of listening and reading task-types and topics, and perceived difficulty of the language learning level of the texts. Second, since the majority of the results are relevant to the context in

which they were elicited, this paper will report the most noteworthy of these and focus on a discussion of pedagogical issues arising from the data.

New context: Case study

The study was conducted in a large, private technical university in Japan, with the following new aspects: a) a new course structure over 5 levels, b) a new core syllabus addressing the new structure, c) two new core textbooks, d) over 1200 freshman students, and e) 15 teachers, appointed between 1-6 years, including 3 newly-hired teachers in their 1st or 2nd term.

Four groups of people were involved in the evaluation:

1. curriculum committees - planners,
2. teachers - users,
3. students - users, and
4. publishers and authors - producers.

Two questionnaires were designed and piloted, one administered to teachers two weeks prior to the end of term, and one to students (See Appendix A) across 52 classes during the final class of the term. The two textbooks evaluated were: Lebauer, R. (1998). *Journeys* 1. Prentice Hall Asia, ELT, and Nunan, D. (1997). *Listen In* 1 and 2. International Thomson Asia ELT.

Research Questions

1. How do teachers and learners react to language learning materials that have been selected and are in place? (post use)
2. What are the similarities and contrasts between teachers and learners post-use reactions to language learning materials?
3. How can findings from research questions 1 and 2 assist in future decisions about EFL curriculum development?

Questionnaire results

How task types worked in teachers' classrooms

For the listening text, of the 5 task types listed, teachers reported listening tasks worked best overall – (93% very well or well). Vocabulary tasks in the text were also rated highly – (73% very well or well). Speaking tasks – (60% worked a little or not well) and tasks that connected to learners' lives were moderately rated (57% worked a little). The least successful were pronunciation tasks – 71% (worked a little or not well). Additionally, there was 100% consensus that the focus on moving from receptive to productive skills was very useful (46.7%) or useful (53.3%) for the level of these students. Responses indicated that listening and then confirming with others seemed to be a helpful and useful strategy within tasks. Teachers regard listening to be considerably easier to

teach than speaking and pronunciation.

For the reading tasks, a significant 93.3% showed scanning tasks to be the kind of task that worked best over all tasks. The reading articles worked 2nd best, indicating the nature and content of short readings were well suited to this particular group of learners. However, one teacher stated, “the (reading) tasks didn't seem communicative and there was little to lead out of the book and into the classroom”. Conversely another said, “students do not want to speak but they will read”. Possible reasons for the range of the success or failure of certain tasks could be: a) teaching methodology dictated to some extent the task types selected, b) teaching styles may reflect how students react to task type, c) students' learning styles reflect how they react to task type, or d) the range of English proficiency within a class.

Teachers' feedback for both texts

Both texts received a significant ‘thumbs up’ as being very appropriate for large classes (92.8% for Reading, 89.4% for Listening). In general, teachers agreed there was a practical application of tasks, that is, students were practicing something they were likely to use (27% -yes; 60% sometimes; 13% - no). Teachers appeared to be reasonably consistent in terms of how they used both texts - communicatively, interactively, and pacing of tasks. They were generally happy with both texts and didn't particularly want to change after one year. Most

teachers preferred a single 4-skills text versus 2 separate texts.

The extent to which students found the task types interesting or enjoyable.

The most striking similarity in the ranking order of interest or enjoyment of task types by students is that they were almost the same for both listening and reading tasks. Rankings for listening and reading responses (shown respectively for both texts in parenthesis) are as follows: Students ranked tasks connected to their own lives 1st (60%/39%), group tasks 2nd (58%/33%) and pair tasks 3rd (57%/26%). Vocabulary tasks were equally ranked 5th for both texts. Students ranked individual tasks low for both texts. For the listening text, listening tasks were ranked 1st, yet for the reading text, reading tasks were ranked 4th. A number of students selected the Not Applicable (NA) category which could be interpreted to mean they: a) didn't do the kind of task, b) didn't remember doing the kind of task, c) didn't understand the question, or, d) didn't understand the task or the description of task type.

Similarities and differences between teachers and students

Both teachers and students felt the level of both texts was about right and both groups ranked listening tasks very highly - as working very well and interesting.

For teachers, speaking and grammar tasks worked least well and students ranked grammar tasks 2nd least enjoyable. Fifty-six percent of students found speaking tasks interesting, but 28% ranked them as NA. Students ranked tasks connected to their own lives the highest but teachers considered these task types worked a little or not well (57% - for Listening; 60% - for Reading). For the reading text, teachers ranked scanning tasks the highest (93.3%) but students rated these as not very enjoyable (8th out of 11). Students ranked group work and pair work as the most interesting and enjoyable, compared to teachers, a significant 85.6% of whom reported using mostly individual tasks and thought they worked well or very well. For teachers, 60% said speaking tasks worked a little or not well. Eighty percent of teachers ranked pre-reading tasks as working very well versus students who ranked this task type as least enjoyable. Topics in both texts appealed more to teachers than to students. But as one curriculum committee member commented, "you can take the most fascinating topic in the world and an inadequate teacher can make it totally boring and vice versa!" For students, the art and design of a text was not particularly important - 54% of students said they didn't notice, compared to teachers who liked the design of both texts a lot.

Task type preferences

These results indicate that students and teachers have different perspectives about language learning and task types, although how teachers choose to use tasks presented by the text will naturally vary. In order to help inform classroom practice, it is worthwhile reflecting on some pertinent issues regarding different task-types and task-based language teaching as found in the current literature.

1. Tasks that "...connect the text to our previous experiences of language and of life" (Tomlinson, 2000, p.23). Tasks connected to their own lives were ranked highest by students.
2. Tasks that "...allow students to personalize what they are learning" (Droukis, 2000, p.9). These indicate a more-learner centered dimension and tasks include giving students choices.
3. Those tasks that allow opportunities to help learners activate prior knowledge and monitor their actions as well as tasks that assist learners to "enact effective listening strategies (metacognitive, cognitive, social)" (Rost, 2001 p.11).
4. Making goals clear to learners, providing a degree of choice, using learners background knowledge and experience are all ways in which materials can involve learners in better understanding their own

learning processes and perhaps help them become more effective language users (Nunan, 1999).

Students' perceived needs and preferences

What do students focus on when given an opportunity to provide personal and anonymous feedback? Students were asked one open-ended question: "Do you have any other comments about the ...textbook?" Responses were translated from Japanese to English and grouped into broad categories. In the main, students adhered to the task of describing aspects of the textbooks; however, what also emerged was a new category, one classified as "perceived needs and preferences" of students. Of the 367 open-ended responses for the reading and listening texts combined, students made 66 comments and suggestions connected to this new category; 51 for the listening text and 15 for the reading text. These comments appeared to reflect areas of dissatisfaction or uncertainty, where students departed in some way from appraisal of the actual texts. Instead, they wrote comments about what they would like, didn't like or would like to do. Responses within each category were grouped into positive or negative aspects and then listed by frequencies, shown here in Table 1.

Table 1: *Students' open-ended responses: frequencies*

Reading (Primary text)	☹/☺	No. of responses	Listening (Secondary text)	☹/☺	No. of responses
1. Content/Topics	18/28	46	1. *Needs/ Preferences	42/9	51
2. Art & Design	39/5	44	2. Level	35/13	48
3. Level	29/9	38	3. Art & Design	27/16	43
4. *Needs/ Preferences	15/0	15	4. Listening	15/6	21
5. General/ Suggestions		8	5. Usefulness/ Interest		12
6 Vocabulary		6	6. Content/ Topics		9
7. Reading		5	7. Speaking		3
8. Usefulness/ Interest		4	Other		7
9. Grammar		2			
Other		5			
Totals		173			194
				Total responses:	367

* = new category

Primary text: Reading

The highest number of responses (46) was connected to content and topics. Of these, 28 were positive, using descriptions such as *'interesting'*, *'easy to understand'*, *'difficult but interesting'*, and *'fun, because it has something original'*. The remaining 18 were negative comments indicating, for example, general dislike, wanting

more interesting stories, longer sentences and more explanation. Interestingly, the second highest number of responses (44) concerned feedback about the art and design (aspects of illustration, layout, graphics, lettering). Fourteen of these were complaints that italics were difficult to read. Some thought reading illustrations were not clear or not easy to understand and the size of lettering was sometimes too small. Comments about the level were the third most frequently mentioned category, with 29 negative comments; in particular, the word "difficult" recurred frequently.

Secondary text: Listening

The most frequent number of responses was 51 comments connected to the new category of perceived needs and preferences. Of these 42 were negative and 9 were positive. Responses variously decried lack of clarity about course goals, constrained use of the text, problems with listening tasks and the need for teacher feedback. These issues will be addressed in the next section of this paper. The second most frequent response (48) alluded to the level of the text. Of these, 35 were negative statements and 13 positive. The majority of negative comments used phrases such as *'difficult'*, *'not easy'*, *'not able to understand'*, *'tough'*, *'not clear'*, *'explanation in English is tough'*, *'could not understand what questions meant'*, and *'long sentences are difficult'*. At the other end of the scale, 13 students claimed the text was *'too*

easy. Art and design feedback was also prevalent for the listening text. Of the 43 responses, 27 were negative compared to 16 positive. Positive descriptions included e.g., *'colorful, interesting, helpful pictures'*, and *'good layout'*, while negative descriptions included e.g., *'didn't like the pictures, pictures were difficult to understand, wanted more pictures, easier if it was in paragraph form, size of letters too big'*, and *'I wanted a smaller, simpler text'*. However, of the two texts, students seemed to prefer the listening text design. The fourth most frequent response (32) was connected to the skill of listening, compared to only 5 comments about reading as a skill for the reading text.

Pedagogical implications

Student comments have been listed in Appendix B under the heading of Students' Perceived Needs and Preferences. What is noteworthy from these open-ended responses is that most relate to how individual teachers may have presented and used the texts, or perhaps *not* used the text. Students also identify classroom aspects that imply something is lacking in teachers' classroom management, teaching style, methodology, or techniques. The following quotes highlight issues that as practitioners are important to ask ourselves:

1. Goals: *'Study for what?'* *'Not clear of the aim'*. *'How much expectation for goal?'* Are we making the aim

or purpose of a task clear to students? Do we think we are?

2. Use of text/timing: *'not much/not all of the text was covered'*, *'no need because of not enough chance to use it'*, *'want to do more pages'*, *'wanted to do all of the book'*, *'wanted to study pronunciation more'*, *'wanted to use this text book more often'*. Are we allocating an appropriate amount of time on task? Could we assign more homework? Are we maintaining a balance of skill coverage? Are teachers using supplementary materials, leaving less time to address the texts or are we, in fact, trying to cover too much material in a given term?
3. Listening: *'Listening too fast. Not easy just once'* (11) Many students need and want to hear listening cassettes more than once. What are some ways to judge when this is optimal? Are we checking students' understanding and level of accuracy? Are we providing clear, instructional guidelines? Six students said listening *was 'useful and difficult, but good'* and although 26 students mention the listening tasks were too fast or difficult in some way; this may not necessarily be construed as a negative perspective. Rather, it could mean that the level of listening tasks was challenging. However, from a cultural perspective, if a Japanese student says something is difficult, he or she is perhaps inferring they don't understand.

4. Teacher feedback: *'I need answers', 'Drop some hints', 'want more detailed explanation for questions'*. Do we always follow up by providing answers to tasks or questions?
5. Student feedback: Do our programs allow opportunities for students to give feedback? If yes, should it be anonymous? When should we ask them? Why should we ask them? What do we do with the feedback? If no, what could be put in place? Although more than twice as many student responses were interpreted as negative, students also express some positive feelings about the interest and usefulness of the texts. Perhaps this particular group of freshman took the opportunity to complain or perhaps Japanese students are prepared to speak out, anonymously, more than before about what they really think.
3. How can we identify what might be lacking in teachers' consideration of, or provision of ways for students to learn?
4. How can we find out if the materials we are using are helping do this?
5. How can we modify or improve our classroom planning, timing of tasks, implementation of ideas, or teaching styles?

Conclusion

Many issues reported here call for any EFL curriculum to meet the real needs of learners. In the open-ended section of the materials evaluation survey, we can only view results as the learners' perceived needs. Thus, it is necessary and important to balance results by listening to and taking into account teachers' opinions, judgments, and practical experience of the materials. Results such as these don't tell us everything we want to know, but conducting a materials evaluation gives our "clients" a voice and alerts teachers, curriculum designers, and administrators to students' perspectives. In so doing, it provides invaluable data for informed and defensible curriculum decision-making.

Issues raised

The following are pedagogical issues arising from this study that warrant further areas of investigation:

1. What can we learn by asking materials users about their opinions, experience and judgments?
2. How can we become more aware of and more sensitive to students' needs?

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Appendix A

KIT Materials Evaluation: English III, Classroom Textbook Evaluation

Students: We would like to know your opinion about the new textbooks:

“Journeys 1”, by Roni Lebauer, Units 6-9, and “Listen In I” by David Nunan, Units 11-20.

Please circle your answers about these textbooks. Thank you!

A. “Listen In I”

1. What did you think of these tasks? Circle the best answer for you.

- | | | | |
|--|----------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Vocabulary tasks: | a) interesting | b) not interesting | c) not applicable |
| 2. Listening tasks: | a) interesting | b) not interesting | c) not applicable |
| 3. Pronunciation tasks: | a) interesting | b) not interesting | c) not applicable |
| 4. Speaking tasks: | a) interesting | b) not interesting | c) not applicable |
| 5. Tasks that connect to your own life: (Circle the answer that is true for you) | | | |
| | a) interesting | b) not interesting | c) not applicable |
| 6. Individual tasks: | a) interesting | b) not interesting | c) not applicable |
| 7. Pair work tasks: | a) interesting | b) not interesting | c) not applicable |
| 8. Group work tasks: | a) interesting | b) not interesting | c) not applicable |

2. I think the “Listen In 1” textbook topics were:

- a) very interesting b) interesting c) a little interesting d) not interesting

3. I think the level of the “Listen In 1” textbook is _____ for me.

- a) very easy b) easy c) about right d) difficult e) very difficult

4. I think the “Listen In 1” textbook helped me improve my English.

- a) a lot b) some c) a little d) not at all

5. I think the “Listen In 1” listening tapes were:
 a) very difficult b) difficult c) a little difficult d) not difficult
6. What do you think of the art and design in the “Listen In 1” textbook?
 a) I liked it a lot b) I liked it c) I didn’t like it d) I didn’t notice
7. Do you have any other comments about the “Listen In 1” textbook? _____

B. “Journeys I”

1. What tasks did you enjoy doing? Circle as many as you wish.
- a) vocabulary tasks
 - b) tasks that connect to your own life
 - c) conversation tasks
 - d) scanning tasks
 - e) pre-reading tasks
 - f) short readings
 - g) reading articles (3-4 paragraphs)
 - h) grammar tasks
 - i) individual tasks
 - j) pair work tasks
 - k) group work tasks
 - l) writing reports about topics from “Journeys”
 - m) other _____
2. What do you think of these “Journeys I” topics?
- Unit 6: Try It ... You’ll Like It (food)
- a) very interesting b) interesting c) a little interesting d) not interesting

- Unit 7: One For You and One For Me (shopping/money)
 - a) very interesting b) interesting c) a little interesting d) not interesting
 - Unit 8: Home Is Where The Heart Is (home)
 - a) very interesting b) interesting c) a little interesting d) not interesting
 - Unit 9: The Right Time and Place (time)
 - a) very interesting b) interesting c) a little interesting d) not interesting
3. Overall, I think the “Journeys I” textbook is:
- a) very interesting b) interesting c) a little interesting d) not interesting
4. I think the level of the “Journeys I” textbook is _____ for me:
- a) very easy b) easy c) about right d) difficult e) very difficult
5. I think the “Journeys I” textbook helped me improve my English.
- a) a lot b) some c) a little d) not at all
6. Do you have any other comments about the “Journeys I” textbook? _____

Appendix B

Students' Perceived Needs and Preferences (data from open-ended question)

Listening Text: [42] ☹️

- About the speed of tapes: How about 1 time slow listening and 1 time fast
- Listening is too fast. Not easy just once (11)
- Let me listen to the tape more to get to used to it
- I want to listen to the tape not once but twice
- Want to do more pages
- Wanted to do all of the book
Wanted to study pronunciation more (2)
- Wanted to use this text book more often
- Didn't use it in class much (2)
- More conversation practice
- Need more detailed explanation for questions
- Need more written explanation (examples)
- No need because not enough chance to use it
- Want more friendly lecture
- Drop some hints
- More fun
- More listening
- More long sentences
- Need answers
- Not easy to know when to pay attention
- Some answers for listening were not clear
- Study for what?
- Not clear of the aim
- How much expectation for goal
- Could not understand what questions meant (2)
- Want every day conversation
- Want the tape
- Class more often
- Feel like it is better to study for Eiken

[9] 😊

- Recent news would be fun
- A kind of DJ (disk jockey) might be fun
- How about using Cartoons?
- How about putting all of the scripts of listening tapes at the end of the book? (2)
- Need to dub tape for preparation and review at home

- Need to pick up and write down important words
- Would be better to use a more difficult textbook
- Need this, otherwise I cannot understand anything
- Keep this without change

Reading Text: [15] ☹️

- Better not to use the textbook
- More grammar (3)
- Only this text book for English study would be enough
- Too many things to do in an hour makes me tired
- Need the answer of cross word puzzles
- Need some explanations
- Want more detailed explanation for questions
- Want to combine with 'Listen in 1'
- More conversation
- More everyday conversation
- More explanation in Japanese (3)