An Adopted Framework to Evaluate ELT Supplementary Materials: The Applicability of "Top Notch" Software

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Abstract. It is vital in every language classroom that the best possible materials be chosen as they are considered to play the next most important role in learning a foreign language after the teacher. All teachers are responsible to evaluate what they intend to take to the language classroom. These days, language teachers have the preference to equip their classes with technology as a supplement to books, tapes, and videos. In fact, CDs are replacing any other tool for language learning both in the classroom and at home. Therefore, a comprehensive set of criteria consistent with the objectives of the course as well as the principles of current language teaching methodologies is required to see if the available software is good enough to be used. The aim of the present study is, in the first place, going through some of the available ELT materials evaluation schemes to come up with a synthesized, comprehensive framework specifically designed for evaluating language software, and secondly, scrutinizing one of the recent language teaching series, Top Notch, which has won to be taken in most of the language classrooms in Iran as supplementary materials, to see if it meets the criteria to have enough credibility for its present position in language classrooms.

Keywords: Materials evaluation; Top-Notch software; foreign language learning

1. Introduction

Choosing a particular book or software in the language classroom signals an executive decision behind which lies a professional and financial investment. In a language classroom, the learners' attitudes toward the materials used fluctuates between the idea that they are valid and useful sources, and time-saving tools which can help them learn in a better way, and, on the other hand, the idea that masses of rubbish are packed together to be sold in the market. In a broader sense, ELT materials are sometimes seen as poor comprises between what is actually helpful for the learners to enhance their learning through following a careful, step-by-step process, and those which are rather educationally undesirable and only are the end-product of a company's willingness to obtain a quick profit.

Therefore, there seems to be a need for a checklist to see how well the ELT materials work in the classroom. Even though a number of checklists for materials evaluation have been developed so far, the fact that some of them are empirically operative only in special contexts should not be ignored. It is crystal clear that the process of evaluating a particular book or software is a subjective activity, and no specific criteria can be set to provide a definite means to measure the credibility of all materials.

In the evaluation of materials, two basic questions need to be raised (Byrd, 2001; cited in Celce-Murcia). The first one is whether the materials have the features that we are looking for so that we can adopt them, and the second question is how the language teacher with particular students in a certain context and program can make them work to guarantee an effective and interesting learning tool. In order to answer the first question, the need for having a comprehensive framework to check the features required for an ELT material is felt. In order to answer the second question, we should get an overview of the presentation, practice, and evaluation phases offered. Then, the next step is to scrutinize the format, content, practice, and evaluation suggested by the intended material.

The purpose of the present study is twofold. In the first place, it

intends to synthesize a number of evaluation checklists available to come up with a comprehensive framework to evaluate ELT software available on the market. Secondly, on the basis of the suggested scheme, this study aims at finding out whether "Top Notch" CDs can be considered reliable supplementary materials to be used in language classrooms or not.

2. Literature Review

The selection, adaptation, and creation of teaching materials is one of the most crucial responsibilities teachers and materials developers should bear in mind.

While the syllabus defines the goals and objectives as well as the content, instructional materials can put flesh on the bones of these specifications (Nunan, 1991). McGrath (2002) stated that materials design and evaluation provide a systematic approach to the selection and subsequent evaluation of textbooks and practical advice on their adaptation and supplementation.

Evaluation is regarded as a crucial activity in the materials development process since it allows developers to check if the obtained material satisfies all requirements, and it also provides developers with reliable information about material's utility, validating if the obtained material can be effective support in the achievement of the educational goals which it intends to support (Padrn, Daz, Aedo, 2007).

Having a glance at the literature helps one to find different ideas on the processes involved and criteria chosen for designing and evaluating language materials. Regarding the relevance and thus evaluation of the materials included in a course, Allwright (1981) pointed out that materials should be related to the conception of the whole of language teaching and learning.

Richards and Rodgers (1986) suggest that instructional materials can provide detailed specifications of content, even in the absence of a syllabus. They give guidelines to teachers on both the intensity of coverage and the amount of attention demanded by a particular content or tasks.

Materials help the definition of the syllabus goals and the roles of teachers and learners within the instructional process (Wright, 1987). Sheldon (1988) provides an extensive checklist of questions which can aid in the selection and development of materials. He proposes that materials should be developed and then evaluated according to criteria such as their rationale, accessibility, layout, and ease of use. In one study reported by Nunan (1988) the following detailed information on the content of a textbook is introduced:

1. The chance to promote discussion in the classroom;

2. The aims and objectives of each unit;

3. The length of time it takes to teach each unit (including the time allocated to different learner configurations: teacher-fronted, pair or individualized work);

4. An indication of how the unit is introduced;

5. A special organization in the order of materials presented in each unit and the whole book;

6. An evaluation of students' knowledge of the learned materials;

7. An estimation of the suitability of the materials for the designated learner group;

8. An indication of intention to use similar materials in future.

According to Tomlinson (1996), the process of materials evaluation can be seen as a way of developing our understanding of the ways in which it works and this way we can enhance both language learning and pedagogic practices. Skehan (1996), focusing on task-based learning, suggested some methods to analyze and evaluate tasks. According to him, tasks are considered suitable to be used in a language classroom if they increase accuracy and fluency in the learners' public performance.

More recently, Miekley (2005) offered a checklist to evaluate ESL textbooks. The checklist includes the examination of content, vocabulary and grammar, exercises and activities, attractiveness of the text, teacher's manual, methodological guidelines and supplementary materials. In his study, Yilmaz (2005) illustrates the criteria for selecting and evaluating textbooks and builds a theoretical framework onto the learning and teaching process in which the teacher trainees are actively

involved. Bahumaid (2008) stresses the need to scrutinize the evaluation formats from a teacher's perspective. He proposes a specific "customizing" test which can help EFL teachers to assess the available evaluation checklists, select and adapt the most appropriate form that would fit in their language contexts. To him, manageability, relevance, applicability, clarity, scoreability, integratedness, and extent are the main components of that so-called test.

Hamiloglu and Karhova (2009), suggesting a textbook evaluation paradigm for vocabulary, examined five current course books used in ELF classrooms in Turkey and concluded that all the selected books integrated lexis as a major part of their syllabus emphasizing word knowledge by word building, word formation, synonyms and also lists supplied at the end of Students' Books for quick reference. They also evaluated the books by their layout, pictures and drawings included and diagrams and cartoons to enhance vocabulary knowledge of learners.

2.1 Adopted framework to evaluate ELT software

Ansari and Babaii (2002) made a list of universal features of EFL/ESL textbooks. Their framework consists of four parts: approach, content presentation, physical make-up, and administrative concerns. In the approach, they include consideration of the nature of language, learning, and how theory can be applied. As for content, purposes, selection and rationale of materials, syllabus satisfaction both to the teacher and student are taken into account. Regarding physical make-up, they emphasize attention to the size, layout, durability, quality of editing, and appropriate title. They finally subdivide the administrative concerns to macro-state policies, appropriateness for local situation (culture, religion, gender), and appropriate price. This framework has been extended and revised here to be applied to the evaluation of ELT software as well. The whole framework is divided into two parts: internal and external criteria. Then, some items have been included to cover the credibility of the use of software, too.

I. Internal Criteria:

A. Content Presentation

    1. Stating purpose(s) and objective(s)

     a. For the total course

     b. For individual units

    2. Selection and its rationale

     a. Coverage

      (1). Pronunciation

      (2). Grammar

      (3). Vocabulary

      (4). Reading and Writing

      (5). Speaking and Listening

     b. Grading

     c. Organization

     d. Sequencing

     e. Creativity

     f. Interactive games

     g. Exercises and Activities Evaluation

    3. Satisfaction of the syllabus

     a. To the teacher:

      (1) Providing a guide book

      (2) Giving advice on the methodology

      (3) Giving theoretical orientations

      (4) Key to the exercises

     b. To the student:

      (1) Piecemeal, unit-by-unit instruction

      (2) Grouping strategies

      (3) Incorporating higher level thinking skills

       (a) Graphics

       (b) Motivating learners' autonomy

       (c) Developing critical thinking

       (d) Periodic revisions

       (e) Workbook

       (f) Exercise and activities

       (g) Periodic test sections

(h) Accompanying other aids

(i) Consistency with pedagogical principles

    4. Context suitability

    5. Competence and knowledge of the developers

II. External Criteria:

A. Physical Make-up

1. Attractive layout

2. High quality

2. Appropriate title

B. Administrative Concerns

1. Macro-state policies

2. Appropriate for local situation

a. Culture

b. Religion

c. Gender

d. Consistency with psychological principles

3. Manageability

C. Appropriate Price

3. "TOP Notch" Software

3.1 Description of the software

The material destined to be evaluated through the present framework was "Top Notch" software. There are two CDs accompanied by each "Top Notch series": one is a ninety-minute DVD, and the other is a take-home CD.

The first one is introduced as a video program that brings authenticity and fun into the classroom (back cover). It features TV-style situational comedies, original songs related to the topic of each lesson, and on-the-street interviews. Each unit is introduced by a special topic, situational one, followed by short phrases introducing the social language and grammar points.

The second software is a CD-Rom which includes units, the titles of which go with the ones presented in both the book and the "Top Notch TV" DVD. Each unit consists of four major parts: a speaking

practice, in which one can have role playing and record his voice while presenting a dialog with the text either shown or hidden, and compare his performance with the original one; an interactive workbook having a variety of exercises including fill in blanks, drag and drop, matching, conversation scramble, and multiple choice questions. The students can check their answers later; games and puzzles which include guess and spell, concentration, and quiz show; and Top Notch pop songs which is presented in two forms: either the song is sung or it is presented in karaoke mode where the student has the opportunity to sing the song while the music is played.

3.2 Evaluation of the software

What was described above aimed at giving a general view of the software which functions as the supplementary material for the Top Notch books. To evaluate the software, a checklist was developed based on the available material evaluation checklists, particularly the one suggested by Ansari and Babaii (2002). The present checklist is in fact a synthesis of all the elements which need to be taken into account in evaluating language software. The framework examines the software from two perspectives: internal and external. Internal criteria refer to the content, and external one gives a broader view for the evaluation of the software in general. Following is an overall evaluation of the Top Notch software on the basis of the suggested framework:

I. Internal criteria:

• The purpose of each unit is stated as social language and grammar points being focused, but the overall purpose of the total course is ignored.

• Materials in the DVD and CD are learner-centered and in line with the current worldwide theories of language learning. They can be used both in the classroom with the teacher's help or taken home for self-practice. The software, therefore, supports both autonomy and self-efficiency.

• Even though the scenes observe the learners' needs offering situational episodes, the atmosphere in which the videos are recorded does not appear authentic. Meanwhile, all roles played in different units by

the same individuals give a kind of artificiality to the scenes.

• Language skills and subskills are not well incorporated: even though conversations give life skills to the learners, and they present authentic pieces of language, reading authentic texts is not included. Meanwhile, pronunciation is not paid due attention. Yet, receptive and productive skills are simultaneously presented. Grammar is dealt with properly and there is an appropriate sequencing, a sort of smooth flow from simple to more difficult patterns, and enough drills are offered to help the students discern a grammar form. All activities are spiral and follow interactive and communicative approaches. As for the vocabulary, there is a principles basis for vocabulary presentation, and that is the "context of situation". The presentation of the new vocabulary is at an appropriate rate so that the language is understandable for the learners. Because the vocabularies are situation-based there is little opportunity for their presentation in the subsequent units for reinforcement purposes. Writing is limited to answering grammar questions in the workbook. Not enough attention is, therefore, paid to writing skill.

• The units are topically and functionally graded based on what the learners might come across in real life situations. The activities introduce innovative ways of learning and help the students develop creative minds in language learning, but they do not develop critical thinking in the learners. The games are enjoyable and interactive, and there is a variety in activities and exercises. They are all task-based and they make comprehension easier by addressing one new item at a time rather than multiple new ones. Assessment and self-evaluation is provided and the learners have the opportunity to check their own progress.

• A teacher's edition is available on how to use the software in the classroom, and there is a free teacher's disk with printable activities: learning strategies, grammar self-checks and vocabulary building. Teachers are given room for activating students' background knowledge while using the software. Also, it helps teachers to accompany their teaching with technology

• Hints are given on the culture, geography, and customs in a foreign country so that they give the learners awareness toward the differences.

• The software has been designed in such a way that it can promote pair and group work and discussions in the classroom and thus it is open to both competitive and collaborative learning. However, there is a special focus on individualistic, out of class learning through personal involvement of the learners.

• The methodology is consistent and learners get accustomed to the way they should use the software. The software is appropriate for the curriculum and it coincides with the course goals (two four-credit conversation courses for EFL students); there isn't a periodic review or test sections for the presented units.

II. External criteria:

• As for the physical make-up, sound and voice are both authentic and clear enough to be used in the language lab. The page design and visual imagery are of high aesthetic quality. In the on-the-street interviews a variety of voices of mostly native speakers talking at normal speed have been selected. Audio and videos in this section resemble a natural situation. The number of actors in all episodes, however, is limited so that it might be demotivating for the learners to watch different scenes presented by a limited number of actors or actresses in all units in a rather artificial atmosphere.

• The scenes and dialogs are in a way that they are appropriate for different local situations. They promote cross-cultural awareness and serve as a window into learning about the target language culture and taking into account the linguistic and cultural diversity of the student population. The cultural tone overall is appropriate for use in learners' setting. Nothing as religion-affected audios and videos are included.

• The software has been designed to be used by an adult language learner from beginner to advanced level. No special language background is required by the learner, and it represents male/female differences in an English speaking context even though it does not explicitly give any kind of gender-difference awareness. Job and social-status distribution is fairly done between males and females.

• There are cues on ethical values, psychological personality differences consistent with normal principles.

● The software can be used and managed with ease with no specific complications; besides, it has a reasonable price to be bought by learners.

4. Conclusion

Among the available language software on the market in Iran, "Top Notch" is a new one with a focus on learner-centered approach. It goes one step beyond other ELT materials as it is different in the type of activities and exercises presented.

With a special attention to grammar and vocabulary as the two basic building blocks of the language, it offers adequate practice on oral and aural skills. Sound and picture quality are good enough to motivate the learners to use it later at home. It would turn into a magic package though if it had some reading and writing practices incorporated into the program. Even though the activities do not provoke learners' critical thinking, they encourage them to use language creatively in different contexts. Cultural awareness, learners' autonomy promotion, and language use in real life situations are other distinguishing features of the software. All in all, it is suggested as suitable language software both for individualistic study and in the classroom.

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