

## **Age is Only a Number: Evaluating and Modernising Dated EFL Materials**

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Language teachers, apart from regular teaching and designing classroom materials, are also obliged to take an active part in evaluating materials. The latter is a process of measuring the worth of learning materials as well as forming critical opinions about how learners are affected by them. Another reason why teaching materials need constant assessment and evaluation is that they are time-constrained. Therefore, in order to determine the value of materials, to check their re-usability, compliance with the teaching standards or programme's goals, as well as to estimate their appropriateness for a particular group of learners, numerous criteria should be established. Nevertheless, in establishing them, it should be remembered that "different areas of evaluation are important to different people, at different times, and for different reasons" (Rea, 1983, p.90). Hence, in this article an attempt will be made to outline some of the theoretical claims that have already been made regarding the importance of materials evaluation, as well as to demonstrate what such a process looks like in practice. At the very outset, I will present my learner-group profile and take a look at the structure of the course book I would like to teach them from. Then, I will concentrate on presenting the learning outcomes of the selected unit, specifying to what degree they are achievable from the existing material. Finally, I will outline some changes to the unit to make it meet the needs and expectations of the learner-group profile.

Let us begin with the class profile. The class concerned consists of fifteen nineteen-year-old Polish males (from a technical secondary school) at an advanced level of English who like reading historical, military and political texts. They come from different backgrounds and having diverse experiences, prefer practical activities in which they can draw on prior knowledge. The students differ in personalities, intelligences and learning styles (mostly visual and auditory learners). They are intrinsically motivated and learn English to be able to communicate fluently and accurately, as well as to prepare for the extended Matura exam (level B1/B2 according to the Council of Europe). Also, the class are fans of British English, which they find 'posh' and refined.

With the class profile now clearly presented, I will now concentrate on the most urgent needs of the learners concerned. Firstly, the students' oral performance in the target language leaves a lot to be desired. Accordingly, the students need to focus on clear and logical presentation of ideas, especially in longer speeches. Also, despite using correct pronunciation, they need to concentrate more on the suprasegmental aspects of speech, that is, stress and intonation which, when defective, sometimes results in misunderstandings, even communication breakdowns. Moreover, the class should work more on becoming confident speakers as they invariably feel insecure and frustrated while speaking. Hence, their speech is replete with long pauses and frequent hesitations, as well as being accompanied by unnatural body inflections, soft voice and stooped posture. Secondly, the students need to practise, both in the spoken and written modes, how to construct coherent and cohesive texts, how to negotiate certain positions and how to express agreement and disagreement, while at the same time practising the language of argument. Thirdly, the students' output indicates problems with emphatic sentences and the perfect aspect of tenses, which should be attended to through purposeful and authentic tasks. Finally, the class need to work on exam strategies and presentation skills in order to enter for the end of school exam in English with confidence and a positive attitude.

Bearing the profile of the learners in mind, *Headway Advanced* appears to be a perfect choice as a coursebook. It consists of 12 units and provides 120 hours of teaching. Furthermore, it is a course for adults who want not only to be fluent in communication, but also accurate in the usage of vocabulary and grammar. To achieve this it offers thorough explanations of lexical and grammatical aspects of English, systematically develops all four language skills and familiarises language learners with socio-cultural facets of the target language. Another reason why this course book is appropriate for this group of learners is the Matura exam, which checks students' knowledge of the target language in all the areas covered in the book. In terms of Maley's (2003, p.9) processes, at least three activity types can be distinguished i.e. *generic* (e.g. reflective or interactive), *techniques* (e.g. repetition or questioning), and *task-types* (e.g. brainstorming and problem solving). Furthermore, another big advantage is different types of task questions. For instance, apart from ordinary display questions that Maley (2003) defines as the ones to which teachers know answers, there are *inference*, *opinion* and *interpretation* questions. Thus, it can be concluded that thanks to the interesting collection of communicative tasks there is

every likelihood that students will become confident and competent users of the target language.

Having briefly presented the class profile, learners' needs and the course book structure, the next step is to develop the criteria on which the unit will be evaluated. Bearing in mind the class profile presented above, the following five criteria taken from Tomlinson seem to be appropriate for further discussion: (1) materials should maximise learning potential by encouraging intellectual, aesthetic and emotional involvement which stimulates both right and left brain activities; (2) materials should provide the learners with opportunities to use the target language to achieve communicative purposes; (3) what is being taught should be perceived by learners as relevant and useful; (4) materials should expose the learners to language in authentic use; and (5) materials should take into account that learners differ in learning styles (1998: 5). All of them are based on cognitive, affective, linguistic and socio-cultural principles, since successful language learning and teaching occurs only when all these perspectives are involved.

With the criteria specified, the stage is now set for the unit evaluation. However, it should be first made clear that the unit was widely and successfully applied in an EFL context in the 1990s. Hence, the criteria I have just selected will be employed to help me to decide, first and foremost, how this unit could be updated or modified for current teaching. In other words, I intend to make the unit material relevant and appropriate for the group of nineteen-year-olds so that it first complies with their needs and interests and second, is enjoyable to learn from. Tomlinson (2003a: 23) refers to this type of evaluation as a "pre-use evaluation", whereas Ellis names it "before-programme evaluation" (1998: 220).

The unit under study, *War and Peace*, adopts an objective attitude to the theme of war. It provides students with a range of activities, including speaking, listening, reading and writing, as well as extensive practice of the systems of English (grammar, vocabulary and phonology). However, to be more precise, the learning outcomes of this unit could be summarised in the following way (see Figure 1).

**By the end of this unit, the students are expected to:**

- be able to discuss the issue of war and peace, including past, present and future events
- be able to accurately apply vocabulary connected with the theme of war and peace
- be able to write a text summary and a description of an event
- be able to produce emphatic sentences
- have practised suprasegmental aspects of speech
- have practised receptive and productive skills

Figure 1. Learning outcomes.

Consequently, all the outcomes clearly reflect the communicative nature of the unit and if they were included in the unit, they would enable learners to plan, implement and assess their classroom experiences.

As can be seen, the evaluation criteria and the unit content most appropriately conform to the communicative approach to language teaching, which emphasises the practice of skills and also introduces learners to language as social action. Hence, three aspects need to be closely analysed so that it is possible to determine whether or not the learning outcomes of the selected unit are achievable, and if so, to what degree. Those three aspects of language learning, language awareness and cultural awareness are all component parts of the modern model of language teaching.

Language learning, to begin with, is perceived as a process of socialisation into a particular discourse community. This being so, the unit concerned should provide students with ample opportunity for meaningful social interaction, specifically to provide comprehensible input, as well as practice in various types of communication, and it successfully does this, engaging students intellectually, aesthetically and emotionally (Tomlinson, 2003b: 162). Further, the application of meaningful language data in the course book highlights the significance of context in interpreting the meaning of texts, whereas a great variety of contextualised oral and written texts provides learners with different language experiences and communicative purposes. The next element requiring close attention in the unit is language awareness, which Scott defines as “explicit knowledge about language and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning (...) and language use.” (1994: 91) This aspect of language learning is of great importance, as learner development depends to a large degree on language awareness, requiring of students cognitive reflections on its nature, structure and functions. As far as the *War and Peace* unit is concerned, it provides comprehensive coverage of both grammatical and lexical systems of

English, thanks to which learners learn how to select proper discourse types, simultaneously becoming competent FL users. Various types of activities also cater for different learning styles, stimulating both right and left brain hemispheres.

The last aspect is cultural awareness which refers to the identification, understanding and appreciation of the culture where the target language is spoken. Of course, this process can be properly stimulated, and thus quickened, when learning is facilitated with culturally rich materials, for example, a variety of relevant and useful text types in course books. For instance, including literature in didactic materials promotes better understanding of the cultural nuances of the target country, for “through literature we can experience that insider view and appreciate traditions and beliefs different from our own” (Turner1999: 214-215). In the unit, elements of culture are represented, among others, by a poem and a musical play, both of which are subsumed in the concept of “big-C culture” (Chastain, 1988: 203) as they deal with the arts, as opposed to day-to-day life.

The micro-evaluation of the unit would not be complete without suggesting some changes to the existing material. Despite the fact that the unit was produced 20 years ago, it successfully meets the class profile and the five criteria selected above.

However, living in the 21st century, being surrounded by different technologies, witnessing issues of war and terrorism on a regular basis, plus following the recent view on the learning/teaching process all call for certain modifications in the unit.

They are discussed below.

Firstly, in order to make this unit more student-friendly and student-informative, I would suggest starting with a learning outcomes box (see Appendix A), whose main role would be to specify what learners are anticipated to know, understand and do at the end of the unit. Thanks to this information, students could not only see that the unit is divided into subsections of intended achievement, but also think about its theme, as well as work systematically towards previously identified targets.

Another modification relates to bringing this unit up to date; the best way to achieve this would be by changing the title from *War and Peace* to *War, Terrorism and Peace*. In consequence, the discussion part would take a new form (see Appendix A). It would be divided into four sections (A to D) where the first two (listening to sound effects and watching film clips) aim at challenging the students' perceptions and attracting their curiosity and attention. The third would include pictures, headlines, an article excerpt and controversial questions for discussion, whereas the

fourth would seek to develop the students' presentation skills for the Matura exam. The new form of the task is vital, since connecting pictures with text enhances learners' text comprehension. Moreover, pictures not only provide non-verbal information and explain the setting, but also localise and personalise the task, frequently introducing cultural/contextual reference. The listening part would be especially useful for the auditory learners, whereas the graphic/pictorial element would help the visual ones, who "learn best from visual displays of information" (Materna, 2007: 51). Thus, the new discussion part could serve as a challenging task through which students' critical thinking and language confidence might be triggered. Subsequently, since one poem has already been included in this unit, *The Responsibility* verse (in the original on p.58) could be removed to prevent task repetition. Instead, I would suggest modifying the three-sentence long writing part by providing students with a concise step-by-step presentation of how to approach descriptive writing (see Appendix B). I believe that a good course book should guide and show students how writing in English should be approached and what aspects should be taken into account so as to be able to successfully produce coherent and cohesive texts.

The final change to be introduced is a self-assessment section which addresses the issue of achieved learning outcomes in the unit concerned. This self-assessment section is extremely important for three reasons. According to Neary (2000: 124), it: (1) helps learners to understand their learning experiences, (2) allows for a great deal of feedback, and (3) develops students' confidence and autonomy. In consequence, in order to enable my students to foster reflection on their learning as well as to help them to see their strengths and weaknesses in this process, I would include a chart as a concluding stage of the unit (see Appendix C).

All in all, it can be concluded that materials evaluation is an inevitable element of teachers' work which informs them about the quality of teaching materials and the adaptations required. When done properly and systematically, it allows, as demonstrated above, for McGrath's (2002: 74) principles such as *localisation*, *personalisation*, *individualisation*, and *modernisation* to be taken into account. Also, it stimulates teacher creativity not only in designing and implementing materials, but also in planning and assessing classroom organisation in general. When neglected or abandoned, on the other hand, it is bound to increase both already huge costs and numerous errors in design work, not to mention the violation of the code of

professional ethics on the part of the teachers. But, would teachers ever think of resorting to the latter?!

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## **Internet resources**

<http://www.merineews.com/article/terrorism-a-nemesis-for-government-andmasses/138811.sht ml>

[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Polish\\_Army\\_soldiers\\_in\\_Afghanistan.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Polish_Army_soldiers_in_Afghanistan.jpg)

<http://www.bant-shirts.com/war-answer-t-shirtBLUE.htm>

[http://www.zazzle.com/religion\\_should\\_be\\_bumper\\_sticker-128288540152781195](http://www.zazzle.com/religion_should_be_bumper_sticker-128288540152781195)

<http://www.un.org/works/sub2.asp?lang=en&s=18>

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/7930995.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/7930995.stm)

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## **Appendices**