

## **Enhancing English Language Learning: Insights and Innovations in ELT Textbook Design**

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### **Abstract**

*English Language Teaching (ELT) textbooks are the main source for teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language (FL). Nevertheless, there is a gap between the related research and the use of ELT textbooks inside classrooms. This study aims to bridge this gap by investigating effective methods for evaluating and developing ELT textbooks. The study has used qualitative research methods. The findings reveal a range of perspectives on the relevance, effectiveness, and cultural suitability of ELT textbooks. Key themes emerged, including the importance of textbooks in meeting learners' needs, the emphasis on grammar and vocabulary, and the need for culturally relevant content. The research uncovers a gap in the use of ELT principles in the design of language textbooks, highlighting issues such as adaptability and communicative effectiveness.*

**Keywords:** *ELT Textbook, Textbook Evaluation, Textbook Development, Textbook Design.*

### **Introduction**

The textbooks and their supplementary materials have an essential role in improving learners' linguistic skills to learners (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2017). The use of textbooks in many world countries helps teachers and learners save time and effort during the teaching and learning process. As a result, research is needed to identify useful methods for evaluating and designing textbooks effectively. (Al-Mousawi, 2020).

The researchers of this study use the words “textbooks” and “materials” interchangeably to refer to the ELT textbooks and their supplementary materials. ELT materials form the fundamental element for teaching the English language (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2017). These materials often dictate the teaching syllabus, influencing not only what is taught but also how it is taught, including the pace and intensity of instruction (Mishan & Timmis, 2015). McGrath (2013) argues that ELT materials do more than regulate content; they also shape the implementation of language education. Each set of materials is based on a specific language teaching approach, which guides its practical application (Richards, 2006); consequently, influencing teaching methodologies for both teachers and learners (Tomlinson, 2010).

The importance of evaluating these materials is widely recognized in the field (Tomlinson, 2013). Effective textbook evaluation is key to successful language learning

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(McGrath, 2016). Tomlinson (2013) advocates for the development of teaching materials as a means to render linguistic theories both useful and practical. This process enables linguists and theorists to express and refine their theories and teaches them how to apply these theories in real-world teaching scenarios.

ELT Textbook development started to gain the attention of writers and researchers in the 1990s (Tomlinson, 2001). It is crucial for effective language learning (Garton & Graves, 2014; McGrath, 2016), and it is a continuous process which can be conducted by writers and teachers (Graves, 1996). Nevertheless, this process is not well estimated by teachers (Richards, 2001). This process can serve a field of study e.g., curriculum design, and a practical aspect e.g., evaluation (Tomlinson, 2013). Furthermore, it is important to bridge the gap between the related research and practice in a systematic and principled approach (Saraceni, 2003; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2004) to help learners learn the language effectively (Graves, 2000).

Despite the gap between the related research and practice (Saraceni, 2003), and the lack of a perfect theory for teaching and learning the language (Cook, 1996), the teachers can utilize their experience and knowledge to evaluate and develop the textbook effectively (Tomlinson (2013)

There are different perspectives about the appropriate teaching methods, (Ur, 1996; Timmis, 2004). However, there is a consensus on certain teaching methods which can help researchers evaluate and develop their language textbooks (Tomlinson (2013). Based on the related literature, Alkhalidi (2011) summarizes the principles of materials development revealing that the ELT materials should:

“have an impact on the learners in the sense that they provoke some emotion in the learners, involve relevant content to the target learners’ needs, include relevant content to the target learners’ interests (wants) which motivates learners to learn the target language effectively, help learners to feel secure and develop their confidence and independence, develop the learners’ awareness of the target language, develop learners’ cultural awareness, assist learners in using the target language for communicative purposes, take into account the different learning styles of learners, reflect the learners’ present and future uses, provide the learners with useful content that encourages them to be engaged in learning the language mentally and/or emotionally, be flexible to allow teachers to adapt the materials to suit their learners’ needs and interests, provide teachers with methodological support to facilitate their job and provide inspiration to them to articulate creative teaching methods or ideas.

(pp. 5-7)

The rationale of the Study

The development of materials is instrumental in aiding teachers to comprehend and implement language learning theories; as a result (Crawford, 2002). Tomlinson (2001) emphasizes the key role of teachers in the selection, evaluation, adaptation, and organization of teaching materials. However, there is a research gap concerning teachers' input in the principles of materials development and the assessment of local teaching materials, particularly in the sphere of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and in specific contexts such as the Jordanian context.

Dat (2003) contends that for the successful development of materials, it is essential for developers to establish a connection with the local environment. This approach aids in enabling learners to articulate their beliefs, feelings, and ideas in a manner that is true to their context. The dearth of theoretical support for crafting such locally tailored materials underlines the significance of this research.

Tomlinson (2001) identifies two key factors motivating linguists to delve into studies on materials development. Firstly, guiding teachers through the process of materials

development enhances their understanding and application of language learning theories. Secondly, in the absence of a perfect coursebook, teachers must possess the necessary skills for evaluating and tailoring materials to meet the specific needs of their learners. McDonough and Shaw (2003) concur with this perspective, highlighting the need to develop practical principles for the effective evaluation and development of teaching materials.

## Methodology

This research utilized qualitative methods for several reasons. First, data were collected in real-world settings, enabling direct engagement with subjects experiencing the issue under study (Creswell, 2009). The analysis primarily employed inductive reasoning, involving a dynamic interplay between emerging themes and the collected data, a method combining both inductive and deductive reasoning. A significant focus was placed on understanding the subjective views, and experiences of participants, aiming to explore their perceptions and interpretations of the situation.

The participants are 20 male and female teachers from Jordan. The teachers willingly participated in interviews. Open-ended questions were developed to elicit the teachers' responses. The questions are related to the relevance of ELT textbooks, their effectiveness, any suggestions for changes, the teachers' preferences about reading texts and activities, the advantages and disadvantages of the teacher's book, and the strong points and weak points of ELT textbooks.

### Data Analysis

Participant responses underwent a thorough analysis to categorize emerging themes. The approach adhered to Creswell's (2009) multi-level methodology, which included organizing and preparing data for analysis, conducting an initial review of all collected data, and then moving into a more detailed analysis. This involved inductive coding, transitioning from specific details to broader themes. The coding process was used to describe the setting, and participants, and to identify categories or themes. The researchers then decided how best to present these themes in the qualitative narrative. Finally, interpretation of the data took place, where the researchers transcribed the interviews, read the data to gain an overall understanding, and then analyzed the data in depth. This involved moving repeatedly between data analysis and interpretation, focusing on both predetermined issues and emergent themes. Throughout the coding process, innovative ideas and insights have emerged.

## Findings and Discussion

This research identified various themes critical to assessing and enhancing language teaching materials, potentially bridging the gap between theoretical research and practical application. The key themes include:

### Relevance of Materials to Learners' Needs

Most teachers believed the materials met learners' needs, especially in vocabulary, grammar, and reading texts. However, opinions on cultural suitability varied. MA found the materials well-aligned with local culture, whereas KL argued they were too narrowly focused and misaligned with the Jordanian market, highlighting differing perceptions of cultural relevance. For example, one teacher expressed his opinion saying:

“The textbook is rich in vocabulary ... I think some of the suggested textbooks relate to students' interests ... especially teenagers or adults.”

Another teacher said:

“I think yes... I think it corresponded with students' needs because this textbook may include many examples about grammar use.”

The materials were designed to meet the learners' needs as perceived by the teachers. Most teachers associated these needs with the development of language skills and aspects.

#### Awareness of Educational Objectives

Some teachers, like SK, were unclear about the broader curriculum goals, suggesting ambiguities in the teaching process. For example, he said:

“The objectives are very narrow and the context does not match our culture... And also the objectives are not linked to our market... especially, there are no interviews, there is no {information} for work or job”

Another teacher said:

“I have objectives for myself... I know something that my objective is to speak English fluently or to use English ... in technology.”

This observation, highlighted by the teacher, presents a connection between the needs of learners and the future demands of Jordan's business market. The teacher critiques that the current educational objectives are overly narrow, suggesting a misalignment with the broader market requirements.

#### Mismatch Between National Goals and Educational Emphasis

Some teachers pointed out a mismatch between Jordan's educational goals, such as promoting fluency for tourism, and the education system's focus on grammatical accuracy. This discrepancy underlines the need for materials that better equip learners for Jordan's specific English requirements, particularly in speaking and listening skills. AL, for example, said

“I think that ... we have a general objective ... because we have a time of tourism ... our student's needs is to be accurate ... because the exams ... concentrate concentrates on grammar ... to master the language in the feeling of accuracy rather than fluency. ... but there is a big gap between the general objective of our country {fluency} per the time we live now ... and the objective of the Ministry of Education”

This observation suggests the potential development of a criterion for the specific needs of national English education. Furthermore, the teachers highlight a discrepancy: the country's objective of 'fluency' and the Jordanian Ministry of Education's focus on 'accuracy' diverge from the learners' primary goal, which is 'passing' the exams.

#### Potential Gender Bias in ELT Materials

Some teachers noticed a potential gender bias, with materials leaning towards topics traditionally appealing to boys, like cars and sports. This observation calls for a more balanced approach to content that engages all learners equally. MA, for example, said

“I think some of topics are more kind of boyish like cars, political issues, and footballers, heroes... not interesting topics for girls... I feel that my (female) students feel bored when we talk about some topics like heroes ... footballers.”

The observation shows that there is a bias towards boys, rather than maintaining a balance between both boys and girls. This insight has significant implications for the evaluation process, offering the researcher a deeper understanding of how to apply and enhance the evaluation.

### Teachers' Perspectives on the Teacher's Book

Teachers universally regarded the teacher's book as a valuable educational resource, offering substantial methodological support. However, opinions varied on its impact on linguistic skills, with some viewing it as beneficial for language development, while others did not find it as helpful. This led to the consideration of whether the teacher's book assists non-native teachers in enhancing their language proficiency. One of the teachers, for example, said:

“I think that the teacher's book is very good, it provides teachers with effective guidance for how to teach um, how to explain the lessons. I think the teacher's book is stronger than the textbook itself.”

Another teacher said:

“How can it (Teacher’s Guide) improve my reading skill? My writing skills... of course, not... but pedagogically may be... I depend on myself to improve my language”.

Concerning the linguistic relevance of the teacher's book, there is a divergence in teachers' perspectives. Some teachers have reported that the teacher's book was instrumental in enhancing their language skills. On the contrary, other teachers expressed that it did not significantly aid their linguistic development, suggesting that not all written materials necessarily contribute to language input. This disparity in feedback highlights the varying impacts of educational resources on language skill acquisition among teachers.

### The Need for Flexibility in Teaching Methods

Some teachers expressed concerns about strict adherence to the teacher's book, highlighting the need for flexible and varied teaching approaches that respect individual differences among students and teachers. AI, for example, said:

“We can't say that there is one method that is suitable for everything... we have differences among our schools ... we have individual differences inside the class so the teacher's book itself gives let us say one way or methods, but these methods can be used in one class, but can't be used in another class, why? Because we have differences...differences among our schools, among our students .... (and) teachers.”

A noteworthy perspective emerged from the responses provided by the teacher, highlighting the presence of individual differences among both students and teachers. In addition, the teacher noted the distinct characteristics of schools, which may vary in aspects such as the quality of teachers, the learners' abilities, or the available facilities. In light of these variations, the need for flexibility and the provision of multiple options in educational strategies becomes apparent.

### The Importance of Grammar and Vocabulary

Teachers and learners alike emphasized the importance of grammar and vocabulary in learning English, viewing these components as essential for successful language acquisition and examination preparation. For example, one of the teachers said:

“First, I like grammar explanations; they are explained in detail; they help the students very much to understand grammar.”

Another participant said:

“I think that grammar and the meanings of vocabulary are the most useful activities because they improve our language, they improve our conversation and composition writing, and the subjects that relate to English.”

Grammar and vocabulary are perceived as the most advantageous aspects of ELT textbooks. This viewpoint may stem from the ease of grammar presentation. The

emphasis on grammar and vocabulary in this context aligns with the teachers' aspirations to adequately equip their students for academic assessments.

#### ELT Materials and Teachers' Preferences

The research suggests that ELT materials often adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, potentially limiting teachers' ability to adapt them to their teaching styles or the specific needs of their students. This finding highlights the necessity for materials that are flexible and accommodating of various pedagogical approaches. One of the teachers said:

“We teach students depending on the material itself to train students to master the language accurately ...many activities inside the material that train students to be accurate rather than to be fluent.”

The analysis of qualitative data provides valuable insights into the teachers' personal preferences, uncovering a new criterion for consideration in textbook evaluation and development. This criterion could be formulated as, "Do the materials accommodate the teachers' methodological preferences?" It is important to clarify that this does not imply strict adherence to the teachers' preferences, but it suggests that the ELT materials should be developed with an informed understanding of these preferences.

#### Cultural Relevance in ELT Materials

There are different perspectives regarding the content. Some participants like the cultural content emphasizing the importance of including culturally relevant content in ELT materials to enhance engagement and facilitate discussions in the learners' cultural context. S, for example, said:

“The reading text is useful and interesting...Because it is a text that presents historical information...First I can express my opinions in two languages Arabic and English when I was asked about history in the English language.”

In ELT materials evaluation, there is a need to include the target learners' culture. Integrating this perspective into the evaluation process can make the process more thorough and culturally sensitive.

### **Conclusion**

This research has revealed a gap between language theories or principles and the use and design of ELT textbooks. Key themes that emerged include the necessity for materials that offer adaptability to teachers, are suitable for communicative purposes, and effectively enhance student confidence and independence. These findings, drawn from practical language theories and criteria suggested by teachers, highlight the critical role of evaluating language materials to facilitate their improvement. As Timmis (2004) emphasized, the input from users, including both teachers and learners, is invaluable in developing practical theories for material development. Moreover, the study advocates for a framework that bridges the gap between theoretical concepts and practical implementation. The suggested principles for developing effective language materials are:

- **Diverse Discourse Samples:** Ensuring materials provide a variety of discourse examples for meaningful and practical language use.
- **Flexibility for Adaptation:** Enabling teachers to adapt materials, facilitated by offering a diverse range of language items and teaching methods.
- **Fostering Creativity:** Designing materials to stimulate creativity in teachers and learners, clearly defined in aims and objectives.
- **Clear Methodological Approach:** Outlining a comprehensive methodology in materials to allow teachers to instruct effectively without restrictive limitations.

- **Consideration of Preferences:** Developing materials with an awareness of the preferences of both teachers and learners.
- **Balanced Skill and Component Exposure:** Offering a balanced approach to various language skills and components, avoiding overemphasis on specific areas.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Incorporating cultural elements in materials to engage and motivate learners.

These principles are intended to ensure that language materials are both practical and effective, meeting the needs and preferences of users.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

This study sheds light on several critical issues affecting the use of English language materials in contexts where English is a FL. It underscores the importance of formulating effective principles, research methodologies, and evaluation criteria that effectively link theoretical foundations with practical application, as Graves (1996) discussed.

Further research is recommended to enhance English language education. Future studies should focus on evaluating and developing materials based on the proposed principles and criteria. Future research must consider the established evaluation criteria, which should include: addressing potential gender biases in materials, developing culturally sensitive evaluation tools, assessing the impact of materials and training programs on raising teachers' awareness of their goals and fostering creative teaching approaches, evaluating the role of the teacher's book in supporting non-native teachers' language skills, ensuring material flexibility to cater to various teaching styles and methods, considering teachers' methodological preferences in the design of materials, taking learners' preferences into account, especially regarding content, preparing learners for specific national needs such as tourism, and facilitating discussions that incorporate learners' own cultures in learning a second language. These considerations are essential for developing materials that are not only effective in teaching English as a FL but also responsive to the unique needs of both teachers and learners.

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