

TEXTBOOK SELECTION AT NON-MAJOR UNIVERSITIES IN HANOI

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1. INTRODUCTION

Textbook selection is one of the most important tasks for language teachers at tertiary level in Vietnam. Since English was introduced across the national curriculum, universities and colleges have freedom to choose ELT textbooks for their students. Language major universities may design their own language teaching materials, which are suitable for their students' language levels and learning purposes. Non-language-major universities very often rely on commercial course books produced by international publishing houses (D. T. Nguyen, 2007).

Taking into account all the characteristics of global ELT textbooks, and the identified issue that textbooks may become the main teaching curriculum for the classroom, university teachers often have the task of selecting which materials to use. When selecting textbooks, language teachers need to keep in mind learners' needs, as global commercial textbooks "may not address the needs and aspirations of the learners in question" (Awasthi, 2006, p. 4). Teachers generally carry out predictive evaluation of the materials available to them to determine which textbooks are the most appropriate to their teaching purposes. Then, once they have used the material, they may feel it is necessary to make a retrospective evaluation of the textbooks to determine whether the textbooks really worked for them (Ellis, 1997, p. 36).

Predictive evaluation enables teachers to acquire useful, accurate, and contextual insights into the overall nature of the

textbooks. Through these evaluations, teachers learn the content of the book, the way it is written, its strengths and weaknesses, and this facilitates the adaptation of their teaching to meet the objectives of the course and learners' needs (Awasthi, 2006; Cunningsworth, 1995). Retrospective evaluation of ELT textbooks has its own special significance. Retrospective evaluation "involves making judgments about the effect of the materials in the people using them" (Tomlinson, 2003b, p. 15). Teachers need to look back at the textbooks and reconsider their selection; they need to consider which activities work for their students and which do not, and what modifications should be made to make these textbooks more effective for future use (Ellis, 1997). Teachers and administrators can also use retrospective evaluation to test the validity of predictive evaluation, and use these data to improve predictive instruments.

Important as it may be, there is little record on how textbooks are selected in tertiary institutions. Thorough evaluation of a complete set of materials seems to be such a daunting task which few teachers have time or willingness to undertake or are willing to do that. This qualitative research looks into the process of selecting English textbooks at some technical universities in Hanoi and explore how predictive and retrospective evaluation are made at these universities.

2. METHODS

In order to collect data for the research, Heads or Vice Heads of the language

faculties from ten participating universities were asked to join structured interviews. The interviewed Heads or Vice Heads were asked questions about the ELT textbooks used at their universities and how these textbooks are selected. All the interviews were conducted in these Heads/ Vice Heads' offices. The universities were coded from U1 to U10.

3. RESULTS

EFL textbooks at the participating universities were subjected to a selection process. These universities followed similar procedures in evaluating and selecting their textbooks. The procedures have been divided into two stages: predictive and retrospective evaluation.

3.1. Predictive evaluation

Most Heads admitted that the process of textbook choice at their university was subjective. None of the participating universities carried out any systematic selection of textbooks. Nor did they conduct any trials before choosing their current textbooks. The process in most universities (n=8) was for language faculties to review potential available textbooks in groups. Each group discussed the pros and cons of their chosen textbooks based on the course objectives. In addition, some universities consulted others. The faculties then met to discuss each group's recommendations before making the final decision. In two other universities, the English faculties' managing board studied available textbooks and selected a range of suggested textbooks first to be reviewed by faculties. Then these recommended textbooks were presented to the whole faculties. Over several meetings, the faculties reached a final decision regarding which textbooks were chosen.

U8 consulted their University's Department of Training, who was responsible for academic quality, for the objectives, framework and requirements of the course. U8's English Faculty worked with the

Department of Training to develop criteria for their potential textbooks. These potential textbooks were studied thoroughly before they were recommended in faculty meetings. A new textbook was only chosen once there was a complete agreement across the English faculties.

Most Heads agreed that as university language teachers may teach English in multiple institutions, they may have used or known about other textbooks in the market. Their experience in using these textbooks may save them time and assist them when evaluating new textbooks.

3.2. Retrospective evaluation

After a new textbook has been introduced into a program, it may be reevaluated for applicability and appropriateness. At these ten universities, textbook evaluation was carried out after a semester or after a year. U1's teachers had annual meetings and discussed the appropriateness or inappropriateness of each section in the textbook. They did not use questionnaires but only through teachers' recommendations. They encouraged their teachers to research the new teaching curriculum so that if there were too many problems, we would be able to change or adapt it in time.

U3 carried out yearly retrospective evaluation. Their teachers recorded unsuitable or inappropriate things in the books and shared these with colleagues to adapt the textbook over time. Teachers exchanged ideas regularly in order to make timely adjustments to conduct more effective lessons. Yearly textbook retrospective evaluation at U9 and U10 was carried out without any official evaluation process. Teachers reported their suggestions and discussed these in yearly meetings.

U2, U4, U5 had meetings among teachers to evaluate textbooks every semester. However, these retrospective evaluations were neither official nor systematic. Teachers reported unsuitable sections in the books in accordance with the syllabus. FH4 felt that

these semester evaluations were not enough. In order to provide timely feedback, they used other means of communication, such as Facebook, to exchange ideas. They observed each other's classes and had discussions on which parts of the book were suitable and which needed to be left out.

4. SUMMARY

The process of selecting textbooks included predictive evaluation and retrospective evaluation; However, these evaluations were not based on any systematic trialing. Although all participating universities carried out faculty-led retrospective evaluations on a yearly or semester basis, few consulted students in these processes. Some universities took students' opinion into account in evaluating textbooks. However, they felt that they could not possibly implement students' recommendations because of time and financial constraints. Instead, they used students' exam results as a basis to modify their teaching and materials accordingly.

All cases considered, there is no perfect one-size-fit-all recipe for choosing and adopting a textbook. I recommend that language administrators undertake a more systematic textbook selection process. They could consider their needs and their students' needs, the course objectives, the course requirements, students' psyche, and students' social backgrounds and language level.

Language education administrators could undertake careful predictive evaluation and set out a number of important criteria to consider when selecting a textbook. The list of criteria is related to diverse aspects representing a broad domain for evaluation (El-Dakhs, 2011). One of the first criteria is the target audience of the textbook, and thus the proficiency level targeted in the textbook. Another important criterion is the textbook content and the authenticity of this textbook content. Next are the language skills that assist students in achieving their learning targets. Pedagogy is a key aspect, as among

various teaching methods, the good use of a textbook helps learners achieve their aims with "maximum interest and motivation", as well as encouraging learning autonomy (El-Dakhs, 2011, p. 5). Other criteria that need to be taken into consideration include educational psychology, physical appearance, sociolinguistic and pragmatic factors, and supplementary packages (El-Dakhs, 2011).

In addition, administrators could apply flexible measurements to the use of these textbooks, employing timely adjustment and adaption if necessary. If a chosen textbook is found to be inappropriate in content or language level for students, it is recommended that they take necessary acts to change or adapt teaching materials.

Administrators could also undertake more systematic retrospective evaluations. These evaluations may not only be based on students' exam results, but also take into consideration teachers and students' feedback.

5. TÀI LIỆU THAM KHẢO

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