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Materials evaluation

Brief lecture notes. First published 28 November 2009

It is common enough in ESP that teachers will have to choose their own textbook. All teachers can benefit - even the more experienced ones - by taking explicit steps to compare and evaluate the textbooks objectively, so that the textbook and the use of the textbook is the best match to the needs of the students. Subjective feelings should only be a guide - by establishing a list of criteria these feelings can be confirmed or shown to be wrong. In addition, I am assuming that normally the decision to use a textbook will involve discussion with other colleagues. It is far easier to discuss materials selection when objective criteria are established and agreed.

A. MATERIALS EVALUATION

1. Discuss

What attracts you to a book? It is likely to be a mixture of reasons. eg

- a. cover is attractive
- b. persuasive blurb
- c. list of contents matches what you want
- d. book review
- e. level seems right
- f. material is user-friendly
- g. good teachers notes and answer key
- h. a colleague recommends it or has used it
- i. the right size
- j. it is available
- k. quality of the copying

2. How do you evaluate? (Hutchinson & Waters 1987 chapter 9)

- a. Evaluation is basically a matching process: matching needs to available solutions. Ultimately the decision is subjective.
- b. It helps to know what you are looking for, and your priorities
- c. It helps to have a checklist
 - 1) list the features
 - 2) give priority ratings to the features
- d. It helps if two or more people do the work.
- e. Actively compare how two or more books deal with a language point/skill/topic.
- f. Distinguish between:
 - 1) global appraisal.. overall approach and content
 - 2) detailed evaluation, of one unit of a book.

3. Characteristics of good material

- a. Provide a stimulus to learning -- interesting, enjoyable, content at the right level
- b. Provide a path through the learning maze. Clear, coherent structure, with variety.
- c. Consciously reflect a view of learning and language
- d. Stretches teachers to use different techniques
- e. Provide models of correct and appropriate language use. But, models in perspective.
Language is a means to an end for ESP learners.

B. ADOPT, ADAPT, OR WRITE

1. The easiest is to take an existing course
 - a. lazy way: teach without modification
 - b. adapt
2. You will probably want to add new material, new exercises, new units, new topics
3. Writing from scratch requires considerable experience, and time, and is usually inferior to what is already published.

C. MATERIALS DESIGN

See (Hutchinson & Waters 1987 chapter 10)

1. Why do many ESP teachers design their own materials?

- a. To tailor a course to the requirements of the group
- b. Non availability of materials
- c. Poor quality of materials that do exist

2. Materials design is a last resort

- a. materials design is a lot of time and is best done by experienced teachers.
 - b. there is a lot of common ground between learners of apparently different subject specialisms.
- => Are the learners' needs significantly different from those of other groups in your institution
- c. consider choosing one course and supplementing/adapting
 - d. consider using 2-3 courses selectively.