Evaluation of English Teaching and Learning Materials in Terms of Learner-centeredness

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Abstract
This paper discusses learner-centered approaches and evaluation in English language teaching and learning materials design. Based on the researches in this field, a framework is developed for the evaluation of learner-centered components contained in the materials. Thereafter, we apply the criteria to the assessment of two major English textbooks College English (1991) and Experiencing English (2002) for teachers and book designers’ reference. The results reflect the trend in the domain of College English materials development in China.

Key words: Learner - centeredness; materials evaluation; Experiencing English; College English

Introduction
Generally speaking, learner-centered materials are designed to cater for both the learners’ external and psychological needs, i.e., a) the need to develop the basic language skills for effective communication, which would enable the learners to operate effectively in the target language in their future professional or academic life; b) the need for personality development, which is important to personal success in one’s future career and life; and c) the need for fostering independent language learning. (Cunningsworth 1984, 1995; Prabhu 1985; Tudor 1996).

Learner centeredness is gaining growing recognitions in the area of education. In particular, the fostering of students’ independence is regarded as extremely necessary for “this progression from dependence on the teacher and on the course book towards growing confidence and independence is crucial to the individual success of learners and to the success of the teaching programs” (Cunningsworth 1995: 16) Therefore, it would be meaningful to find out to what degree an English textbook is “learner-centered”, thus providing significant information for materials evaluation, selection and adaptation. This study seeks to develop a practical checklist for those purposes.

Development of the Evaluation Framework
There are two researchers, Ellis & Sinclair (1989: 2), who stressed that materials should cover learner-training activities which “help learners to consider the factors that affect their learning and discover the learning strategies that suit them best so that they may become more effective learners and take on more responsibility for their own learning.” They later developed a checklist (Ellis & Sinclair 1992: 214-222) for the evaluation of textbooks in terms of their potential for learner training in the form of questions. The questions concern the domains of integration of language learning activities or topics, learner choices, self-assessment and monitoring, and helpful reference materials respectively. However, the criteria seem to be inadequate, as in the literature some other learner-centered approaches listed as below can be included in language teaching and learning materials.
First, group work activity is regarded as a learner-centered approach encouraging learning development as compared with teacher-fronted, whole class instruction (Edge 1992).

Second, materials that contain consciousness-raising or discovery activities, in which learners are required to attend to linguistic features of the input that they are exposed to and make comparisons between the current state of their developing linguistic system and the target language system (Schmidt & Frota 1986). Such activities require and facilitate the learners’ self-investment, which significantly contributes to language learning for “the learners seem to profit most if they invest interest, effort and attention in the learning activity” (Tomlinson 1998: 11).

Third, materials containing humanistic activities and involving students as complex human beings and exploit their affective and intellectual resources as fully as possible for personal development (Stervick 1990). Such activities can be dialogues, interviews, preference ranking, personal charts and tables, activities using the imagination, etc. (Nunan 1991: 241) with the attempt to involve the students’ ideas, feelings, opinions and personal experiences.

Last but not least, the application of modern computer technology such as multimedia software and website information as students’ learning sources, which can offer structured active learning for individual students and to extend learning beyond the classroom and construct a flexible, personalized, and interactive learning environment.

Therefore, it is felt necessary to take into account the ideas suggested by those researchers and establish a checklist for the evaluation of Learner-centered components contained in an English book. The criteria can be presented in the form of evaluating questions as below:

<table>
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<td>1 Does the book help develop the communication skills the target learner need effectively?</td>
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<td>2 Does the book encourage co-operative learning?</td>
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<td>3 Does the book provide consciousness-raising activities for the discovery of linguistic features?</td>
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<td>4 Does the book attempt to personalize the learning process by getting learners to relate topics and texts to their own lives, views, and feelings?</td>
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<td>5 Does the book contain a variety of activities for learners to use different learning strategies?</td>
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<td>6 Does the book offer choices to cater for learners’ differences?</td>
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<td>8 Does the book provide helpful referential materials (e.g. any vocabulary lists, tape transcripts, answer keys, indexes, etc.?)</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 Does the book include the use of computer and internet technology to support independent learning?</td>
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Application of the Criteria in Materials Evaluation
To illustrate the use of the criteria, we hereafter apply it to the assessment of a traditional college English textbook – *College English* (CE, published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press in 1991), and a most recent one *Experiencing English XP* (EE, issued by Higher Education Press in 2002), both are designed primarily for Non-English major students at the tertiary level. In the data CE is matched against the data obtained from EE, to allow for an exploration of differences and to facilitate the evaluation process. The evaluation also helps capture an inside view of to what degree that EE satisfies the claim of being learner-centered.

*Q: 1 Does the book help develop the communication skills the target learner need effectively?*
The book gives priority to learners’ vocabulary study and reading skill training. It contains listening materials in the form of testing. The most common exercises are multiple choices, cloze and True or False statements, also a bit speaking in terms of story retelling or class discussion, and translating exercises at sentence level without any theoretical guidance. There are only quite a few real communication tasks contained in the book.

EE: Definitely yes. EE is obviously skill oriented and productive skill dominated. Each unit of the book include four sections of “listening and speaking, read and explore, write and produce”, which are given equally weight in design. The book emphasizes the training of effective speaking and writing strategies for authentic communication. A typical example is Exercise 4 “Talk About it” to Passage B, Unit 2 “Jobs and Careers”. It requires the students to make a speech on the topic: “You can find a dream job via Internet”, with the words, phrases and sentence patterns that are likely to be used offered for students reference. The writing section usually includes two parts: General Writing and Practical Writing. The former focuses on a particular use of grammar (e.g. Unreal Condition Clauses in Unit 2) to ensure the accuracy in students’ language use, whereas the latter adopts modeling approach and provide a sample for the learners to follow with the focus on the training of text development. The ultimate aim of the book is to help students achieve communicative purposes in the real world.

**Q: 2 Does the book attempt to personalize the learning process by getting learners to relate topics and texts to their own lives, views, and feelings?**

CE: Partially yes. Such personalized materials are confined to a couple of questions asked in the oral speaking section of each lesson.

EE: Yes. The book is closely relevant to the target learners. Questions involve the student’s ideas, and personal experiences are asked. For example, again in Unit 1, “Think About It” section before Passage B: “1. Who has supported you on your road to college? 2. Do you feel encouraged by the title: ‘Students, You Represent Our Best Hope’? 3. How did you start your college journey?” Writing tasks that will be applied in real life are also provided. A good case in point is the Practical Writing: Application for Admission. “When you are applying to study abroad, one of the important things is to fill out the application for admission form.”

**Q: 3 Does the book encourages co-operative learning effectively?**

CE: Not obviously. No explicit instructions or guidance on co-operative learning can be found throughout the book.

EE: Partially yes. The materials encourage co-operative learning mainly during the speaking phase. For instance, in Communicative Two (Unit 1, Book 2), students are instructed to “Work with a peer and take turns to start the conversation.” Another instance is the pre-reading questions of Passage A, “1. What do you know about Oxford University? Share what you know with each other.” But the book contains little instructions of encouraging any further co-operative learning in the reading and writing sections.

**Q: 4 Does the book provide consciousness-raising activities for the discovery of linguistic features?**

CE: No. There are few consciousness-raising activities involved in the book.

EE: No. Self-discovery activities as a technique for grammar learning fail to be found in the book, either.

**Q: 5 Does the book contain a variety of activities for learners to use different learning strategies?**

CE: A little yes. Most of the exercises are controlled or guided practice activities in the form of cloze, multiple choice, gap-filling, matching and transformation activities. They focus on the decoding of bits of the language. As
suggested by Brian Tomlinson (1998), activities contained in CE in the forms mentioned above mainly cater for learners who are analytical, visual and independent, but not those who are imaginative, aural and kinesthetic.

**EE: Yes.** In addition to some vocabulary and grammar exercises in the conventional mode which aim to practice specific linguistic features of the target language, there are also speaking and writing activities involving the use of the target languages in order to achieve situational purposes. Such productive activities can involve such high level learning strategies as imaging, connecting, interpreting, evaluating, etc.

**Q: 6 Does the book encourage learners’ self-assessment and monitoring of their learning process?**

**CE: Partially yes.** The book only provides two test papers with keys provided in the back of the book for self assessment.

**EE: Yes.** In addition to three simulated tests designed for the learners’ self-assessment of what they have learnt. The regular “goal checking” task requires students to rate how well they have achieved the goals at the beginning and then at the end of the unit. This monitoring of students’ learning process can make them achieve a sense of accomplishment and thus help engage their attention and develop confidence in their language learning.

**Q: 7 Does the book provide helpful referential materials (e.g. any vocabulary lists, tape transcripts, answer keys, indexes, etc.?)**

**CE: A little yes.** Each unit of the book contains related cultural information, notes to the text, and a vocabulary list for students’ information.

**EE: Definitely yes.** Each unit of the book contains related cultural information (as in the section of Culture Salon), notes to the reading text, explanations to the words and difficult expressions, translation of the passages, keys to the exercises and a glossary which are sufficient for students’ independent learning. There are also many pictures illustrating or highlighting what the topic is about.

**Q: 8 Does the book include the use of computer and internet technology to support independent learning?**

**CE: No.** The book was issued in the year of 1991 when the computers were seldom used in the field of English education in China.

**EE: Yes.** Multimedia technology of sound recording and comparison is employed in all the *Listen and Talk* section. Another striking feature of the book is that in each unit, some related websites relating to the topic are provided for students to explore and do further investigation for themselves. For instance, in Unit 2 - *Job and Careers* (Book 2), three most popular employment websites (i.e. CareerBuilder, American’s Job Bank and Yahoo Careers) are recommended in the section of *Related Websites*, which can expose the students to the authentic language use in the real world.

Therefore, the evaluating scores can be summarized as the following:

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4. Does the book attempt to personalize the learning process by getting learners to relate topics and texts to their own lives, views, and feelings?

5. Does the book contain a variety of activities for learners to use different learning strategies?

6. Does the book encourage learners’ self-assessment and monitoring of their learning process?

7. Does the book provide helpful referential materials (e.g. any vocabulary lists, tape transcripts, answer keys, indexes, etc.?)

8. Does the book include the use of computer and internet technology to support independent learning?

(The scale ranges from ★ : a little yes to ★★★★★ : completely yes.)

The research findings indicate that, in comparison, CE is text-centered, teacher-centered and paper-based, with focus on language form and language practice rather than students themselves, while EE is skill-oriented, topic-based, and definitely much more learner-centered. It pays much more emphasis on the developing of students’ productive language skills with the purpose to achieve authentic commutation and to encourage peer cooperation in tasks. Many questions asked in the book are humanistic and affective. Plus, EE uses modern computer technology as a powerful and effective tool for addressing listening and speaking skills while the on-line information sourcing can enhance learner-centeredness to promote autonomy in the learning process. To conclude, the current materials have offered considerable innovations in content and methods. The results reflect the course materials authors’ awareness of latest developments in the domain of FL methodology, which lead to the apparent tendency that exists with regard to the learner-centered approaches the current materials adopt.

**Conclusion**

The criteria concerning ‘learner-centered’ approaches developed above, though by no means definitive and complete, provides practical guidelines for the assessment of any ELT course books, especially those for adults or more advanced level students. It can also be used as a checklist for materials designers who hope that their books will be “learner-centered” and achieve the goal of truly promoting learner autonomy. The limitation with the study is that it is mainly based on the perception on the outsider evaluators. If the analysis in the study is combined with interviews with the teacher and student users, a more objective and useful profile can result.

**References**


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