DEVELOPING A TEACHING MATERIAL EVALUATION CHECKLIST FOR A MALAYSIAN ARMED FORCES (MAF) ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT: *The aim of this paper is to present the author's experience in developing a teaching material evaluation checklist for a Malaysian Armed Forces English language program. The checklist was adapted from one which was devised by an expert. The original checklist was selected because it covered the relevant key areas in teaching material evaluation, which is the link between the teaching material to program aims and objectives, the language skills, exercises, activities, and practical concerns. In adopting the checklist, some modifications were made. The original checklist had four sections, in which exercises and activities were combined into one of the sections. This was separated into two sections to distinguish the two elements. Certain other modifications were also made; some items were either removed or adjusted accordingly, and some items were added. The response format was adjusted from a "yes/no" option to a rating scale of 1 to 5. Accordingly, the items were modified from question form to statement form. As an addition to the checklist, the last section, which consisted of three open-ended questions, was included to obtain respondents' comments beyond the response limitations of the closed-ended items. As such, the adapted checklist consisted of six sections.*

Keywords: evaluation, language program, teaching material, coursebook, checklist

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the author's experience in developing a teaching material evaluation checklist as part of a comprehensive evaluation of a Malaysian Armed Forces English language program. It is felt that this experience is worth sharing with the language teaching fraternity as teaching materials are an essential component of any language program [1,2]. The development of a practical and effective procedure for the evaluation of English language teaching material has many significant purposes. Among them are as a guide in the selection of teaching materials for particular programs and courses, to gauge the effectiveness of certain teaching materials and for the purpose of the continuous improvement of teaching materials [3]. Here the author mentions the English Language program concerned, the teaching material that was evaluated, and the development of the evaluation checklist which was adapted from the work of a leading expert [4] and modified accordingly based on the course objectives, the coursebook contents and the format of its items. Relevant literature by leading experts was also explored in depth in the process to shed light on the important characteristics of teaching materials.

2. THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROGRAM

Malaysian Armed Forces General English Upper Intermediate Course (Officers) is a six-week course conducted at the Malaysian Army Management Institute. The course objectives are as follows [5]:

a. To develop students' communicative skills in all four areas of reading, listening, speaking and writing.
b. To enable the students to use correct grammar, structures, and functions of the language.

The course deals with the vocational competency of an officer to communicate effectively using the English language receptive and productive skills in a range of MAF English language contexts in order to support MAF missions in operational and non-operational contexts and in training contexts on and off-shore. It focuses on the macro skills of reading, listening, speaking and writing required in many different military contexts, and the underpinning knowledge of basic English grammar [5].

3. THE TEACHING MATERIAL

The "Coursebook MAF Upper-Intermediate English" was used as one of the teaching materials designed to meet the objectives of the Course. As such, its contents were tailored to provide the relevant skills, exercises, and activities and include the military context. The summarised contents of the coursebook are shown in Table 1. It was developed by the Education Directorate at the Malaysian Armed Forces Headquarters. Authentic texts were obtained from various public domain sources including Malaysian and Australian newspapers, military publications and a wide range of international texts and graphics published on the Internet [6]. This coursebook was evaluated as it was developed and approved by the Malaysian Armed Forces Headquarters and as such, it is within their jurisdiction to make changes for its improvement. Therefore, the outcomes of the evaluation of this material will be able to contribute to effective change as well as be put into professional practice [7] in terms of enhancing and enriching the development of locally produced English Language Teaching (ELT) materials to benefit the MAF.

Table 1 Summarised contents of the coursebook

Topic/Sub-topic	Skills	Exercises	Activities
MAF Values	• Reading • Speaking • Writing	Grammar (vocabulary, nouns, adjectives)	Discussion
Bomb Threats	• Reading • Writing • Speaking • Listening	Grammar (adjectives)	Roleplay
Rules, Regulations & Technology in the MAF	• Reading • Writing • Speaking	Reading comprehension	Public speaking
Writing	Writing	Essay writing	-

Essays

MAF Future	• Speaking • Writing	Essay writing	Discussion
Extra Practice Exercises	• Reading • Listening • Writing	• Grammar • Reading comprehension • Listening exercises • Writing a letter/e-mail • Asking questions • Filling out forms	• Discussion • Pair work • Roleplay
Vocabulary tests	-	Progressive vocabulary tests	

Teaching materials can be defined as "things that are needed in order to do a particular activity" [8]; the activity, in this case, is teaching. Teaching materials are key components in language programs [9, 10]. Teaching materials can enhance teaching and learning by providing much of the language input learners receive and the language practice that occurs in a classroom [10, 11, 12]. [4] said that a textbook (a type of teaching material) "can serve different purposes for teachers: as a core resource, as a source of the supplemental material, as an inspiration for classroom activities, even as the curriculum itself." It comes as no surprise that the market of teaching material and resources has grown tremendously due to the worldwide demand for English and the fast-growing importance of the role of teaching materials [13, 14, 15]. [14] also said that books nowadays have more material, more extensive accompanying material (such as videotapes, CDs or cassettes), and are of better quality than their predecessors. Like good teachers, good learning material can motivate learners.

3.1 The Roles of Teaching Materials

Like teachers and learners, teaching materials also have many important roles in a language classroom. According to [16], the primary role of teaching materials in a communicative syllabus is to promote communicative language usage. [17], cited in [10] summarised the roles of teaching materials as follows:

a. As a resource for presentation materials (spoken and written).
b. As a source of activities for learner practice and communicative interaction.
c. As a reference source for learners on grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and so on.
d. As a syllabus (where they reflect learning objectives that have already been determined).
e. As support for less experienced teachers who have yet to gain confidence.

3.2 Types of Teaching Materials

[7] talked about authentic and created materials. Authentic materials (referred to as "realia" by [16]), he said, are "texts, photographs, video selections, and other

teaching resources that were not specifically prepared for pedagogical purposes." [18] referred to authentic materials as "materials such as newspaper articles, brochures, train tickets, letters, advertisements, recordings of the news, airport announcements, etc. which were originally used in real situations and were not designed for use in language teaching." Authentic materials are used to expose learners to language in real-life use [18]. Created materials include textbooks and other specially developed instructional materials [10]. Both authentic material and created materials have their own advantages and disadvantages as shown in Table 2 [10, 19, 20].

Table 2 Advantages and disadvantages of authentic material and created material

Authentic materials	
Advantages:	Disadvantages:
a. Authentic materials are intrinsically more interesting and motivating than created materials as they relate closely to the interests of learners.	a. Authentic materials may contain difficult and unneeded vocabulary items that are beyond learners' abilities and may distract teachers and learners.
b. Authentic materials provide authentic cultural information on the target culture.	b. Authentic materials may not always correspond accurately to the course syllabus.
c. Authentic materials provide exposure to the real-life language.	c. Authentic materials may not systematically cover teaching items as they are usually in bits and pieces.
d. Authentic materials relate more closely to learners' needs with regards to language use in real-life.	d. The preparation and development of authentic materials is time-consuming and can be a burden for teachers.
e. Authentic materials support a more creative approach to teaching where teachers can utilize them in developing activities and tasks that suit their teaching styles and the learning styles of the learners	e. Authentic materials can become dated as they are taken from real-life contexts which change over time.

Created materials	
Advantages:	Disadvantages:
a. Created materials can be motivating for learners as they are often attractively designed.	a. Created materials contain a limited variety of learning items.
b. Created materials are built around a graded syllabus and provide systematic coverage of teaching items.	b. Created materials may not provide authentic cultural information about the target culture.
c. Created materials are ready-made. They do not require teachers to prepare them.	c. Created materials do not provide exposure to real-life language
	d. Created materials may not relate closely to learners' needs with regards to real-life language use.

As both authentic materials and created materials have their advantages and limitations, both of them are used in many language programs where they can complement each other. [10] said that the distinction between both types of materials is becoming blurred as created materials today are beginning to incorporate more authentic real-world sources.

[16] mentioned three types of teaching materials in a communicative syllabus; (1) text-based materials

(primarily textbooks), (2) task-based materials, and (3) realia. A textbook is the most common type of learning material. It is also usually the main course material. It is defined as "a book that teaches a particular subject and that is used especially in schools and colleges" [8]. Many language programs use their course-prescribed textbooks. There are a number of purposes a textbook can serve. It can serve as a core resource, as a source of the supplemental material, as an inspiration for classroom activities, even as the curriculum itself [4]. Just like teachers and learners, textbooks are part and parcel of language programs. Textbooks are used because the contents are usually organized systematically to complement the course syllabus.

3.3 Characteristics of Good Teaching Materials
Good language programs are highly selective in selecting appropriate teaching materials. Experts have developed various criteria for materials evaluation and selection [4, 14, 18]. [18] mentioned the following general principles for materials evaluation:
   a. The teaching materials must relate to program aims and objectives.
   b. Relevancy of the language skills requirements to learners' needs after completing their program. The materials must be effective in helping learners acquire the necessary language skills beyond the language classroom.
   c. The textbook must be structured to meet learners' needs. Good teaching materials breakdown the contents into smaller chunks called learning units that relate to each other and progressively build up learners' language proficiency.
   d. The textbook must relate the language, the learning process, and the learner. It must allow students to practice English in a systematic and comprehensive way so that new language items can be assimilated by the learner.

[14] mentioned that effective instructional materials take into account the following factors (see Table 3):

Table 3 Factors to be considered in producing effective instructional   materials

Teacher factors	Learner factors	Contextual factors
Language proficiency.	Learning style preferences.	School culture.
Training and experience.	Language learning needs.	Classroom conditions.
Cultural background.	Interests.	Class size.
Preferred teaching style	Motivations.	Availability of teaching resources where the materials will be used.

[4], meanwhile, listed her criteria in evaluating or selecting an ESL learning textbook:
   a. The textbook must match the program curriculum in terms of program goals and course objectives.

   b. Relevancy of the language skills requirements to the program.
   c. The quality of exercises in the textbook:
      i. Exercises must contribute to learners' language acquisition by giving the learners opportunities to practice and extend their language skills.
      ii. Exercises must be balanced in their format, containing both controlled and free practice.
      iii. Exercises must be progressive as the learners move through the textbook. Exercises should build on and reinforce what learners have already learned by progressing from simple to more complex and demanding levels.
      iv. Exercises must be varied and challenging. Learners will be motivated and interested if they see something new or different in each chapter.
   d. The textbook must be practical. It must be readily available and reasonable prices.

Teachers, learners, and teaching materials form the core of a language program. There is a direct link between them [21]. The relationship between them is important in successful teaching and learning. Teachers impart knowledge to aid learners' learning and to motivate them. Good teaching materials, meanwhile, can boost appropriate communication and interaction between teachers and learners and among learners to provide effective language practice in all the four language skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing). It must be remembered that teaching materials also teach, and they teach both teachers and learners. Teaching materials can train or deskill teachers, depending on how good or bad they are [10]. Therefore, both teachers and teaching materials should ideally combine to complement each other to teach and motivate learners effectively within the program context.

3.4 Devising the Teaching Material Evaluation Checklist
A checklist was selected as the procedure for the teaching material evaluation in this study. This is because checklists are a useful tool for the evaluation of teaching material [4, 7, 18, 21]. According to [4], the use of a checklist in evaluating a textbook "can lead to a more systematic and thorough examination of potential textbooks and to enhanced outcomes for learners, instructors, and administrators". [7], meanwhile said that checklists "are most helpful in saving teachers from 'reinventing the wheel' when evaluating materials". In this sense, checklists are ready-made, systematic, objective, simple, time-saving, and can be tailored or adapted according to program issues.
The checklist used in this study (Table 4) was adapted from [4] which consisted of four constructs, which are program and course, skills, exercises and activities, and, practical concerns. The main areas covered by the checklist were relevant to the contents of the coursebook and its link to the program objectives.

This instrument was selected based on four main considerations. First, the contents of the coursebook were aligned to the program objectives. Second, the contents of the coursebook consisted of four language skills, exercises, and related activities. Third, it is short simple, easily understood and time-saving. Four, the instrument also covered a section on practical concerns, which is an area that merits evaluation. Some of the central issues with regards to the quality of teaching material is summarized as follows:

a. The link between teaching materials to program aims and objectives.

b. The quality and relevance of the language skills component.

c. The quality, balance variety, and progression of exercises.

d. The variety, progression, and relevance of activities.

e. Practical concerns in terms of availability and cost.

The coursebook evaluation form which was used consisted of six sections. The checklist was made up of Sections 1 to 5, which covered the following areas; program and course, skills, exercises, activities, and practical concerns. The original checklist [4] had only four sections, where exercises and activities were combined into one section. The two sections were separated to distinguish the two elements. Certain other modifications were also made; some items were either removed or adjusted accordingly, and some items were added. Section 6, which consisted of three open-ended questions, was added at the end of the checklist to obtain respondents' comments beyond the response limitations of the closed-ended items [23].

This instrument was piloted on several English language teachers at a different institution and was finally completed by the teachers at the Army Management Institute, where the evaluation was done. The rationale for this is that the teachers are the people who are most familiar and experienced in using the coursebook in a particular program and their judgments of it (the coursebook) would be of very high accuracy, validity, and reliability.

The response format was adjusted from a "yes/no" option to a rating scale of 1 to 5 (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = undecided, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree). The purpose of this adjustment was to obtain a grading for each item to indicate the level of intensity or quality to reflect the nature of evaluation. Accordingly, the items were modified from question form to statement form. There was a total of 21 items as follows:

a. Section 1 – Program and course

This section consisted of five items (items 1 to 5). These items were related to the compatibility to the program in terms of program objectives, level, contents, and culture.

b. Section 2 – Skills

This section consisted of four items (items 6 to 9). These items were related to the relevance and quality of the language skills presented in the coursebook.

c. Section 3 – Exercises

This section consisted of three items (items 10 to 12). These items were related to the quality, balance, and structure of the exercises presented in the coursebook.

d. Section 4 – Activities

This section consisted of three items (items 13 to 15). These items were related to the quality, structure, and variety of the activities presented in the coursebook.

e. Section 5 – Practical Concerns

This section consisted of three items (items 16 to 18). These items were related to the cost and availability of the coursebook.

f. Section 6 – Additional information

This section consisted of three open-ended questions (items 19 to 21). These open-ended questions were included at the end of the checklist to elicit more information from the teacher beyond the structured response limits of the checklist. The questions were to obtain information from the teacher regarding what his/her opinions were on the strengths and weaknesses of the coursebook and how the coursebook could be improved.

Table 4 The checklist used for this study
COURSEBOOK EVALUATION FORM

Circle or check each item in the column that most clearly represents your evaluation: (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = undecided, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree)

SECTION 1 – PROGRAM AND COURSE						
1.	The coursebook supports the objectives of the program.	1	2	3	4	5
2.	A sufficient number of the course objectives are addressed by the coursebook.	1	2	3	4	5
3.	This coursebook was written for learners of this level.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	The coursebook reflects learners' preferences in terms of content organization.	1	2	3	4	5
5.	The coursebook is sensitive to the cultural background of the students.	1	2	3	4	5
SECTION 2 – SKILLS						
6.	The skills presented in the coursebook are relevant to the course.	1	2	3	4	5
7.	The coursebook provides learners with adequate guidance as they are acquiring these skills.	1	2	3	4	5
8.	The skills that are presented in the coursebook include a wide range of cognitive skills.	1	2	3	4	5
9.	The skills that are presented in the coursebook are relevant to the students' needs after they complete the program.	1	2	3	4	5
SECTION 3 – EXERCISES						
10.	The exercises in the coursebook promote learners' language development.	1	2	3	4	5
11.	There is a balance between controlled and free exercises.	1	2	3	4	5
12.	The exercises represent a progression from simple to more complex.	1	2	3	4	5
SECTION 4 – ACTIVITIES						
13.	The activities in the coursebook promote learners' language development.	1	2	3	4	5
14.	The activities represent a progression from simple to more complex.	1	2	3	4	5
15.	There is variety in the activities.	1	2	3	4	5
SECTION 5 – PRACTICAL CONCERNS						
16.	The coursebook is available.	1	2	3	4	5
17.	The coursebook can be obtained in a timely manner.	1	2	3	4	5
18.	The coursebook is cost-effective.	1	2	3	4	5
SECTION 6 – ADDITIONAL INFORMATION						
19. In your opinion, what are the strengths of the coursebook?						
20. In your opinion, what are the weaknesses of the coursebook?						
21. In your opinion, how can the coursebook be improved?						

4. CONCLUSION

The evaluation of teaching materials must not be taken lightly by ELT practitioners, managers, publishers as well as the language teaching fraternity as it affects the selection and continuous improvement of the materials. This paper presents the author's reflection on devising a teaching material evaluation checklist in the evaluation of a coursebook designed to support an English language program in the Malaysian Armed Forces. The experience has shown that a checklist for this purpose provided many advantages. A checklist can be comprehensively and systematically structured to cover all the main characteristics of what makes a good teaching material. In addition, it is simple, practical and time-saving. Therefore, a checklist is a highly useful and practical teaching material evaluation tool as suggested by many leading experts.

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