

Developing A Framework for Distance Materials Evaluation

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Abstract - It is generally accepted that in distance training programs, materials have a crucial role in teaching and learning. Materials should harmonize with learners' current and changing perceptions of their needs. Only then can it be estimated how well the materials serve the learners as the route towards target language knowledge and language capabilities which will equip them to meet their present and future language needs. In India the Education commission (1964-66) recommended opening supplementary channels for clearing the backlog of untrained teachers through summer courses, vacation courses, part time courses and correspondence courses. During sixties another channel, i.e. correspondence course was introduced. The correspondence-cum-contact mode was considered suitable especially for teachers of the secondary school stage. In order to institutionalize this mode of teacher training, several institutes started different programs through the correspondence-cum-contact mode. Various correspondence courses in use now and have been well-received by both the learners and teachers. However, since any set of materials have to be periodically revised and updated, a need has been felt among the users to revise and modify them by using a suitable framework.

Index Terms - Distance material, Material evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

The value of evaluation, especially with relation to distance materials, has been variously discussed. Calder (1994) and Thorpe (1988) have suggested several important reasons for evaluation in Distance Education. They say evaluation helps distance educators to gather information about learners and their needs and desires. According to Sanders, (2000) successful programme development cannot occur without evaluation because in material evaluation, problem areas are recognized to achieve the proposed objectives/ goals of a program more effectively. Also evaluation helps evaluators to recognize the strengths, weaknesses and effectiveness

of the materials, and take necessary decisions to support, revise, modify or discontinue with the materials in question. As Tuckman (1988: 252) defines it evaluation is 'the means of determining whether a programme is meeting its goals, that is, whether the measures/ outcomes for a given set of instructional inputs match the intended or specified outcomes'. Nunan, (1988:185) adds that, "Evaluation assists us in deciding whether a course needs to be modified or altered in any way so that objectives may be achieved more effectively. If certain learners are not achieving the goals and objectives set for a course, it is necessary to determine why this is so... evaluation, then, is not simply a process of obtaining information; it is also a decision making process". Tomlinson (2003: 15) gives a similar definition of materials evaluation, "Materials evaluation is the process which involves measuring the value of a set of learning materials. It involves making judgments about the effect of the materials on the people who are using them". Sheldon (1988: 245, in Chambers 1997) notes, 'materials evaluation is fundamentally a rule-of-thumb activity and that no formula, grid or system will provide a definite yardstick', it does seem useful to provide 'some model for hard-pressed teachers / course planners that will be brief, practical to use and comprehensive in its coverage of criteria' (McDonough and Shaw 1993: 53). The above definitions suggest that materials evaluation is a complex process involving a number of factors and can be most effective when a set of well-defined framework is used for the assessment.

FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATION

Materials evaluation is the process of measuring the value of a set of materials and making judgments about its effect. In order to be objective there is a need to base it on a system or framework or a set of principles

which are developed carefully. Teachers generally develop their theories by reflecting on their practice in classroom and construct the criteria for evaluation. Some of the theories/ principles are stated below:

- Language learners succeed best if learning is a positive, relaxed and enjoyable experience.
- Language teachers tend to teach most successfully if they enjoy their role and if they can gain some enjoyment themselves from the materials they are using.
- Each learner is different from all the others in a class in terms of his or her personality, motivation, attitude, aptitude, prior experience, interests, needs, wants and preferred learning style.
- Each learner varies from day to day in terms of motivation, attitude, mood, perceived needs and wants, enthusiasm and energy.
- Successful language learning in a classroom depends on the generation and maintenance of high level of energy.
- The teacher is responsible for the initial generation of energy in a lesson; good materials can then maintain and even increase that energy.
- The most important thing that learning materials have to do is to help the learner to connect the learning experience in the classroom to their own life outside the course.
- The most important result that learning materials can achieve is to engage the emotions of the learners. Laughter, joy, excitement, sorrow and anger can promote learning.

These principles form the underlying basis for developing a set of well-defined framework for materials evaluation. In ELT context, there are no definite frameworks for evaluating materials. Framework used in evaluating textbooks may not be suitable in other contexts without considerable modification. Brian Tomlinson's work in the area of materials evaluation is extensive. He uses the following framework/ criteria for the assessment of learning materials (Tomlinson 2003) they are:

- To what extent are the materials related to the wants of the learners?
- To what extent do the materials help the learners to achieve connections with their own lives?

- To what extent are the materials likely to stimulate emotional engagement?
- To what extent are the materials likely to promote visualization?

According to Tomlinson (2003) the following are the principles for the development of materials for language teaching.

- Materials should help the learner to develop cultural awareness and sensitivity (Byram and Fleming, 1998; Tomlinson, 2000b).
- Materials should reflect the reality of language use.
- Materials should help learners to learn in ways similar to the circumstances in which they will have to use the language.
- Materials should help to create readiness to learn.
- Materials should achieve affective engagement (Tomlinson, 1998a).

The researcher has been used and modified ideas from different checklists to evolve a set of framework for analysis of distance education materials in general.

GENERAL FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATION

- Do the materials cater for the development of language skills that would enable them to operate effectively in their future academic or professional life?
- Do they give learners plenty of opportunities to make choice which suit their linguistic level, their preferred learning style, their level of involvement in the text and the time available to them?
- Do the materials exploit the learners' prior knowledge and experience and provide opportunities for further development?
- Do the materials offer opportunities for cooperative learning, through pair and group work activities and information exchange tasks?
- Do the materials cater for different teaching styles and personalities?
- Do the materials offer the teachers scope for adaptation and localization?
- Do the modules reflect the insights and findings from current theory and research on second language acquisition?

- Do the materials provide a rich, varied and comprehensible input in order to facilitate informal acquisition as well as conscious attention to linguistic and pragmatic features of the texts?
- Do the activities relate to learner interests and real-life tasks?
- Are the materials relevant/suitable/appropriate to the learners' cultural context and sensitive to their values and beliefs?
- Do the materials allow for flexible use of tasks/texts/activities, permitting them to be exploited or modified as required by local circumstances? Or is it too rigid in format, structure and approach?
- To what extent has it realized its stated objectives? Is there advice about how to supplement the materials, or to present the lessons in different ways?
- Do the activities encourage learner autonomy?

CHECKLIST FOR THE MODULE ON SPEAKING SKILLS

- Does the module focus on production?
- Does it contain sufficient exercises on transcription, stress and intonation?
- Does the speech organs and speech sounds represented diagrammatically or not?
- Is there clear distinction between R.P and GIE?
- Does it clearly explain place of articulation and manner of articulation with examples?
- Does the module contain consonant and vowel diagram?
- Does it contain review questions with answers?
- Is material for spoken English (dialogues, role-plays, etc) well designed to equip learners for real-life interactions?
- Is there any video and audio material support for developing spoken English?

CHECKLIST FOR THE MODULE ON PERSPECTIVE ON LANGUAGE TEACHING

- Does the module discuss the learner factors and learning environment in detail?
- Does the module provide a general discussion of language teaching issues?

- Does the module introduce the teachers to current approaches in English Language Teaching?
- Does the module clearly state student and teacher roles?
- Does the module give adequate practice in preparing lesson plans and teaching materials?
- Does the module give sufficient practice in creating test items and setting question papers?
- Does the module discuss classroom management strategies?
- Are the tasks and activities creative?
- Is any distinction made between learning and acquisition?
- What is the attitude towards the use of students' mother tongue?
- Does the module present some basic theories of first and second language acquisition?

CHECKLIST FOR READING SKILLS

- Are reading passages and associated activities suitable for learners' levels, interests, etc? Is there sufficient reading material?
- Are learners given sufficient examples to learn top-down techniques for reading comprehension?
- Does the module give adequate examples for teaching learners to preview, skim, scan, summarize and find the main idea?
- Do the exercises promote critical thinking on the text?
- Is the text intrinsically interesting?
- Does the module give techniques for activating learner's background knowledge before reading the text?
- Is there emphasis on reading for pleasure and for intellectual satisfaction?
- How long are the texts? Do they encourage intensive/extensive reading?
- How authentic are the texts?
- Is the subject matter appropriate (interesting, challenging, topical, varied, culturally acceptable, contemporary)?
- Does the module discuss the types of reading?
- Does it give sufficient practice on reading comprehension and reading sub skills?

CHECKLIST FOR WRITING SKILLS

- Are writing activities suitable in terms of amount of guidance/control, degree of accuracy, organization of longer pieces of writing (e.g. paragraphing) and use of appropriate styles?
- Is attention given to the language resources specific to the written form, such as punctuation, spelling, layout, etc?
- How does the material handle controlled writing, guided writing and free or semi-free writing?
- Is there appropriate progression and variety of tasks?
- Are learners encouraged to review and edit their written work?
- Does the module teach how to organize ideas and thoughts prior to writing?
- Does the module provide a variety of instances for text production?
- Does it discuss letter writing, report writing and resume preparation etc, which are important for secondary school learners?

CHECKLIST FOR GRAMMAR

- What are the grammar items included in the module? Do they correspond to teachers' needs?
- Are new structures presented along with language functions?
- Does the module contain functional grammar items?
- Are there any easy tips to learn and teach grammar?
- Are activities and games adequate?
- Does the module follow the deductive method or inductive method?
- Does the module contain review questions and answers?
- Does the module discuss the principles and approaches to teaching grammar?
- Are the grammar items related to the syllabus at high school level?

CHECKLIST FOR VOCABULARY

- Is there any principled basis for selection of vocabulary?

- Is there any distinction between active and passive vocabulary, and classroom vocabulary?
- Is vocabulary learning material included in its own right?
- Are the new vocabulary words presented in a variety of ways?

CHECKLIST FOR LISTENING SKILLS

- Do the modules have sufficient listening activities/tasks?
- Are there any specific listening passages are given?
- Do the textbooks listening passages help the learners develop their comprehension skills?
- Are the listening passages accompanied by background information, questions and activities?
- Are there any recorded materials for listening?
- Are the cassettes/ CDs for pronunciation practice?

CHECKLIST FOR STUDY SKILLS

- Does the module make the teachers efficient and self-reliant learners?
- Does the material discuss and identify areas of learner need?
- Do they cover these aspects: reflection on study techniques, advice on study skills/ development, reference skills, other?
- Are the topics sophisticated enough in content, yet within the learners' language level?
- How are the non verbal items represented in the module?

CHECKLIST FOR LITERATURE

- Are the objectives of including a module in literature stated clearly?
- Does the module explain teaching of poetry, drama, short fiction and short story in detail?
- Does the module discuss how to interpret a short story, drama and a poem?
- Does it contain sufficient exercises?
- Does it introduce the principle of developing language through literature?
- Does the module give an introduction on how to teach literature?

- Does the module use authentic material at an appropriate level?

CONCLUSION

In this paper, researcher presented the discussion on the salient features and principles of distance mode materials and review of existing framework for materials evaluation to derive a framework for evaluating materials. This study is limited in scope and focus in that it examines a distance training programme from one perspective. The efficacy of the materials depends on the teacher's use of the knowledge acquired through training in teaching. The researcher, however, could present a sample framework to evaluate the existing materials.

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