EVALUATING ELT MATERIALS

1. EVALUATING ELT MATERIALS

Tomlinson (2003): Materials evaluation is a procedure that involves measuring the value (or potential value) of a set of learning materials.

Materials are chosen:
- Writing materials can be very time consuming.
- Teachers are under pressure to select a book that will become the textbook for years to come.
- Materials are the core of a program ; the most visible representation of what happens in the classroom.
- In contexts where the assimilation of stimulating, authentic materials can be difficult

Materials are passed on to the teacher:
- materials may be limiting → need to resort to adapting materials to suit the needs of particular context
- be interested in evaluation as a useful process → gives insight into the organizational principles of the materials & helps to keep up with developments in the field
- influence decisions about whole textbooks if they are part of a Ministry of Education team
- be invited to make suggestions as part of a process of materials selection

1.1. The External Evaluation

Examining the organization of the materials as stated explicitly by the publisher by looking at:
- the blurb
- the introduction and table of contents

From the blurb and the introduction:
- intended audience
- proficiency level
- context (e.g., general English, ESP, etc.)
- how the language has been presented and organized into teachable units
- author's views on language and methodology

From table of contents:
- information about the organization of the materials,
- information about vocabulary, skills to be covered, interactive digital materials

1.2. The Internal Evaluation

the extent to which the aforementioned factors in the external evaluation stage match up with the organization of the materials as stated by the author

1.3. The Overall Evaluation

- **usability factor** → materials could be integrated into a particular syllabus as core or supplementary
- **generalizability factor** → one can generalize the core learned material to the other similar contexts of use, e.g., a passage for ESP
- **adaptability factor** → parts can be added/ extracted/used in another context/modified for local circumstances
- **flexibility factor** → the sequencing and grading is rigid, that is, can the materials be entered at different points or used in different ways?

1.4. Predictive vs. Retrospective Evaluation (Ellis, 1997)

Predictive evaluation → determine which materials are best suited to their purposes. Carried out:
- rely on evaluations carried out by 'expert' reviewers
- carry out predictive evaluations (checklists and guidelines)

Retrospective evaluation → once materials have been used, it may be good to undertake a further evaluation to
- determine whether it is worthwhile using the materials again,
- which activities 'work' and which do not,
- how to modify the materials to make them more effective,
- test the validity of a predictive evaluation, and improve them, if required

Retrospective evaluation:

    Impressionistic → during the course they assess whether particular activities work

    Empirical → teachers use students' journals and end-of-course questionnaires ; time-consuming

        macro-evaluation → calls for an overall assessment of whether an entire set of materials has worked

        micro-evaluation → the teacher selects one particular teaching task and submits this to a detailed empirical evaluation
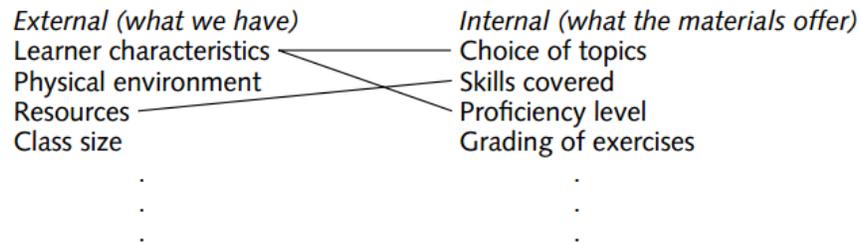
2. ADAPTING MATERIALS

Adaptation is subsequent to, and dependent on, adoption

Adoption is concerned with whole course books, adaptation concerns parts

Teachers are more likely to be involved

To adapt materials = try to bring together individual elements (external and internal) → the principle of congruence

External (what we have)	Internal (what the materials offer)
Learner characteristics	Choice of topics
Physical environment	Skills covered
Resources	Proficiency level
Class size	Grading of exercises
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.	.
.	.

Tomlinson and Masuhara point out that adapting materials can not only contribute to the learners' learning but also to the teachers' enjoyment of teaching.

2.1. Principles and Procedures

Environment may necessitate a number of changes:

- **Personalizing** → increasing the relevance of content in relation to learners' interests and their academic, educational or professional needs
- **Individualizing** → addressing the learning styles both of individuals and of the members of a class working closely together.
- **Localizing** → taking into account the international geography of English language teaching
- **Modernizing** → not all materials show familiarity with aspects of current English usage, sometimes to the point of being not only out of date or misleading but even incorrect

2.2.1. Adding

Materials are supplemented by putting more into them.
Add in this simple, quantitative way → **extending**: to supply more of the same within the methodological framework of the original materials:

- The materials contain practice in the pronunciation of minimal pairs (bit/bet, hat/hate, ship/chip) but not enough examples of the difficulties for learners with a particular L1, e.g., Japanese and Arabic speakers

Bringing about a qualitative as well as a quantitative change → **expanding/exploiting**: to add to the methodology by moving outside it:

- The only pronunciation practice in the materials is on individual sounds and minimal pairs. However, our students need to be intelligible, and intelligibility entails more than articulating a vowel or a consonant correctly, e.g. work on sentence stress and rhythm & on the related phenomenon of 'weak' and 'strong' forms in English.

2.2.2. Deleting

Reducing the length of material → **subtracting**:

- Our pronunciation exercises on minimal pairs contain too much general material. Since our students all have the same mother tongue and do not make certain errors, many of the exercises are inappropriate. Arabic speakers, for example, will be unlikely to have much difficulty with the l/r distinction.

Greater changes → **abridging**:

- The materials contain a discussion section at the end of each unit. However, our learners are not really proficient enough to tackle this adequately, since they have learnt the language structures but not fluency in their use. The syllabus and its subsequent examination does not leave room for this kind of training.

2.2.3. Modifying

An internal change in the *approach*, *nature* or *focus* of a piece of material
Some of the linguistic content needs modification, e.g., communicative material, culturally loaded → **rewriting**:

- End-of-text comprehension questions. Some of these are more like a test, where students can answer by 'lifting' the information straight from the text. These questions can be modified so that students have to interpret what they have read or heard, or relate different sections of the text to each other.

Restructuring → applies to classroom management

- Sometimes a written language explanation designed to be read and studied can be made more meaningful if it is turned into an interactive exercise where all students participate. For instance, it is a straightforward matter to ask learners to practice certain verb structures in pairs (say the present perfect: 'Have you been to/done X?'; or a conditional: 'What would you do if . . . ?'), and it can be made more authentic by inviting students to refer to topics of direct interest to themselves.

2.2.4. Simplifying

One type of modification, namely, a 'rewriting' activity, e.g., many elements of a language course can be simplified, including the instructions and explanations that accompany exercises

2.2.5. Reordering

Putting the parts of a coursebook in a different order:

- The length of teaching program may be too short for the coursebook to be worked through from beginning to end. It is likely in this case that the language needs of the students will determine the sequence in which the material will be taken. There is little point in working systematically through a textbook if key aspects of grammar, vocabulary or communicative function are never reached. For instance, if the learners are adults due to study in the target language environment, it will be necessary to have covered several aspects of the tense system and to have introduced socially appropriate functions and frequently used vocabulary.