

Evaluative review in materials development

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Abstract

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) professionals know that initial efforts to produce or adapt materials generally require evaluative review and revision. A review process that solicits feedback from teacher and student users is critical because materials writers often find it difficult to envision the problems others may have with their materials. Despite the importance of such feedback, the EAP literature provides few insights on how to engage in evaluative review to inform material revisions. To fill this gap, we describe the evaluative review process that we developed as part of an interdisciplinary textbook development project. The case study setting is described, to situate the discussion, and includes an explanation of the scope of the project, the nature of the instructional approach, and our rationale for materials assessment. We then describe instruments developed to gather feedback from three participants groups, explain feedback-collection and data-analysis procedures, and provide sample data to demonstrate the breadth, scope, and usefulness of our evaluative review. We conclude with implications for EAP practitioners, with an emphasis on implications that are pertinent to the overall materials evaluation process and to the design of feedback-collection instruments and procedures.

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1. Introduction

English for Academic Purposes professionals often engage in materials development activities because commercial textbooks and other instructional materials fall short in addressing their students' specific language learning needs. Those who have engaged in such efforts know that initial attempts to create or adapt materials generally require an evaluative review and revision process. Whether writing materials for one's own students or a broader target audience, it is assumed that materials will be adjusted over time in response to evolving student populations, new research findings, current trends in the field, and external mandates (e.g., from school administrators, governmental offices, or publishers). Materials that undergo this evaluative review and revision process are likely to serve target student and teacher audiences more effectively than materials that do not (see [Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998](#); cf. [Bell & Gower, 1998](#)).

Relatively little information, however, is currently available about review and revision processes that follow directly from large-scale materials development projects.¹ To fill this gap, we present the evaluative review process that we followed as part of an interdisciplinary textbook development project. We begin with a brief review of the literature, a depiction of the case study setting, and a description of the multidimensional materials development process that we have engaged in. We conclude with implications for EAP professionals who are engaged in both small- and larger-scale materials development projects and who might benefit from having a series of formal steps to follow during the materials evaluation and revision process.

2. Evaluation: an integral part of the materials development process

Many discussions of evaluation in language-teaching settings center on macro-evaluation, that is, curriculum and program-wide evaluation (e.g., [Brown, 1995a, b](#); [Johnson, 1989](#); [Richards, 2001](#); cf. [Ellis, 1998](#)). The model of curriculum design, development, and evaluation set forth by [Brown \(1995a, b, 2003\)](#) illustrates the inextricable links between regularly conducted formative evaluation and the five principal components of his curriculum development framework: needs analysis; the specification of goals and objectives; test development and improvement; materials adoption, adaptation, and development; and teaching and teacher support. [Richards \(2001\)](#) also highlights the essential role of evaluation in his multi-step model of curriculum development involving, much like Brown, needs analysis, situation analysis, specification of goals and learning outcomes, course planning and syllabus design, and teaching. In both Brown's and Richards' models of curriculum development, the ongoing process of formative evaluation serves important functions, including a monitoring of the effectiveness of materials for the practical purposes of materials revision and improvement (e.g., [Byrd, 1995](#); [Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001a](#); [Jordan, 1997](#)). When materials evaluation activities are followed by proactive steps that bring about improvements in current and future practices ([Brown, 1995b](#); [Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998](#)), materials are more likely to achieve their "true purpose, that is, to help learners to learn effectively" ([Jordan, 1997, p. 138](#)).

¹Discussions of large-scale materials and curriculum development and evaluation projects were more common in the 1970s and 1980s, in now hard-to-find British Council ELT Documents (e.g., [British Council, 1980](#)).

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