

How to Evaluate Teaching Materials, Coursebooks

There are two elements in the process of learning and teaching and they are the learner and the teacher. The atmosphere and the relationship between these two is more than important. Good teachers never stop searching for materials that can help them to achieve the goals of teaching and to improve the atmosphere, to strengthen the motivation of the pupils. A good textbook can be of great help, and so can be other materials that can be products of either teacher's or learner's creativity.

The first material used is, of course, a coursebook. With the vast range of different titles offered by different publishing houses for different levels nowadays it is not an easy task for the teacher to choose the right title for the right group of learners. Let's have a look at the criteria for coursebook evaluation:

Possible areas for consideration	Possible questions for coursebook analysis
Price and availability	Not all students can afford to buy an expensive textbook of foreign origin. Even if they invest the money, the coursebook may not be an ideal one and needs to be completed by some extra materials. The whole package consists not only of the student's book, but there are usually other supplementary parts: a teacher's book, workbook, audio-cassette or CD, even video-cassette. Quite a large sum of money is needed. How much will the student have to pay, and how much the teacher?
Add-ons and extras	Apart from a textbook and workbook the publisher usually offers some extra supplementary materials. Either the flash-cards or the pictures, maps, posters. There may be websites devoted to the book with suitable exercises and some optional materials. Also the discussion pages may appear. Are they easily available? Is it worth the value (time and money)?
Layout and design	Is the book attractive and challenging for the particular level of students? Are there pictures, colours? Is the workbook just black and white (not very attractive in the era of colour TV and PC). Do I as a teacher like the design of the book? Does it look like cheap commerce?
Instructions	Instructions appear mainly before each exercise. The teacher and the learner will also be interested in the instructions explaining grammar, pronunciation or vocabulary and their use. Are the instructions in English or in Czech? Are they clear and brief? Will students understand without teacher's help?
Methodology	Do the methods respect the age and the level of my students? Is there a balance between accuracy and fluency exercises, between study and activation? Do the authors respect the natural approach towards language acquisition or do they just teach?
Syllabus	Does the book contain the topics of my students' interest? Is there an expected logical sequence of topics? Do the units cover the expected amount of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation? Does the coursebook build in a feeling of progress?
Language skills	Are all skills in the coursebook covered in balance? Are there challenging activities offered? How many open-ended and close-ended tasks? How many writing as a means and writing as an end exercises? Do the texts offer natural spoken English? Is there chance enough to study and

	activate?
Topics	Topics are interdependent with the syllabus. Is there a variety of topics that are adequate to the level and interest of my students? Do the topics suit their age? Are they challenging enough? Do the topics integrate other subjects, too?
Cultural appropriacy	Are the texts in the coursebook plus the exercises appropriate for the learning of culture? Are there any multicultural items? Is the coursebook unprejudiced in the way it deals with different customs, ethnicities, races and sexes? Does the cultural view in the book enrich my students' worldview?
Teacher's guide	The teacher's book should be a counsellor and the guide for the teacher. Does it have all the answers that teachers and students need? Will the book help me to answer my students' curious questions? Does it provide differentiated activities for a heterogeneous class with slow and fast students of roughly different levels? Does it explain things clearly? Will the book help me with my lesson and syllabus planning?

(The table was adapted from Harmer: How to Teach English, Longman 2007)

An ideal coursebook does not exist. It will always be the teachers who can adapt the materials, add and replace exercises according to the group of students they are teaching. The teachers should make decisions about which coursebook to use. The decision is based on analysis (see the points mentioned in the table), piloting, consultation and gathering of opinions from students and colleagues. Unfortunately the reality in Czech schools is different. The teacher can hardly ever feel free to choose the suitable coursebook. It has already been chosen before, money has been invested and the book with an obligatory "doložka ministerstva školství" was bought years ago. Now the school is short of money and just new workbooks can be bought. Of course they are workbooks belonging to the same old textbook. Therefore the importance of choosing and bringing other additional materials into the teaching process must be highlighted. Not all the materials are expensive. Some may even be free of charge. The criteria of evaluation with the additional materials are roughly the same as in the table above. For the materials see the chapter Supplementary Materials.