

Making an Inventory of the Resources Provided by a Textbook Required for Use in a Course

by Patricia Byrd

from

A Module on the Teaching of Modern Languages

published by the Center for Applied Linguistics

[Introduction](#) | [Creating a Content Inventory](#) | [Creating an Activities Inventory](#)

[Understanding the Sequencing and the Format of the Text](#) | [Conclusion](#)

[Table 1: Inventory of Language-Oriented Content of a Chapter](#)

[Table 2: Inventory of Topics and Other Non-Linguistic Content in a Chapter](#)

[Table 3: An Inventory of Activities in a Textbook Chapter](#)

[Table 4: Inventory of Potential Uses of Exercises](#)

[Table 5: Inventory of Materials Addressed to or Intended for the Teacher in the Complete Textbook](#)

[References](#)

Introduction

Using a required textbook that has been selected by someone else is a frequent experience for teachers, especially when first joining a program but also in situations where textbook selection is carried out by a committee or by an administrator. The following guidelines have been developed to provide guidance for a teacher in developing plans for a course in which a required textbook must be used. Other guides have been developed to help teachers in the process of evaluating texts and materials (i.e., Skiero 1991). Such guides are valuable in the early part of the process of text selection and use, a task which involves comparative evaluation of various possibilities for text content and organization. Evaluative questions are essential in the initial selection of texts and in making decisions about continuing to use a text. Evaluative guidelines can, however, point in unproductive directions when used in analyzing a required text in the limited time generally available to a teacher before beginning a new course. In the days--and sometimes only hours--before walking into a classroom to use a textbook, a teacher needs to focus on the resources that are available and on plans for turning that script into a class that is productive and satisfying for the teacher as well as for the students.

Creativity can be exercised by a teacher in many different aspects of the teaching process. Creation of materials is only one of the many interesting challenges for a teacher. A useful metaphor for the classroom pictures the interaction of students and teacher as a dramatic presentation: the teacher takes the roles of director, producer, and actor while the students are primarily actors but can have other responsibilities for the unfolding action. The metaphor is especially helpful in clarifying the relationship of the teachers and students to textbook

materials. The text is a script that needs interpretation and selection before it can come to life. As in the making of films and in the theater, creativity is not limited to the writing of the script, nor are all of the participants expected to be effective writers of the materials upon which the production is based.

Textbook authors are generally classroom teachers who have been thoughtful about providing resources and guidance for other teachers to use. Teachers should remember that texts are planned with their needs in mind, too; teachers as well as students are the audience for textbooks. Because we have been trained to be judges of materials in the selection process, it is sometimes difficult to let loose of judgmental attitudes and language. A first step can be to re-label the task of analyzing a textbook at this point in the process. "Evaluation" is the judgmental process in which decisions are made about liking or disliking, choosing or rejecting a text. "Inventorying" is the later task of learning in detail the resources of content and activities that are provided in the assigned text.

Answering questions such as the following, a teacher can develop a descriptive overview of a text that can be a resource for the rest of the term.

1. What is in this book? What resources does the book provide?
2. How does the book organize those resources?

[TOP](#)

Creating a Content Inventory

Second language textbooks have two basic strands of content: (1) One strand has to do with the language being taught (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, etc.) and (2) another strand has to do with the ideas and information presented in the readings, examples, illustrations, and activities. Many texts also include a third strand having to do with communication strategies or types (apologizing, introducing, questioning, etc.). Yet other texts will include a fourth strand having to do with development of particular skills needed by the students in other arenas (academic skills, survival skills, and so forth). Textbooks are usually conceived of by their authors as holistic units--as "books" for "courses."

Thus, effective use of a text depends on recognition of the existence of these strands and the ways in which they have been woven together. [Table 1](#) illustrates how a linguistic inventory might be organized: (1) the linguistic areas, (2) the questions to guide the inventorying of the linguistic materials, and (3) questions to inventory the teacher's knowledge of those areas. An inventory of topical content could be developed using a format such as that in [Table 2](#): for each

chapter or subdivision, the inventory provides a list of the topics that will be covered during the term. Similar tables should be developed for other content material provided by the text.

[TOP](#)

Creating an Activities Inventory

By inventorying the sets of exercises given in the text, a teacher can make better decisions about which to use and about when to use them. Few textbooks are designed so that all of the materials in them are to be used in a particular term. The author is expecting the teacher to make informed decisions about which materials to use with particular groups of students. While the following is based on commonly recommended systems, the emphasis has been changed away from making evaluative judgments to awareness of the range of choices available for immediate use in the lessons planned for this particular academic term. [Table 3](#) shows how an inventory of the activities in a textbook chapter might be organized--looking at the choices that teachers have for working with the content of a course. [Table 4](#) approaches the the selection of activities from an organizational perspective. This inventory provides the teacher with information on activities that can be used for a variety of teaching purposes, in or out of class, in various organizational patterns, and appealing to various learner types.

[TOP](#)

Understanding the Sequencing and the Format of the Text

As was mentioned earlier, textbooks are written for the teacher as well as for the student. An inventory approach can clarify which parts of the text are addressed to the teacher and need to be given special attention by the teacher. At the same time, such an analysis can reveal those parts of the text that appear to be addressed to students but are in fact intended for the teacher. For example, it is conventional to address instructions to the student but in reality information about how to do an activity is meant for the teacher. Thus, instructions can seem to be more linguistically complicated than the activity. The textbook author is expecting the teacher to interpret the instructions in ways that make them understandable for students. [Table 5](#) can be used to find those parts of the text that are intended as practical help for the teacher.

[TOP](#)

Conclusion

In addition to information provided by the textbook itself, another resource in learning about a

text will be the other teachers who have used it before and who have participated in the selection process. Often these colleagues can share copies of syllabi and lesson plans to show how they have worked with the text. The program's administrators are additional resources in learning about a text's values for the program and the ways in which it fits the overall goals of the program. Using the information gathered from these sources along with the syllabus for the course, a teacher can make initial plans for the term that will be modified by the needs of the students in the class as well as by growth in familiarity with the resources provided by the text and by greater understanding of the purposes of the course and of the overall program.

The completed inventory will reveal areas of the text that the teacher might choose to supplement with other materials. That is, the inventory can be used as the basis for a plan for choosing additional materials to complement the resources already available in the text. For example, if the text has a variety of pair work for practice of communication, the teacher does not need to provide additional such materials. That same text might not include as much work as the teacher would like for assessment of the students' linguistic knowledge. Swales (1980) noted that some ESP teachers and programs were developing materials locally that did not seem much different from or better than the materials already available in published textbooks. He noted that so much energy was given to the creation of materials that not enough time and energy were left over to think about the most effective ways in which to use those materials. The textbook inventory is intended to help teachers avoid this waste of time, energy, and resources. With detailed knowledge of what is already available in the text, a teacher can be more efficient in using time to develop additional materials. As importantly, the teacher can have more time for planning creative ways to implement the materials.

It might very well be that initial negative attitudes that some teachers experience toward a new textbook derive from feelings that they have about other aspects of their teaching: fears caused by being in a new situation can be projected onto the textbook or dissatisfaction about not having been part of the selection process can lead to the rejection of a book. When experiencing such feelings, teachers should be careful about problems that can result from telling students that they do not like the book. Negative statements from a teacher undermine the students' confidence not just in the text but in the course and in the teacher, too. This nonjudgmental inventorying has been developed to provide teachers with a helpful approach to use in taking a clear look at what is really going on in a required text and in making a descriptive analysis of the text to use in planning and carrying out a course that will be useful and pleasant for the students and for themselves.

[TOP](#)

Table 1

Inventory of Language-Oriented Content of Chapter _____

What grammar or vocabulary or reading or writing is being taught?

Language Area	List of Content: What items are presented? Is there an emphasis on anything in particular?	Self-Knowledge Questions: Is there anything here that I'm not sure about? How can I learn more ASAP?
Grammar		
Sounds and or pronunciation patterns		
Reading skills		
Writing skills		
Vocabulary		
Other Topics		

[TOP Return to Discussion of Table 1](#)

Table 2

Inventory of Topics and Other Non-Linguistic Content in Chapter _____

What topics are presented and how can I use that content?

Topics or Themes	Questions about Content: Be sure to make notes on the location of the topic including page numbers. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What topics are introduced?• What ideas and/or information is presented?• Do these recur in other places in the book?• Do any themes tie any of the topics together into sub-units?	Self-Knowledge Questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do I need to know anything else to deal with these topics effectively?• Where can I get that information ASAP?
Topic #1		
Topic #2		
Topic #3		
Topic #4		
Topic #5		
Topic #6		
Topic #7		
Topic #8		
Topic #9		
Topic #10		
Topic #11		
Topic #12		

[TOP Return to Discussion of Table 2](#)

Table 3**Inventory of Activities in Chapter _____**

How can I use the activities for basic teaching purposes--to introduce, practice, communicate, assess?

Purpose of the Activity	Location of the Activity: Note page number and activity number	Notes on uses: in class? homework? individual? small group?
Introduction of content		
Practice		
Use of Content for Communicative Purposes		
Assessment of Knowledge or Skill		

[TOP](#) [Return to Discussion of Table 3](#)

[TOP](#) [Return to Discussion of Table 4](#)

Table 5
Inventory of Materials
Addressed to or Intended for the Teacher

What information and support is provided for the teacher?

<p>Preface or Information for the Instructor</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Is there one?● What information does the author provide about use of the book?● What organizational pattern is used?● Is strict sequencing required?	
<p>Table of Contents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Students are unlikely to use this much. Generally, it is designed with the teacher in mind as a way of providing an overview and a guide to the content of the subdivisions of the book.● How do the chapters seem to relate to each other?	
<p>Chapters or Other Subdivision</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● How are they organized internally?● Do they seem to follow the same patterns?● Where are the exercises?● How can you tell exercises from the other content of the chapters?● What formatting tools are used--bold print, color, etc.	

Wording of Exercises

- The convention is that instructions are addressed to the student in command form. The reason that simple activities sometimes appear to have complex directions is that the author is writing to the teacher but must work within the pretense that the directions are for the student. However, reality is that the words are intended for the teacher, who must interpret the directions for students for effective use of the materials.
- How are the exercises worded?
- What is the author trying to tell you about the activity--how to organize it, materials that might be needed, etc.?

Index

- Few students are skilled users of indexes. Often the index is more important for the teacher.
- How is it organized?
- What kinds of terms or words are indexed?

Appendices

- Are there any?
- What's in them?
- How are they to be used? Students are unlikely to notice them unless the teacher uses them.
- How can they be worked into the plan for the course?

Glossary

- Is there one?
- How is it organized?
- Is it tied to the text in any way-through numbering or bold type?
- What does the author say about using it?

Supplementary Materials

Is there an instructor's manual?

- How can you get it?
- Does anyone else on the faculty have a copy?
- Does the chair or director have a copy?
- If you can find one, what's in it that can help you plan your lessons?
- Is there an answer key?
- Is there a sample lesson plan?
- Is there any practical information about using the book?

What other materials are available to help teachers?

[TOP Return to Discussion of Table 5](#)

References

Byrd, P. (2001). Textbooks: Evaluation for selection and analysis for implementation. In Marianne Celce-Murcia (Ed.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (3rd Ed.), pp. 415-442. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Swales, J. (1980). ESP: The textbook problem. *The ESP Journal* 1(1), 11-23.

Skiero, A. (1991). Textbook selection and evaluation. In M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.) *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (2nd ed., pp. 432-453). NY: Newbury House.

[TOP](#)

Please send your questions and comments to me at patbyrd@comcast.net.