

Research on Language-teaching Materials—An Evaluation of Extensive Reading Textbooks*

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Abstract—In second language teaching, materials play a unique role and the demand of developing language-teaching materials has been increasing. The textbook, an integral part of language-teaching materials, to some extent dominates the contents of teaching and learning and has a deep influence on curriculum. Textbooks for extensive reading apparently highlights this feature while some kind of series adopted in universities have several shortcomings in the representativeness of the articles and their variety of the categories, etc. which makes it hard to play an active role and have a positive impact in teaching and learning process. Some teachers ignore the development of this ability and the significant contribution they can make to evaluating and selecting textbooks. Thus, the author collects basic information from one series of textbooks and analyzes it systematically, and then shows overall comments with detailed suggestions on contents as: selecting more articles from representative writers; increasing articles about history and philosophy; selecting more current articles from magazines; adding more poems and attaching more detailed introductions about the authors and reference books to read. These suggestions will provide some implication for extensive reading textbook evaluation and selection, thereby, the selected textbooks can be at the good service for extensive reading teaching and teachers can get a self-development in the process.

Index Terms—materials, textbooks, material evaluation, evaluation of textbooks, extensive reading teaching

I. INTRODUCTION

Tomlinson (2011) defines materials as “anything which is used by teachers or learners to facilitate the learning of a language.” (p. 2) They can be in the familiar form of textbooks, dictionaries and newspapers and so on; they can also be the native speakers’ live talks, teachers’ instructions or learners’ discussions. (Tomlinson, 2011) According to his definition, language teachers’ instruction itself can be regarded as one kind of teaching material and they are the ones which get in touch with all kinds of other forms of material in teaching. Thus, teachers are endowed with another role in developing materials which should be instructional, experiential, elicitive and exploratory. (Tomlinson, 2001) They need to consider “what should be provided for the learners, how it should be provided and what can be done with it to promote language learning.” (Tomlinson, 2011, p.2-3)

A. Textbooks and Materials

Textbooks are one of the most frequently used materials in language teaching and learning. As is said above, they can provide information about the language; they can provide exposure to the language in use; they can stimulate language use and they can encourage learners to make discoveries about language use. (Tomlinson, 2001) According to Westbury (1990), textbooks can not only support teaching but also defines the curriculum. Researches on evaluating, selecting and adapting textbooks are urgent and necessary, which will not only bring beneficial effects on the course teaching, but also improve teachers’ self-development ability. Teachers are always the textbook users, who need to correct their wrong conception of following the textbooks without worrying about other elements including the needs of the students. Wang Qiang (2006) proposed that as a qualified teacher, he/she definitely needed to “develop an awareness as well as ability to evaluate textbooks available to them or chosen for them” (p. 294). The current situation is that language teachers don’t pay enough attention to evaluating and selecting the textbooks not only before using them, but also after using them; it hinders the function of textbooks to play in the teaching process, also directs both teachers and students into wrong direction to either depend too much on textbooks or debase them unfairly.

B. Extensive Reading Textbooks and English Teaching

Even though there’s no definitively acknowledged second language acquisition theory which can guide the whole process of material development, it means teachers as well as the researchers can’t find out the standard answer to the problems they encounter, they can do something to ensure that students are learning what they want and need to learn.

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In the authors' opinion, evaluating and selecting a good series of valuable textbooks is the most convenient and efficient way to facilitate the learning. Teachers' classroom explaining and a textbook's samples of language use should work together to guide students to discover the things beyond pure language learning; teachers' proper scaffolding with a good textbook's modeling can direct learners to reflect on the way they have just learned from reading passages, especially facing to some challenging tasks. Thus, teaching should not only transmit information, but also helps the students to discover things for themselves and helps them to do something; it should also predict, prevent, respond to and remedy the problems in the process of language learning and teaching. In a way, both the teachers and students need proper textbooks to realize the nature of teaching and learning, especially in extensive reading course.

Extensive reading textbooks are eagerly needed to evaluate and the articles there needed to be selected and arranged well since they must provide enough exposure of target language to students by reading. The large amount of reading in and after extensive reading class can definitely provide a good chance for students to acquire native language. Since the amount of reading passages is large, both teachers and students to some degree depend more on textbooks. Teachers can tailor-made some materials for their students, but the amount is not enough and it's time-consuming. Exactly, they need to get a lot of help from extensive reading textbooks. Thus, the extensive reading textbook is a double-edged sword, which can facilitate teaching and learning when arranged well on the one hand; on the contrary, they can destroy everything when ignoring the basic principles.

In order to improve undergraduate English majors' reading ability effectively and achieve the teaching goals for extensive reading, researches and buildings on textbooks are very important procedures. Several universities all around the country once use a series of extensive reading books—*Companion Readers* published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press—one of the most influential presses in China, in 2010. This paper aims to research on this series of extensive reading textbooks with statistical analysis to find out the detailed shortcomings, come up with suggestions to improve and then provide more reference for extensive reading teaching and textbook construction.

II. TEXTBOOK EVALUATION AND FEATURES OF GOOD TEXTBOOKS

Each series of textbooks are edited under different teaching theories and teaching principles. And textbook evaluation can also be specifically divided into several opposite pairs of types based on specification of objectives, principles and procedures, including ad hoc evaluation and systematic evaluation, on-the-page evaluation and in-the-use evaluation, external evaluation and internal evaluation (Wang Qiang, 2006). This paper does not aim to touch every aspect and analyze them in detail. The authors of this paper prefer to mix them together and absorb in the key points but to present them in the following ways, which can definitely stand out the author's own idea in English teaching and textbook evaluation. In the analysis of this series of books, the authors not only try to express their own ideas, but also take the common features of good textbooks into consideration. Wang Qiang (2006) listed several features of good textbooks based on Tomlinson's (1998): "Good textbooks should attract the students' curiosity, interest and attention; textbooks should help students feel at ease; textbooks should help students develop confidence; textbooks should meet students' needs; textbooks should expose students to language in authentic use; textbooks should provide students with opportunities to use the target language to achieve communicative purposes; textbooks should take into account that the positive effects of language teaching are usually delayed; textbooks should take into account that students differ in learning styles; textbooks should take into account that students differ in affective factors; textbooks should maximize learning potential by encouraging intellectual, aesthetic and emotional involvement which stimulates both right and left brain activities" (p. 297). These features are useful to know and be kept in mind when evaluating textbooks.

III. THE BASIC INFORMATION ABOUT THE SERIES OF TEXTBOOKS

A. The Source of the Articles

About the source of the articles based on the authors' nationality and the introduction provided in the series:

		Volume1	Volume2	Volume3	Volume4
Authors from English-speaking countries	British	5	10	5	8
	American	16	21	15	14
	Irish	1	1	3	1
	Canadian	0	1	0	1
	Australian	0	1	1	0
	New Zealand	0	1	0	0
Authors from Non-English-speaking countries	French	0	1	2	0
	Russian	0	1	1	1
	German	1	0	2	0
	Norwegian	0	1	0	1
	others	1	3	2	0
Only authors' names; hard to find exact information		22	9	9	7
No information and introduction about the authors		4	1	1	0

According to the table, there are four volumes with 175 passages in the series: the works written by the authors

from English-speaking countries are 105, accounting for 60.00% of the whole; it is the largest category; the second largest category is the 47 articles attached with only authors' names, no specific introduction, accounting for 26.86%; it's hard for the students to find exact information; the third one is the 17 articles written by the authors from non-English-speaking countries, accounting for 9.71%; the other 6 articles, accounting for 3.43%, are the ones without any information.

For the authors from English-speaking countries, most of them are Americans: 66 articles are chosen; the number is much larger than the others, even accounting for 37.71% of the whole; rank 2 is British writers; 28 articles are chosen, accounting for 16%; the third one is Irish writers, and there are 6 passages in the series; there are 2 Australian ones, two Canadian ones and 1 from New Zealand.

B. The Styles of the Articles

The author mixes the literary genres with the types of the articles in the table to highlight their overall stylistic features.

	Short stories	Argumentation	poetry	Expository Articles	Non-fictions	dramas	Science fictions
Volume1	47 (5fables)	0	0	1	0	2	0
Volume2	43 (1fable)	3	1	2	1	0	1
Volume3	29	4	0	6	0	1	1
Volume 4	22 (1fable)	9 (1forum) (1conversation)	0	0	0	2	0

According to Table 2, short stories appears most frequently and there are 141 articles chosen in the series, accounting for 80.57%; the second largest category is argumentation and 16 articles are in it, accounting for 9.14%; the third category is expository writing, 9 articles accounts for 5.14%; the fourth one is drama and 5 dramas account for 2.86%; there are 2 science fictions, only 1 poem and 1 non-fiction in the series, respectively accounting for a small percentage. Among the short stories, the editor arranged several fables on purpose to convey something more from another typical writing style. The only one poem in this series pays special attention to its content which contains some kind of argumentation in it. The only one non-fiction stands out its feature in the application of rhetoric devices as personification and irony.

IV. SHORTCOMINGS OF THIS SERIES OF EXTENSIVE READING TEXTBOOKS

Given the good features of textbooks and the specialty of extensive reading textbooks, the layout of the series of extensive reading textbooks is not fancy enough. In fact, it's hard to attract students' curiosity, interest or attention since all the articles are compiled one by one with a few black and white pictures before some of the articles to illustrate and margins to add notes, without any attractive presentations, even the simplest difference in colors. Even worse, students are always frightened to see so many articles in one volume, in which they didn't see the novelty or possibility of learning something new from the unusual topics or illustrations but also difficulty in keeping their patience and confidence of reading these long passages. Students may feel anxious, uncomfortable or tense when seeing so many articles and exercises crammed together in the series of textbooks. A large number of original reading passages in this series do make sure to expose students to authentic use, but some of them are alien to students' culture and irrelevant to students' needs. According to the author, challenging passages are hard to motivate students in the long run and both teachers and students can't ensure the learning exactly happens in the reading class, let alone enabling students to receive, process and retain information through reading and maximizing their learning potential. Even though more passages mean more choices for teachers and students, this series of books seldom takes students' similarities and differences in affective factors and learning styles into consideration. To some degree, teachers play the most important role in selecting the provided articles from the textbook to build students' confidence in reading and maintain their patience to follow their teachers' guidance to explore. The recycled instruction and frequent exposure to the instructed language features in communicative use in reading classroom are indispensable since few opportunities are provided to use target language to achieve communicative purposes in extensive reading classroom. Based on these points discussed above, evaluating and choosing a good series of extensive reading textbooks are vital and profitable for both students and reading teachers.

Extensive reading teaching should not only aim to let students learn language knowledge, enlarge their vocabulary, improve their ability of reading comprehension and language application, but also cultivates their cultural accomplishment and logic thinking ability to analyze and judge. Based on the analysis above, it's easy to find that the number of the articles in the series is large and it has a wide range of resources; but there's obvious gap in the number of articles as to the authors' nationality, more than half of the authors are from English-speaking countries. Even though the styles are various, the number of short stories is much larger than other types of articles. Generally speaking, the series of extensive reading textbooks have disadvantages in representativeness of its articles and lack of enough

attention to Chinese tradition and culture, which hinders their positive role and influence to be played in reading teaching process. Therefore, the articles selected in extensive reading textbooks should not only pay special attention to be standard and diversified in cultural knowledge. In terms of this standard and other good feature, this set of textbooks is not good enough in the following aspects:

First of all, the articles of the authors from English-speaking countries are not typical enough; that's to say, they are lack of the representatives to stand out different periods of English and American literature. There are some famous American writers' works selected in this set of textbooks, such as O'Henry, Hemingway, Virginia Woolf, Edgar Ellen Poe, D.H. Laurence and so on. Chinese students and teachers are familiar with them but not their works chosen in this set of textbooks because they are not their masterpieces. Some other works and their authors are unknown; indeed, a few of them are not accessible to get related information at all. Five of James Thurber's works are selected into this set of textbooks; in fact, James Thurber's not as famous as the great ones we've mentioned before. While few works from representative writers in British and America are chosen; they are universally acknowledged to be great authors by the scholars from home and abroad. For instance, the British master in literature William Shakespeare's dramas, Milton's poems, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, or *The History of a Young Lady*, Lawrence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*; the poems written by Robert Burns, William Wordsworth, George Gordon Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane; American pioneer/initiator for psychoanalytic fictions, Nathaniel Hawthorne's masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter*; Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*; Emerson's *Essays*; Thoreau's *Walden*; Whitman's *Leaves of the Grass*; James' *The Portrait of a Lady*; Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*; Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and so on. These works and authors should be taken into account.

Secondly, as for the articles from the non-English-speaking countries, the range of sources is not wide enough. The works selected in this set of textbooks are Japanese, Norwegian, Polish, Columbia, Mexico ones and so on; what lack in particular is Chinese great works which can stand out Chinese excellent tradition and culture. There are several successful translators who make much effort on translating good Chinese literature works into beautiful English, like Xu Yuanchong, who makes a great contribution to Chinese culture heritage. According to the author's opinion, his excellent translated works should be chosen in extensive textbooks which can not only boost the inheritance of Chinese culture but also can make students realize the fascination of language, which can inspire them to be determined to learn English well.

Thirdly, the range of the passage styles is narrow and their proportion is not proper. Most of the articles in this set of textbooks are fictions and they are presented in narrative form. While the number of other genres is relatively small, especially poetry, there's only one poem in the whole set. This can't show enough respect to the great achievement of English poetry in history and its contribution to English literature, exactly, it's not fair to treat it like this. In addition, in the limited number of argumentation articles, few of them are the latest articles which talk about the hot issues of the current society and it also lacks the magazine articles, which results in the lack of the spirit of times and the sensitivity to social problems. At the same time, the set of textbooks also lacks articles about history, philosophy and literary theory. Without these kinds of articles, students are hard to know more about English history and culture, to cultivate their theoretical qualities and analyzing ability.

Lastly, the length of articles is not reasonable. One of the articles is more than ninety pages, which prevents students from finishing reading it in or out of class.

In all, this set of extensive textbooks has a lot of disadvantages, including neglecting the representativeness, contemporary nature and readability of the articles even in its large number of the passages; ignoring the disproportion of different genres; lacking of accumulation of students' historical and cultural knowledge and developing of the students' ability of logical analysis and so on. These points are all obvious and needed to be improved.

V. SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

In order to promote the quality and level of textbooks, provide the students with more suitable and better sample texts for English learning, this set of extensive reading textbooks can be promoted in the following aspects based on the shortcomings discussed before as well as good features of textbooks.

Firstly, select the authors and their works which can truly stand out the features of English countries. As the most widely used language in the world which has the widest range of application, excellent English works and articles can be found in every field. As we all know, the Noble Literature Prize has a very large impact on the matters in the world, especially in literature. Editors can prefer the authors and their works which win the Nobel Prize in Literature in particular. These articles in no doubt have the representativeness of English countries and the spirit of the exact times; they can not only help students to learn the native models of English application, but also vividly reflect the features of various literature styles. By reading these works and studying their authors, students can learn more native-like expressions, at the same time, they can get used to expressing their ideas in different writing styles.

Secondly, increase the number of the articles about history, philosophy and so on. It's proved that language is the carrier of culture. For English majors, they should not only learn English, exactly speaking, they are not supposed to learn single language knowledge, but to know western history and culture through language learning. Reading original historical and philosophical articles can not only enrich their learning contents, overcome the boring feeling of English

learning, but also can make students learn relative knowledge about history and literature and then increase their theoretical attainment in language.

Thirdly, add more poems in extensive reading textbooks. Actually, English poetry is famous for its various styles, its elegance, its refined nature and its rich affection. Reading these excellent poems can definitely help students appreciate the beauty of language truly; furthermore, it can purify their soul. As for the length of articles in textbooks for extensive reading, it's not supposed to be too long. The length of poems can be long and short, the words and sentence patterns in poems are not so complicated, so they are easy and suitable for classroom learning and teaching. Some poems are worth paying special attention to: they are sonnets written by Petrarch, Shakespeare, Milton, Browning and so on. Their sonnets are like beautiful music with diverse tones, strong ringing and splendid rhythms.

Fourthly, all kinds of articles from magazines and newspapers should be included in these textbooks. The articles in newspapers always embody the modern habit and trend of language application. English majors can benefit a lot from reading newspapers, including knowing contemporary western ideological trend and social conditions and learning to express in modern English more precisely and standardly. For example, some of the fashion comments and discussions about the hot issues published in *The Economics* not only keep pace with the times and the society, but also has close relationship with their lives and the society they live in. They are always their familiar topics and the problems they are concerned with. These kinds of articles can not only go off the smell of a certain time, but remain logic in their wording as well. Such kind of articles are easy to raise students' reading interest and they can also enhance students' logic thinking ability better.

Fifthly, choose some English version of Chinese literature works. Several excellent literary translators have devoted to translating great Chinese literature works into English in order to make Chinese culture get known and recognized by the western world. As for this field, one of the greatest translators, Mr. Xu Yuanchong, can't be neglected. He has made great contribution to the career of translation, especially to the translation of Chinese classic poetry. He has already translated lots of Chinese classic works, such as *the Analects of Confucius*, *the Books of Songs*, *the Songs of Chu*, *Poetry of the Tang and Song Dynasty*, *the Romance of West Chamber* and so on. His translated classic works not only have the beauty of rhythm, but convey the artistic conception and express the poetic flavor as well. Besides, some other authors' English masterpieces are worth reading and studying, like Mr. Lin Yutang's *My Country and My People*. If students can get access to read and study these great English works in extensive reading class, they can make a contrast between Chinese and English consciously to make clear about the differences between the two languages; they can also cultivate their ability of translating both in English and Chinese; they can build strong cultural confidence to our great nation.

In addition, complete the introduction about the authors and other related information; the recommended booklist for reading should also be attached to the articles. The brief bibliography about the authors and simple introduction to the writing style can help students to get more background information to the creating of the work to understand it clearly and master its stylistic features. Some passages are lack of this part, which hinders both the teacher and students to read more. The recommended books and articles can show correct direction and method to students to their extensive reading after class.

VI. CONCLUSION

In all, the extensive reading textbooks should not only think highly of its representativeness and diversity to articles, but also pay attention to the contemporary nature and readability. The good textbooks with reputation are definitely beneficial to improving students' ability of learning and they can also cultivate their healthy mind and elegant feelings. As Cheng Xiaotang (2011) concluded, "the significance of materials evaluation is self-evident" (p.111). For language teachers, what they can do is to take students' needs and the basic principles of evaluating materials into consideration and either try to evaluate existing materials to choose the most suitable ones for their students or evaluate the chosen ones to adapt them to better suit their students' needs and the needs of teaching. (Cheng Xiaotang, 2011) Teachers can behave better in this field and develop their ability quickly since they can realize the value of doing this undertaking, which will definitely bring benefits to language teaching and learning.

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