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English Textbook Evaluation

An Investigation into Criteria for Selecting English Textbooks

Utvärdering av engelska textböcker

En undersökning om kriterier att ta hänsyn till vid val av engelska textböcker

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Abstract

This dissertation is a qualitative research study on the criteria for selecting English textbooks. Our research is based on interviews with four teachers at an upper secondary school. The informants stated that one reason for not conducting a more thorough evaluation was that they found it too time-consuming. Another reason was that materials evaluation was an unknown concept to them. The results of our investigation illustrate that the school's evaluation procedure has improved over the years. However, the teachers at the school would benefit from developing their evaluation strategy. The most important criterion to consider in the selection is, according to the teachers, interesting and relevant texts that the students can relate to.

Keywords: Criteria, English textbook, materials evaluation, selection

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1 INTRODUCTION

A countless number of English textbooks are available on the market today. The eye can easily be deceived by colourful covers, a beautiful layout and attractive artwork. As an inexperienced teacher it can be particularly difficult to know what to look for in an English textbook. We have heard of incidents when teachers have made rash decisions concerning English textbooks which led to useless working materials, frustrated teachers and wasted money. The decision to purchase a textbook should therefore be carefully considered. The content of English textbooks influences what teachers teach and learners learn. If the textbook is too advanced or too simple for the students the teacher will inevitably be faced with problems. Local cultural taboos could force the teacher to leave out certain parts. The content of the textbook might not be of the kind that students can relate to.

In the selection of a new textbook it is important to conduct an evaluation to ensure that it is suitable. Certain criteria must be considered in the evaluation. Since every school setting is unique in the sense that students have different backgrounds, abilities and needs, the criteria will inevitably vary. Other criteria such as teachers' perspectives as well as the syllabus should also be taken into account in the evaluation. It is important that teachers have a critical approach towards the potential material. Another perspective that will be discussed in our dissertation is whether to use a textbook or not.

Materials evaluation is not a well-known concept in Sweden, and many schools might not have the knowledge of how to carry out the evaluation procedure in a structured way. With this dissertation we hope to raise our awareness of how to select English textbooks in the future. We also believe that it could be used as a guide to other teacher students as well as teachers.

1.1 Background

Tomlinson offers a short summary of the history of materials development (2001). He explains that the study of materials development was not given any real importance until the 1990s when books on this subject started to be published. A few books came out in the 1980s. Tomlinson mentions for example Cunningsworth (1984) and Sheldon (1987), but with these exceptions, materials development was treated as a sub-category of methodology. Tomlinson gives two reasons why the interest in materials

development increased. One was the realisation that by making teachers aware of the process of materials development, it would be easier for them to understand and apply theories of language learning. It would also help teachers to develop personally and professionally. The other reason was the understanding that no coursebook can be suitable for any kind of learners. Therefore teachers need to be able to evaluate, adapt and produce materials that would be appropriate for their particular class. These realisations have increased materials development research as well as the occurrence of materials development courses for teachers (Tomlinson 2001 p 66-67).

According to Tomlinson, most published research on materials development has focused on materials evaluation. One of the problems in materials evaluation that Tomlinson points out, is that most often it is the researcher's subjective views that determine what criteria are measured and valued in a coursebook. However, in recent years, efforts have been made to create objective instruments that can offer more reliable facts about the usefulness of materials. Another problem in materials evaluation is that research has mostly been concerned with pre-use evaluation which is speculative and often too time-consuming for teachers to use. It is not until recent years that efforts have been made to create instruments that enable pre-use, whilst-use and post-use evaluation. This indicates that materials evaluation should be considered an on-going process. Tomlinson claims that research on the value of developing materials in different ways, as well as research on the effects of different kinds of materials, is still needed (Tomlinson p 69).

The current trends in published materials are also something that Tomlinson has reflected on. He has for example noticed that most new books from different publishers focus on language form and grammar, and that there are more exercises that enable learners to actively seek knowledge and make discoveries on their own. There is also more focus on interactive learning and the use of different media. Tomlinson predicts that in the future materials will continue to emphasise accuracy, fluency and appropriateness of language. Concentration will however shift from cooperative exercises, to exercises where language is used to compete for attention and effect. When it comes to grammar, the emphasis will be placed on spoken language rather than written. Materials will also have a more international character as English is widening its position as a world language (Tomlinson p 69-70).

1.2 Purpose and question

The purpose of our dissertation is to investigate how teachers in an upper secondary school select English textbooks. Our research is based on four interviews conducted in an upper secondary school. By analysing the results of the interviews we hope to reach an understanding of how this selection is made. Our question for the dissertation is: What criteria are considered when teachers at an upper secondary school select English textbooks?

2 Materials evaluation

2.1 Theoretical concepts

2.1.1 *Materials evaluation*

When the teachers at a school select new material to use in their teaching, they have to carefully examine that material to make sure that it is suitable for their particular school setting. In this examination they have to take a number of different aspects into consideration, for example the age and proficiency level of the students, what language factors that the students need to learn, the course syllabus and so on. This procedure of examining the material is called materials evaluation. There are different methods that can be used for evaluating materials. McGrath presents some of these methods in his book *Materials Evaluation and Design for Language Teaching* (2001). One of the methods he explains is the *checklist method*, where essential criteria are listed and systematically checked off. Another method is the *in-depth method* which means that some representative parts of the material are chosen for examination. The best method for selecting material, according to McGrath, is to try it out on the students, or students who are similar to those for which it is intended. McGrath recommends pre-use evaluation, in-use evaluation and post-use evaluation. This means that the material should not only be evaluated before being used, but constantly while using it as well as after use.

2.1.2 *Textbook*

The traditional textbook, as we see it, usually consists of a number of chapters with texts of different lengths that deal with various topics. There may be a different theme for every chapter and sometimes there are a few pre-reading activities, or post-reading exercises. The texts can generally be listened to on CD or tape. In some cases the textbook and the workbook are joined together in the same book, but sometimes they are represented by two separate books. In fact, a textbook is always accompanied by other materials such as CDs, cassettes, tests and a teacher's guide. All of these additional materials are of course taken into account in the selection of a textbook. The reason why we decided to give more attention to the textbook in our investigation is that we suspected that it is the most important part of the material package. We estimated that a textbook carries a bit more weight in the consideration of the material.

2.1.3 Analysis and Evaluation

Analysis and evaluation are closely related but yet different. It is important to understand the distinction between them. The most basic explanation of analysis, when looking in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2006-05-10) is the “separation of a whole into its component parts”. McGrath suggests a similar simplified explanation concerning textbook analysis. Textbook analysis involves looking for what is already there in the textbook. When conducting a textbook analysis it will lead you to an objective, verifiable description, according to McGrath (McGrath 2001 p 22). The textbook analysis needs to be performed before commencing the textbook evaluation.

According to the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2001), the most basic definition of evaluation is “the act of considering something to decide how useful or valuable it is”. McGrath’s basic explanation of textbook evaluation concerns the discovery of whether what you were looking for was there. When found, you then need to put a value on your findings. Evaluation implies judgement-making which therefore also means that evaluation is subjective. Although when evaluating, McGrath claims, that you might miss the unusual and the innovative (McGrath p 22).

2.2 Present tendencies

McGrath explains why the selection of a textbook is an important decision, and he gives some examples of what could go wrong if an unsuitable textbook is chosen. The best method for selecting a textbook, according to McGrath, is to try it out on the learners, or learners who are similar to those that the textbook is intended for. This method is called *triallying*. Another method is to gather information about the material from other users by for example interviewing teachers who are using the material, or by observing the material in use. A third method that McGrath refers to is *armchair evaluation* which is applied if the other two methods are not possible. In this method the focus is on careful analysis and evaluation of the textbook (McGrath p 12-13).

Three basic methods for evaluating textbooks are introduced by McGrath. The first is called the impressionistic method and it involves analysing a textbook on the basis of a general impression. The general impression would be gained by reading the blurb and the contents page and then skimming through the book to get a sense of organisation, topics, layout and visuals. As McGrath points out, this method is not adequate in itself but could be combined with for example the second method, which McGrath calls the checklist method. This method is also inadequate if it is used solely, however it has

some advantages. It is systematic in the way that the criteria on the list are checked off in a certain order. It is also very easy to compare different materials and it is not very time-consuming compared to other methods. The third method, the in-depth method, suggests a careful examination of representative features such as the design of one particular unit or exercise, or the treatment of particular language elements. An obvious disadvantage in this method is that the selected section might not be representative of the book as a whole. As all three methods have their pros and cons, McGrath recommends an integrated approach. This integrated approach must be modified for each individual case of material selection. The criteria to consider are not the same in every situation. The outcome of the integrated approach should be determined by the criteria (McGrath p 25-29). Deciding which criteria to aim for can be very difficult. One way to make it easier is to make a distinction between general criteria (features that are necessary in any kind of teaching material) and specific criteria (features that are related to the particular context) (McGrath p 31).

Many different kinds of factors must be taken into account when selecting a textbook. McGrath has listed a number of learner factors such as age range, proficiency level in the target language, reasons for studying the target language, sex distribution and so on. Following the learner factors is a list of learner needs, for example dialect, language-skill emphasis, language-system emphasis (grammar, vocabulary, phonology) and attention to mechanics (spelling, punctuation). There is also a list of teacher factors such as language competence, methodological competence and awareness, experience of teaching the kind of learner for whom the materials are intended etc. Information about the institution and the specific programme for which the material is intended is also important to consider. McGrath mentions for example level within the educational system (kindergarten, primary, secondary), class size, aims of the programme, syllabus and so on (McGrath p 19-21).

The fact that the evaluation is affected by the evaluator's values is a problem that McGrath points out in his book. He suggests that in order to lessen this problem, evaluators should have a critical view of the criteria that are put together by other people, and they should also have knowledge of their own values (McGrath p 48). He also advocates group evaluation since the material will then be inspected from a variety of perspectives, and the important decision of selecting a textbook will be a shared responsibility (McGrath p 52).

McGrath emphasises that it is important for teacher trainees to acquire the skill to evaluate textbooks during their teacher education. He points out that “trainees need to develop the capacity to evaluate existing materials in relation to the teaching-learning context and their teaching purposes.” (McGrath p 4). By gaining the capacity to evaluate textbooks less time will have to be spent on adaptation and supplementation of the textbook (McGrath p 4).

Another text, which can be seen as a complement to McGrath, is a chapter in the book *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*, edited by Marianne Celce-Murcia in 1991. This chapter is called “Textbook Selection and Evaluation” and is written by Alexandra Skierso. Skierso starts her chapter by motivating the importance of textbook evaluation. She claims that even though teachers are never completely satisfied with a textbook, most of them still use one in their teaching. Since textbooks are never perfect, teachers need to be able to evaluate the textbook on an everyday basis in order for it to suit his or her students (Skierso 1991 p 432). In much the same way as McGrath, Skierso lists a number of factors that need to be established before the evaluation process can start. Information is needed on the students, the teacher, the institution and so on (Skierso p 432-434). Just like McGrath she also recommends a first-glance evaluation, although she refers to the process as survey, in which it is possible to eliminate the most unsuitable textbooks (Skierso p 435). To illustrate a potential checklist for first-glance evaluation, please see, *Table 1*, on following side. Skierso then presents a guide to textbook analysis which lists a large number of items to consider in the selection of a textbook (Skierso p 435-440).

Table 1

“Example of a checklist for first-glance evaluation” (McGrath p 33)

<p>Practical considerations</p> <p>all components available? affordable? multi-level (i.e. series)?</p> <p>Support for teaching and learning</p> <p>Additional components: - teacher's book? - tests? - cassettes [CD]? suitable for self-study?</p> <p>Context relevance</p> <p>suitable for course: - length of course? - aims of course? - syllabus? - exam?</p> <p>suitable for learners: - age? - level? - cultural background?</p> <p>suitable for teachers required resources (e.g. cassette recorder [CD player] available)? evidence of suitability (e.g. piloted in local context)?</p> <p>Likely to appeal learners</p> <p>layout visuals topics suitable over medium term (i.e. likely to date)?</p>
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3 Methodology

3.1 Sampling

The dissertation is a qualitative research study and our primary data collection strategy is interviews. One of the reasons for using qualitative interviews as opposed to quantitative is that it gives us the opportunity to do in-depth research. In the dissertation we want to investigate how four English teachers in one specific upper secondary school solve the task of selecting English textbooks. In order for us to conduct an in-depth investigation of the research question we decided to interview four teachers only. We selected the school and the four teachers through a contact network. The choice of informants was based on what Hatch describes as *homogeneous samples*: individuals with similar characteristics (Hatch 2002 p 98). We were interested in teachers with a variation of age and teaching experience. In Sweden today teaching is a female dominated profession and in the upper secondary school selected, only two out of ten English teachers are male. Therefore, the male perspective has been omitted.

3.2 Procedures

The questions used in the interviews (appendix 1) have been categorised into *background, criteria, purchase* and *information on current textbook*. The interviewee was first asked to describe her teaching background. Under the category *criteria* we wanted them to describe their procedure when selecting a new textbook and what criteria they applied in the process. They were also asked what criteria they believed were the most important to consider when selecting a textbook. Under *purchase* they were asked to describe why they decided to acquire a new textbook and if they thought they could have done anything different or better in their last purchase. Had they ever purchased a book they were not pleased with? In the last category they were asked to describe what textbook they currently use and if they were content with it. We were also interested in how much they use the textbook in their teaching and finally if they conduct an evaluation of the textbook at the end of every semester.

In the dissertation all people interviewed have been promised full anonymity. We informed the interviewees in a letter that they had the right to terminate the interviews at any time if they no longer wished to participate in the research. They were also assured in the information letter that our intent was not to accuse them of inapt textbook

selection procedures or to question their opinions. There are no right or wrong answers in our research we are mainly interested in how they solve the task of selecting English textbooks. The information letter (appendix 2) together with the interview questions were e-mailed a few days prior to the interviews. The reason for this was to calm the informants. The fact that they would be recorded on tape had slightly worried them. All four interviews were conducted on the same day at the school but in different rooms; a small workroom in the library, a classroom, a semi-large room with sofas and finally a classroom in a basement with windows facing a small greenhouse. We sat next to each other facing the informant when interviewing and the tape recorder was placed between us and the informant. We offered them mineral water before we began interviewing. To relax the informant and to remove the focus away from the tape recorder we asked the informant to talk about herself and her teaching background for a while. Prior to the interviews we had decided to alternate being in charge of the interviewing, but we were both present during all interviews. The person who were not conducting the interview was there as back-up, staying alert to possible flaws or gaps the main interviewer had overlooked.

Since Swedish is everyone's native tongue in this research, we decided to write the interview questions and conduct the interviews in Swedish. We still believe it would have been possible to perform the interviews in English, but interviewing was an unusual situation for all of us. To then keep the interview in English would have complicated matters. In order to obtain a semi-relaxed atmosphere we preferred to lay focus on content and not the language. We transcribed all data necessary for the research. In the results chapter the data were then summarised and sorted under the various categories of questions asked.

Since our aim is to see how teachers at an upper secondary school select textbooks we have decided to not rename or number the teachers in the results chapter. We were merely interested in looking for patterns and general ideas. The data will be analysed in reference to *Materials Evaluation and Design for Language Teaching* to see whether McGrath's evaluation procedures correspond to those of the interviewees.

3.3 Interviews

We conducted formal semi-structured interviews because we wanted to use guiding questions during the interviews but we also wanted the freedom of probing into areas that arose during interview interactions. Observation studies were not an option for us

since the only observation study that would be possible would be if we could participate in the process of an English textbook selection. Informal interviews are part of observation strategies and allow the researcher to ask questions arising during the observation; those questions are therefore impulsive and unplanned. For our dissertation, we find structured and planned questions more appropriate. We brought guiding questions to the interviews as an aid for us throughout the interviews but they were also a guide for the informants in preparation for the interviews. The guide worked as a backup and checklist to make sure all issues and angles had been discussed. We did not follow the guide in great detail as we preferred the interviewee to be in charge of the discussion. As Hatch also points out, the emphasis was not to rush through all questions but to understand the informants' points of view (Hatch p 102). During the interviews both of us kept a copy of the interview questions in front of us to guide us through the interview but also so we could take notes directly on the guide. The notes could be about tone of voice or nonverbal indicators or anything that came into mind regarding the research. One of us already knew the school and its procedures and the other one was a first-time visitor. This improved the interview in the sense that when something was unclear for the visitor the teachers were asked to explain in more detail.

3.4 Potential problems

To conduct all interviews in one day caused an unexpected problem. If the interviews had been conducted over a number of days, we could have distanced ourselves from the awkwardness of conducting interviews. Perhaps this would have improved our interviewing technique, altered our questions and we would have asked the teachers to describe certain issues in more detail.

4 Results

4.1 Description of the school and teachers' backgrounds

Our interviews were conducted in an upper secondary school in a village in the south of Sweden. Almost one thousand students attend the school and approximately eighty-five teachers work there. Since the municipality does not accept any refugees from other countries it is a rather culturally homogeneous school. The school is situated in a fairly rich municipality and the school buildings have a very bright, open and modern atmosphere.

All interviewees were female and they will be presented after age, starting with the youngest. The first informant is 35 years old. After her graduation she commenced her teaching career at the upper secondary school and has worked at the school ever since it opened i.e. she has spent eight years there. Her subjects are English and German. The second informant has 22 years of teaching experience whereof six of those she has spent at this school. She is 47 years old and she teaches English and Swedish. The third informant is 57 years old and she has taught English and Swedish for 25 years. She has worked at the school for seven years. Finally, the fourth informant who has the longest teaching career of 34 years is currently teaching English, French and German. She is 60 years old and she has worked at the school for eight years.

4.2 Criteria

At the upper secondary school English subject meetings take place once every month, and annually, usually in spring, purchase of new English materials is on the agenda. The teachers acquire information on new English textbooks via advertisements or if they attend educational materials conventions. Occasionally the publishers pay visits to the school to introduce new textbooks. However, in most cases the textbook recommendations were acquired through work connections. The English team share responsibility for purchasing the materials. No one has more responsibility than another.

Since the upper secondary school has only existed for eight years, new textbooks in English have only been purchased on two different occasions. When a reference copy of a new English textbook arrives, it is passed around prior to the meetings. The reading time is usually restricted and most of the interviewees feel that the time to examine the book is not enough. During the meetings all interviewees claimed that many criteria

from the list, supplied in our interview guide, were brought up in the discussions but not as systematically. One interviewee mentioned that not many teachers can find the time to evaluate textbooks as thoroughly as our guide suggests.

In the meetings they commence the discussion by investigating what English textbooks they currently have. Using these findings they decide on what types of texts they lack and what materials they would like to acquire. One interviewee pointed out that all teachers work differently and sometimes it can be hard to agree on one textbook or to convince everyone that a textbook is good. The good part about the discussions is that everyone's opinions and ideas will be ventilated. One of the interviewees believed that one possible problem when selecting a new textbook could be that if a teacher is not fond of changing the textbook he/she will not show much interest in reading or evaluating the new textbook.

The team was not happy with the school's first textbook *Impact* which was the first English textbook purchased for the newly opened school. At this time they did not have a single book on the shelves and all the books had to be bought within a few days. The first textbook in English was thus the result of a hasty decision, and unfortunately a decision they had to regret. Komvux was the only institution there prior to the upper secondary school's opening. They had used *Impact* and recommended it. The interviewee and her colleagues trusted the Komvux teachers' opinions and purchased enough copies for all English classes at the school. This turned out to be a mistake. The teachers perceived the texts in *Impact* as boring and irrelevant, and every chapter in the book had exactly the same disposition. Two years later they decided to acquire a new textbook. The procedure, when selecting *Project X*, began when one informant brought the textbook to a meeting. The reason why she was familiar with the textbook was because she knew one of the authors. They conducted a short oral evaluation during the meeting, which resulted in everyone's approval and they decided to purchase the textbook. The procedure with the current textbook *Blueprint* was conducted similarly. Someone in the subject meeting had heard of *Blueprint* and a reference copy was passed around. A few teachers volunteered and the textbook is currently piloted in two classes. One interviewee believes the system works quite well; at the end of the day the students are the best evaluators since they are the ones who will be using them.

No one of the interviewees had ever read, no less heard of textbook evaluation guides and they were curious as to whether such guide actually existed.

4.2.1 Finance

The upper secondary school has one materials account for all subjects. The money is evenly distributed between the subject teams. Since the school's financial situation is quite good the subject teams hardly ever lack money. However, to buy new textbooks is a large expense therefore the main issue at these meetings is usually to discuss how important a new textbook really is. Questions such as how much they actually use textbooks in their teaching are usually raised. Perhaps purchasing films, novels or other forms of teaching materials is a better investment. One interviewee pointed out that the textbook they currently use (*Project X*) is rather old but because the materials are not often applied in teaching, they last much longer.

One interviewee explained that the school's good subvention system allowed them to purchase new textbooks for all English classes shortly after their first textbook failure. The school's good financial situation also made it possible for one of the informants to purchase *Read and React* and *Read and Catch up* for a class of weak learners in English. Most of these students are barely able to pass. She therefore felt that she needed a simpler material for these classes. Her wish to purchase the textbooks was immediately approved.

4.2.2 The syllabus for English

When asked whether they had the syllabus for English in mind during the evaluation, one interviewee pointed out that it is essential that the textbook contains oral, writing and grammar tasks. Another informant told us that when browsing through a potential textbook, most teachers keep the syllabus for English in mind, some subconsciously and others consciously. She also told us that in *Project X* the vocabulary corresponds to the national tests for English perfectly.

4.2.3 Textbook package

All informants believed that the student CD is an important aspect to consider in the textbook package. The school's textbooks have always included a student CD with listening activities on it. Unfortunately the CDs lack the actual texts from the textbook. Three interviewees would have preferred the textbook's texts to be on the CD which has also been requested by the students. It would enable the students to listen to the texts at home as often as required and in their own pace. This would particularly be an aid for students with reading and writing difficulties. The informant who uses *Read and React*

and *Read and Catch up* explained that before every chapter, on the CD, a glossary list is introduced and it is followed by the chapter text for the students to listen to. The interviewee pointed out that even though the students have been given the aid they fail to use the CD to its full extent.

The informants all agreed on the value of the teacher's guide. It provides them with useful advice on how the textbook is set up and its work strategies. One informant actually never acquired a teacher's guide for their last textbook but she still believes it is useful to have.

4.2.4 Content

All interviewees believed that the main criterion when selecting a textbook is the content. The texts have to be authentic, inspiring and catch the students' interest, if the texts fail to convey these aspects teachers nor students will have enough strength or energy to work with the textbook. One informant believes that texts have to feel relevant especially for teachers since they are the ones spending a lot of time working with them. This informant also stressed how important it is that all teachers read some of the texts in the reference copy passed around. An important factor which two interviewees brought up was the fact that textbooks should not contain excerpts from novels since it is pointless to talk about texts you cannot finish reading. Short stories are therefore a better choice to include. A textbook should also contain a good glossary.

4.2.5 Layout, structure and practicality

Everyone except one thought the layout was an important criterion in the textbook selection. Three informants pointed out that colour pictures are essential and that the textbook should feel new and give a fresh and modern impression. The fourth informant did not consider the layout as relevant in a textbook.

Structure and practicality were criteria we had over-looked when composing our interview questions. They were instead criteria brought up by the interviewees. The textbook and workbook should have a clear structure. Two important aspects that the interviewees discussed were whether the textbook is separate from the workbook and how the tasks in the workbook are set up. Sometimes it is better to have two separate books but other times it is preferred to have textbook and workbook joined in one book. The interviewees explained that the students will complain if the books are too large or heavy. Therefore it is better to have one book containing workbook and textbook. In that way the students will not have to carry around or browse through two books. One

interviewee also pointed out that it is preferred to have the tasks in the workbook designed so that they do not require any writing in them, since this will eventually lead to scribbles in them.

Another issue that we had overlooked and that was brought up by one interviewee was the importance of a textbook being self-propelled in the sense that it will allow and encourage individual work or at least give the students the option to work individually.

4.2.6 Student factors and pedagogic perspectives

When asked about student factors and the pedagogic perspectives, the informants mentioned that the proficiency level of the textbook is important. It is also essential that the textbook contains a great variety of tasks to suit the students' different learning styles. The textbook should contain adolescents' interests, i.e. adventure and youth problems.

4.3 The most important criteria

All informants came to the conclusion that the texts should depict authentic, interesting, absorbing, entertaining and modern topics. It is important that the textbook covers different proficiency levels since the textbook will be used in many different classes and programs at the school which is also the most economic solution.

When we asked the interviewees to what extent they focus on their own needs in the selection of a textbook, they all seemed to agree that the needs of the students were the most important ones. They did however admit that one reason for choosing a new textbook was that they as teachers were tired of the old texts. One of the interviewees pointed out that the students work with the textbooks for just one year, whereas the teachers work with them year in and year out, and in that sense it is the teachers' needs that determine the decision to purchase a new textbook. This interviewee also said that it is no use working with a textbook that the teacher likes if the students do not like it. The teacher who had switched from *Project X* to *Blueprint* said that she did not think that the texts were particularly better in *Blueprint*. It was just more fun for her as a teacher to be able to work with new texts and to have some variation. Another interviewee said that if the teacher feels that a textbook is uninteresting, those feelings will inevitably affect the students. She said that it is impossible to make the students like something that you do not believe in yourself. She also said that it has to be a combination where the starting point is the needs of the students, but in order to inspire the students there has to be an interest from the teacher as well.

4.4 Current textbook

Out of our four interviewees one teacher uses *Blueprint*, three teachers use *Project X* and one teacher uses *Read and Catch up* and *Read and React* in addition to *Project X*. To the question of whether they were satisfied with their textbooks or not, they all gave very positive responses. The teacher who uses *Blueprint* said that she likes that the book has a chapter that explains how to write different kinds of texts for example argumentation texts, reviews and letters. She also found it very practical that the textbook and workbook are put together in one book instead of two. She did however point out that since it is a rather difficult textbook it might not be suitable for a class that does not have advanced knowledge in English.

The teachers who use *Project X* said that they like it because it has a lot of communicative exercises that enables the students to discuss different topics. It has a lot of pronunciation exercises, pre-reading activities, themes and an appropriate amount of grammar exercises. Two teachers mentioned that they dislike the fact that the texts in the book are only available on a tape and not on CD, and that there is only one tape for the teacher and not for all the students. Another teacher reflected on the fact that some of the texts might be getting a bit out of date. As an example she mentioned a film chapter that discussed actors who were popular ten years ago, and the students had never heard of them. She could of course inform her students about these actors but, as she said herself, the students are supposed to be able to relate to the texts themselves. She also said that there is nothing about mobile phones and other similar objects of the latest modern technology, which is such a big part of students' lives. Hence there are a lot of words in this area that are not included in the vocabulary lists.

Read and Catch up and *Read and React* were also highly praised. The teacher who uses these books especially appreciates that all the students get their own CD with the texts from the book that they can listen to at home. She thinks it is unfortunate that the students do not use the material as well as they could.

Even though they are pleased with their textbooks they all use a lot of other material. None of the teachers we interviewed said that they use everything in a textbook. Two of the teachers expressed that they found it somewhat annoying that they were never able to complete a whole textbook. We asked our interviewees how much of their teaching is based on the textbook. They all said that it varies. One teacher estimated that about 60 percent of her teaching is based on the textbook. Two of the teachers we interviewed answered that it depends on the students. They said that if the

class is a very creative one then they might not use the textbook that much, but rather have them do other things. One teacher said that for students with poor knowledge in English it might give a more structured and secure feeling to work with a textbook.

The post-use evaluation is mostly conducted in a spontaneous and informal way in this school. There is no time set aside for such a procedure and no forms to fill in. They simply share their opinions with each other whenever they feel that they need to. In the selection of a new textbook they have naturally discussed their views on the old one. Only one of the teachers we interviewed lets her students evaluate the textbook and the other material that has been used. She said that she usually creates a form for the students to fill in.

5 Analysis

5.1 Procedure

The teachers' evaluation procedure when receiving new reference copies of textbooks can be compared to the impressionistic method (McGrath p 25). The informants browse through and read some of the texts in the textbook. They investigate what types of texts it contains, how the textbook is structured, the layout, glossary lists and language skills. One informant describes how they conduct an investigation prior to the pre-use evaluation procedure. They commence the examination of what is already there, in their current textbook. Using these findings they then decide on what types of materials they would like to acquire. This decision will be based on what is missing in their current textbook. Perhaps, as one interviewee mentioned, the school can use the current textbook for a while longer and instead purchase films and novels. We came to the conclusion that although the informants claimed not to conduct a pre-use evaluation they still keep one in mind subconsciously. They have a sense of what is important. The criteria that were brought up in the interviews correspond to the first-glance evaluation checklist (see p 14 *Table 1*).

5.2 Criteria

5.2.1 *Economising time and money*

Two aspects that are important to consider in materials evaluation are time and money. Not only should evaluation be an aid for schools to save money but also teachers' time, hence it is a financial investment as well as an investment of time (McGrath p 12). One informant pointed out that pre-use evaluation was too time-consuming for teachers to conduct. However, in the long run it is more time-consuming to adapt and supplement a bad textbook. This is also something that McGrath mentions (McGrath p 4).

5.2.2 *Syllabus and course suitability*

One interviewee pointed out that the last textbook purchased (*Project X*) corresponds to the National tests in English perfectly. Whether she knew this because the author of the textbook had told her or if they had analysed the book prior to the purchase we never found out. The syllabus was something she mentioned most teachers had in mind subconsciously or consciously.

Information on the school is also necessary to include in the evaluation (McGrath p 21). In the school where we conducted our research they generally select textbooks for all the school's programmes, with a few exceptions. Therefore the textbook needs to be broad in order to suit different types of programmes. Since English is a core subject the national syllabus corresponds to all programmes and the textbooks can therefore be the same in all classes with a variation of the year level. This was something that the interviewees were aware of and put in to consideration during their evaluation.

5.2.3 Teachers' needs

The answers we received to the question of how much they focus on their own needs in the selection of a textbook were very sensible in our opinion. It might seem obvious that the needs of the students are more important than the teacher's. However, when you reflect on the question more carefully, as our interviewees did, it becomes clear that the teacher's attitudes towards the textbook are indeed significant. As one of our interviewees said; if the teacher finds the textbook uninteresting, those feelings will inevitably affect the students. It is impossible to make the students like something that you do not believe in yourself. This is something that McGrath also stresses when he quotes Grant's saying that the best book in the world will not work in a classroom if the teacher has good reasons for disliking it (McGrath p 41). McGrath also emphasises Masuhara's views that teachers' needs and wants should be considered to a larger extent than they previously have. Masuhara describes teachers as mediators between the textbook and the student, and claims that teachers' opinions of the textbook are therefore very important to acknowledge (McGrath p 20).

The reason why some teachers felt that they wanted to switch from *Project X* to *Blueprint* was, as mentioned before, that it was fun for them to work with new texts and have some variation. The students need variation to be motivated in their learning, and arguably teachers need it as well, to be motivated in their teaching. As one of our interviewees so well formulates it when she discusses teachers' needs in relation to students' needs; it has to be a combination where the starting point is the needs of the students, but in order to inspire the students there has to be an interest from the teacher as well.

5.3 Improvement in purchase strategies

Since a large part of the teaching is usually based on the textbook, the selection of this textbook is undoubtedly very important. As McGrath says the selection "requires an

important investment of time” (McGrath p 12). With this in mind it is not difficult to understand why the selection of *Impact* was such a failure. There was simply no time to conduct a proper evaluation. McGrath also emphasises that in selecting textbooks for a new and unfamiliar teaching context, it is necessary to conduct an analysis of the context before examining potential textbooks (McGrath p 18). Since the school was completely new and just about to start, it might have been a good idea for the teachers to perform this kind of context analysis. But again, it was a matter of not having the time to do so.

One of the learner factors that McGrath lists in chapter two is *interests*. The importance of interesting and varying texts becomes so apparent from the case with *Impact*. The main reason for purchasing *Project X* was in fact that they wanted interesting and relevant texts, which they lacked in *Impact*. One interviewee mentioned that the monotonous structure in *Impact* might be suitable for a small group of students, but most of the students who worked with *Impact* found it tedious. The unfortunate outcome of *Impact* probably made them realise that they had to be more thorough in the selection of *Project X*. In any case, this purchase turned out to be very successful. For the third and latest selection of *Blueprint* they decided, as mentioned before, to try the textbook in two classes before purchasing any more. This is actually the method that McGrath deems to be the best (McGrath p 13). These three selections give a good picture of how the school’s ability to select textbooks has improved a lot since it first started.

Another learner factor that McGrath has listed is *proficiency level in the target language* (McGrath p 19). The importance of this factor can be seen in the selection of *Read and Catch up* and *Read and React*. The purchase of this textbook illustrates how essential it is that the level of difficulty fits the students. It also shows how there can never be a fixed set of criteria, as McGrath also emphasises (McGrath p 18). All learners are different and therefore the criteria must be adapted to the particular context. In this case there was a need for a simpler and more straightforward textbook.

5.4 Reflections on current textbooks

The decision to try out *Blueprint* before purchasing too many soon proved to be a very wise choice. The teacher who uses this textbook could after a short while tell the other teachers that it might be too difficult for some students. However, for students who have

advanced knowledge in English and need to be challenged, *Blueprint* could be a very suitable textbook.

All the teachers who use *Project X* said that they were very pleased with it. One teacher said that although the texts are very good, some of them might be getting a bit out of date. This is a problem that McGrath also mentions. He says that once a textbook has been selected it is likely to be used for several years. News items, texts about celebrities and pictures of people's clothes and hairstyles might soon seem old-fashioned (McGrath p 36). The lack of modern technology, which was something that this teacher also considered a negative aspect in *Project X*, is likely to be a problem with any kind of textbook. Technology develops so rapidly and schools cannot buy new textbooks to keep up with its pace. Naturally it is very useful for students to be up to date with the English terms in the field of technology, but perhaps this knowledge will have to be acquired from other sources than the textbook. One of our interviewees said that there is so much material available everywhere, especially for English. All our interviewees said that they use a lot of other material besides the textbook, and perhaps they could have the technology aspect in mind when they do this.

5.5 Using a textbook or not?

Skierso writes in her chapter about textbook selection and evaluation, that even though no teachers are completely satisfied with the textbook they use, very few are able to teach without one (Skierso 1991 p 432). None of the teachers we interviewed said that they use everything in a textbook. Since the perfect textbook does not exist it may be better, in some cases, to leave out certain parts. This stresses the importance of the fact that teachers, as Skierso writes "need to know on a daily basis how to evaluate the text in order to utilize its assets and compensate for its limitations in applying it to the needs of the students and the objectives of the class" (Skierso p 432).

McGrath has an interesting discussion in chapter one about the pros and cons of using a textbook. He says that using a textbook could involve some risks, for example if all lessons are based entirely on the textbook, and the teacher assumes that everything in it is worth using, when in some cases the content is unclear or questionable. Another possible risk is that the teacher's creativity might be lost and that the textbook might be perceived as an expert who can solve all problems. On the other hand a textbook can save time and be a guide that facilitates your work (McGrath p 8-11). McGrath's final conclusion in this discussion is that "where a suitable coursebook is available

coursebook-based teaching makes sense. However, teachers must use their judgement in deciding which parts of the book to use and how to use them” (McGrath p 11). Two of the teachers we interviewed said that how much they use the textbook depends on the students. Some classes might need a textbook more than others. This seems like a very reasonable and logic way of working with textbooks.

5.6 Evaluation strategies

5.6.1 Group evaluation

The best idea when evaluating a new textbook is to conduct a group evaluation. The reason for this being that decisions will be based on consensus and the discussion leading to the decision will be thoroughly examined from a variety of perspectives. The responsibility is also shared, according to McGrath (McGrath p 52). This is an issue that the subject team also has considered. All responsibility is shared within the group and no one will be the scapegoat if the textbook should turn out to be a failure.

One aspect that McGrath leaves untouched is what happens if teachers are not interested in changing the textbook. If a teacher, as one informant pointed out, is reluctant to change the textbook, this teacher will not bother to show any interest in the reference copy which could be devastating for the selection.

5.6.2 Materials evaluation in the Swedish education system

Is materials evaluation needed in the Swedish education system? Our previous perception regarding Sweden as being an uncharted territory in the field of materials evaluation could of course not be investigated by four informants solely. However, our theory complies with the results from the interviews. None of the interviewees had ever heard of any guides or literature on this topic. The lack of literature in materials evaluation in Sweden could possibly be the result of different school traditions in different countries. The Swedish education system has perhaps never considered an evaluation strategy essential in the selection of textbooks. However, we believe that if the concept is introduced it may be an aid for many teachers and schools. Money and time can also be saved. In our opinion the informants have done an excellent job selecting appropriate textbooks. The first book turned out to be a failure which was never repeated. They learned from their previous mistakes. One could suspect that if they would have had the knowledge they now possess, it would have saved them time and money to conduct a pre-use evaluation prior to their first purchase. The interview

results tell us that teachers with some teaching experience subconsciously know what to look for. They know what criteria are important to some extent. However, to not follow a checklist or a guide could increase the risk of missing several aspects. When evaluating a textbook according to a guide or self-produced criteria, the chances that you will find a suitable and perhaps long-lasting textbook is higher. Perhaps if the teachers would have conducted an evaluation among several more textbooks they would have found the desired criteria, for example the textbooks' texts included on CDs and short stories instead of excerpts. If these criteria were noted they could be included in a future checklist.

Even though the teachers declined using a guide or a systematic approach in the selection procedure, they still brought up certain important criteria such as structure, practicality and learner awareness. It seems that the teachers have an intuitive idea for what is important to have in consideration in a textbook evaluation and selection. Just like we had anticipated the teachers considered the texts to be the most important criterion in the selection. This shows that the subject team has evaluated their previous purchases and by experience they came up with a new way of evaluating textbooks. This is exactly what McGrath recommends teachers to do (McGrath p 13).

5.6.3 Post-use evaluation

According to McGrath, evaluation of textbooks should be an on-going process of pre-use, in-use and post-use evaluation i.e. evaluation should not only be done before deciding to use a textbook, but during and after use as well (McGrath p 14-15). While the school's pre-use evaluation has definitely improved, the in-use and post-use evaluation is still conducted in a spontaneous and informal way. McGrath recommends periodic meetings where teachers discuss which parts of the textbooks that have worked well, and what difficulties they may have had. He also says that a lot of useful information can be gained from a post-use evaluation (McGrath p 15). One of the teachers we interviewed said that she lets her students fill in a post-use evaluation form. This is also something that McGrath suggests. He points out that students might be able to compare the textbook to other materials that they have used, and they can have valuable opinions about the textbooks usefulness (McGrath p 15).

6 Conclusion

Our question for this dissertation is: What criteria are considered when teachers at an upper secondary school select English textbooks? According to the teachers we interviewed, the most important criterion is that the texts in the textbook are interesting and relevant. Varying and motivating texts are significant for both teachers and students. The results of our interviews illustrate that the school has improved its textbook selection strategies. Even though the informants declined using a structured evaluation method, it is obvious that the teachers have intuitive ideas of what to consider in a textbook selection. A reason for not performing a more thorough evaluation was that none of the informants had any knowledge of what materials evaluation entails. One informant claimed that the procedure was too time-consuming, but in fact time can be saved by careful evaluation before the purchase.

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Oral sources

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Appendix 1

Intervjufrågor

Bakgrund:

Ålder? Tid inom yrket? Tid på skolan? Var bor du? Ämnen du undervisar i? Var utbildade du dig till lärare? Hur många skolor har du jobbat på?

Kriterier

Hur går ni på skolan tillväga när ni köper in en textbok i engelska?

-Hur gjorde ni senast? Hade ni läst något om hur man går tillväga när man väljer ut nytt material? Eller funderade ni själv ut vad ni skulle tänka på?

- Finns det några personer som är ansvariga för inköpsprocessen?

- Vilka kriterier utgår ni från?

Ekonomi (finns det speciellt avsedda pengar för detta ändamål?)

Kursplanen

Medföljande paket som textboken ingår i (webb sida, öb, CD, lärarhandledning, prov, kassetband, bildmaterial, video)

Layout

Innehåll (vad tittar man på vad gäller innehållet?)

Elevfaktorer såsom behov (vad har eleverna behov av att lära sig inom engelskan), intressen, förmågor

Inlärningsmetoder (pedagogiska synsätt)

- Vad tycker du är det viktigaste att ta hänsyn till när man väljer ut en bok?

- Hur mycket utgår ni från lärarens egna behov?

Inköp

Varför valde ni att köpa in en ny textbok?

Är det något du känner att ni kunde ha gjort annorlunda/bättre vid det senaste inköpet?

Har ni någon gång köpt in en textbok som ni inte blev nöjda med?

- Vad var det som gjorde att ni inte blev nöjda?

- Valde ni att arbeta med boken ändå? Hur arbetade ni med den?

Information om nuvarande textbok

Vad använder du för textbok i engelska just nu?

- Är du nöjd med boken? Varför/Varför inte?

Hur mycket använder du dig av textboken i din undervisning?

Görs det någon utvärdering av textboken efter att ni har använt den?

Hur går den till i så fall?

Appendix 2

Informationsblad

Hej!

Vi läser just nu vår sista termin i huvudämnet engelska på Lärarhögskolan i Malmö och är mitt uppe i examensarbetet. Det vi vill undersöka är hur några lärare på en gymnasieskola går tillväga för att välja ut en textbok i engelska. Undersökningen kommer att baseras på intervjuer och vi hoppas därför på att få intervjua dig och några av dina kolleger. Intervjuerna kommer att spelas in på band. Dessa kommer endast att avlyssnas av oss och vi garanterar full anonymitet. Intervjuerna kommer sedan att transkriberas och banden kommer att förstöras efter att vår undersökning är slutförd. Vi förstår att din tid för oss är begränsad men vi skulle uppskatta om vi kunde få åtminstone 30 minuter med dig.

För att förbereda dig på intervjun bifogar vi även en intervjuguide som vi kommer att använda. Vi vill också poängtera att det inte finns några svar som är rätt eller fel i vår undersökning. Vi är endast intresserade av dina erfarenheter av ämnet i fråga och hur du går tillväga i ditt arbete.

Intervjuerna kommer att utföras på din skola vid överenskommen tid.

Ni har när som helst rätt att avsluta eller hoppa av undersökningen om ni skulle känna att ni inte längre vill delta.

Med vänliga hälsningar

Cecilia Fredriksson och Rebecca Olsson

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