An evaluative checklist for self-access materials

Hayo Reinders and Marilyn Lewis

Self-access centres (SACs) are playing an increasingly pivotal role in supporting the (self-) study of languages. Selecting suitable resources thus becomes more and more important. At the selection stage, identifying problems with available resources is not an easy task, and is made more difficult by a lack of published guidelines. Linked with this difficulty is the wide range of skills, topics, and levels that self-access resources cater for, making it difficult to have a precisely defined list of criteria. Starting with the premise that evaluation criteria for self-access resources are different from those developed for classroom materials this study worked through two stages. First, existing evaluative criteria for self-instructional materials in general education and language learning were reviewed. Based on this review, a new evaluation tool was developed to guide self-access in the selection of materials.

Evaluating language learning material

When and how are language learning materials evaluated? At the pre-use stage, materials are seen as workplans or constructs, during use they are judged as materials in process, while retrospective evaluation considers outcomes from materials use (Breen 1989). Ellis (1997) suggests that predictive evaluation, which aims to determine appropriateness for a specific context, is carried out either by experts or by teachers using checklists and guidelines. At the in-use stage, 'long-term, systematic evaluations of materials ... are generally considered to be successful' (Tomlinson 1998: 5). These include 'formative decisions for improvement through supplementation or adaptation and [sensitizing] teachers to their own teaching and learning situation' (Nedkova 2000: 210).

Various stakeholders are involved in the evaluation process: experts and teachers (Ellis op. cit.), and material users (Dickinson 1987). The evaluation team need not be limited to teachers alone. The needs and wants of learners and administrators also need to be considered (Masahura 1998).

Criteria for self-access materials
Six checklists reviewed

Some gaps appear in published guidelines and checklists: the basis for their development is not always explicit; guidelines for production and evaluation are similar. In this section six checklists are reviewed.

A list from Gardner and Miller (1999: 115–18) covers ten categories: language level, skills, objectives, length of activity, language of instruction, pathways, technology, assessment, evaluation and progression. Specific

questions, many of them closed, are then listed for each category, for example, 'At which language levels do you need materials?' and 'Do the materials provide evaluation opportunities?' Although the list is intended to support self-access staff, the list could be time-consuming to complete.

Dickinson's (op. cit.: 77) set of criteria is the nearest to a checklist. However, his items seem focused on reading, listening, and vocabulary development and are very general, such as that the material should have 'meaningful language input'. In paraphrase his list suggests that self-access materials should include:

■ a statement of objectives
■ meaningful language input
■ practice material
■ flexibility
■ instructions and advice for learning
■ feedback, tests, and advice about progression
■ advice about record keeping
■ reference materials
■ indexing
■ motivational factors.

Jones (1993) suggests a checklist of features for teach-yourself materials for beginner level language learners. His list has the dual purpose of 'measuring what might be expected to occur' (p. 457) and in order to guide materials writers. However he said it was too lengthy to guide 'learning resource centre staff' (p. 2). Indeed it is seven pages long and lists all features of the new language which could be dealt with in the materials (phonemes, script, etc.), learning objectives, the syllabus, the role of the materials (its components, its length, its target lexicon, etc.), the relationship with the learner (autonomy or support). Finally there is a space for 'general/ subjective comments' (p. 464). Although primarily a descriptive tool, the list is, as Jones points out, also prescriptive in that the criteria are qualities that the resources have or lack. When Jones' list was trialled it was initially found to have low inter-rater reliability, indicating that people have different ideas about what qualities such materials need to possess. Relevant to the present study is Jones's comment that many self-study resources were rather old-fashioned in their pedagogy and methodology (with a number, in 1993, still based on audiolingual principles) and that strategy training and the fostering of autonomous learning skills were almost entirely absent.

Sheerin (1989: 23–4) lists the following features of self-access materials:

■ clearly stated aims
■ clarity of rubric (clear examples of what is required)
■ attractive presentation (unclear what that might be)
■ worthwhile activity (motivating, interesting, worth learning)
■ choice of procedure (allowing learners to select their preferred learning style)
■ feedback
■ balanced diet (quantity of material at each level and for each main focus should be more or less the same).

However, there is no further information on how to identify whether a particular resource possesses these qualities. For example, what is an attractive presentation?

The Language Resource Centre Project (www.lrcnet.org/html/en/ handbook.html) has resulted in a handbook for setting up centres. This includes twenty questions about the usefulness of language learning materials for a resource centre. The questions cover not only materials' suitability for self-study, but also about practical issues such as copyright and technical requirements. As such the focus of the guidelines is broader than ours but were useful in informing the drawing up of our proposed list.

Finally, Lockwood's (1998) list from general education draws sixteen distinctions between textbooks and self-instructional material. His list is presented in binary form: 'written for teacher use/written for learner use' (p. 12), occasionally offers summaries/always offers summaries' (p. 17) and 'can be read passively/requires active response' (p. 20) and so on.

Developing fresh criteria for self-access materials

Any fresh list of criteria needs to keep in mind the literature on materials evaluation and, more specifically, on criteria for self-access materials. If the concern is for purchasing materials, then a predictive evaluation tool is called for. However, if the concern includes in-use evaluation, then the question arises of who conducts it. Masahura (op. cit.) suggest involving teachers and students. Self-access centre facilitators, if they are not trained teachers, may not be in a position to evaluate materials in terms of language learning and teaching principles. On the other hand, through their language advisory work, they may have gained enough experience to evaluate resources in terms of their practical usefulness for self-study. Facilitators may also be more aware than classroom teachers of the requirements of students studying independently and therefore have better-developed expectations of self-study resources.

The present study was carried out in the context of a university English language self-access centre. The centre provides a free service to all second language students, including language advisory sessions and a range of workshops on a variety of topics relating to academic English. In addition it provides an Electronic Learning Environment developed by centre staff, which gives students access to approximately 1,100 language learning resources and guides, and advises students in their self-directed learning.

In a pre-study to this project, when SAC facilitators were asked what they believed students looked for in materials, their answers were varied and even, in some cases, contradictory. This could, of course, be seen as a strength and indeed representative of the range of students. Rather than rely on the facilitators' comments, however, a questionnaire (see Figure 1) was administered to twenty randomly selected students in the SAC. The questionnaire is shorter than we would have wished. However, students attend the SAC for short sessions between their other classes, and it was felt (on the basis of earlier experiences) that only a short questionnaire would be answered by a sufficient number of students. Previous research had shown (Reinders and Cotterall 2001) that open questions about resources led to very general comments mainly about the quantity of the materials and the types of materials students preferred, unless the questions

were specific to one or more materials present in the Centre. As the questionnaire asked about all materials in the Centre, no open-ended questions were included.

> We are trying to find out what YOU think are good materials (e.g. books, listening materials, CD-ROMS, videos) for the ELSAC. What do you look for when you search for materials to help you with your English? Please help us buy the right materials by answering the following questions:

Good materials:

1 Have clear instructions
2 Clearly describe the language level
3 Look nice
4 Give a lot of practice
5 Give feedback (show answers or let me know how I am doing)
6 Make it easy to find what I want
7 Contain a lot of examples
8 Tell me how to learn best.

	1	2	3	4	Average
1	10	8	2	0	1.6
2	12	7	1	0	1.45
3	2	2	9	7	3.05
4	9	7	4	0	1.75
5	13	7	0	0	1.35
6	14	6	0	0	1.3
7	6	11	3	0	1.85
8	14	6	0	0	1.3

FIGURE 1
Students' priorities for self-access materials

1 = very important
2 = important
3 = a little bit important
4 = not so important

As can be seen from the responses, students seem to agree that materials should have most of the characteristics suggested except 'look nice' (as suggested by Sheerin op. cit.) which apparently students found less important. Following the review of the literature and the student responses reported above, the two researchers, one the SAC director and the other a researcher in an academic department, worked to develop an evaluative framework. The goal was to develop a relatively straightforward checklist which could be used by teachers and directors of SACs to make purchasing decisions. The context envisioned was one in which sample books would be available in publishers' displays or as sample copies. The following steps were worked through.

Developing a checklist

First, a number of changes were made to items from other people's lists as follows:

■ General points such as 'meaningful language input' (Dickinson op. cit.) and 'Are learners guided through the materials?' (Gardner and Miller

op. cit.: 116) were turned into more specific points such as 'Objectives are provided for tasks'.

■ Points that were subjective/difficult to answer quickly such as 'attractive presentation' (Sheerin op. cit.) were deleted.

■ Items that were specific to one level of student, such as items on Jones' list for beginners, were excluded.

■ We rejected Lockwood's (op. cit.) binary approach since many features seemed not to lend themselves to such a straightforward categorization.

The second source of items were points that emerged during our trialling of drafts of the checklist. Materials were selected for trialling more or less at random from the shelves of the University's SAC, but the following categories of resources which are often used in a SAC were excluded from the study:

■ books containing explanations and/or examples of how to do something only (e.g. write theses and research papers)

■ reference books (e.g. dictionaries and grammar books)

■ reading material (e.g. graded readers).

The resources also included two CD ROMS.

Trialling the checklist

The trialling moved through four cycles as follows: we used a draft version of the list to examine a number of books, compared notes, and then refined the list and so on. A few items were worthwhile but so rare that they seemed better to leave evaluators to add them under the general category 'Other features'.

We discussed whether adding up the number of features and considering the total, relative to other books would be a good way to summarize the evaluation process. While individual users might choose to do that, it could also be that for some contexts one particular feature would be more important than others. For this reason we added a 'comments' column.

Two tensions became evident as the list was refined. On the one hand it was intended that users should be able to complete the task relatively quickly. If a checklist could not be completed without examining every chapter in the book then it would be less likely to be used. On the other hand, though, each time we examined another book, some fresh features emerged. For this reason we included a category 'other features'.

The other tension was between aiming for a one-size-fits-all list and yet not excluding interesting features as we found them in the books. For example, we noted that an index may or may not be worded in a way that makes it easy for a language learner to understand its content. We also noted that some books had not only a clear table of contents but also an index and even a 'map' of the contents giving more detail than the actual table of contents. Should each of these variations be suggested on the checklist or should there be generic headings such as 'clearly signposted'? We decided to leave it up to individual users to use the 'comments' column for this purpose.

The question of inter-rater reliability mentioned by Jones (op. cit.) was measured at each stage of the cycle by having the two colleagues examine each book independently and then compare their results.

Features	Yes/No/Unsure	Comments
Selecting the resource		
Claims to be suitable for self-access		
Clearly describes student level		
Needs to be used sequentially		
Accessing the parts of the resource		
An index		
A table of contents		
A detailed 'map'		
A glossary		
Chapter previews or summaries		
The learning process		
Information summarized		
Examples provided for tasks		
Objectives provided for tasks		
Keys / answers/ criteria for tasks		
Learning to learn		
Notes on the learning process		
Shows how to set goals		
Other features		

FIGURE 2
The checklist

Conclusion

This article has identified the need for a set of criteria for evaluating materials intended for a Self Access Centre, using the SAC at the University of Auckland as our starting point. Having identified the need, we set about designing a list which drew on the published work of others as well as on our own experience. Our list (Figure 2), which we see as work in progress, combines features of earlier lists with items we identified during a series of trials. In particular we were aiming for a tool which could be used reasonably quickly by either teachers or managers of SACs, particularly when presented with sample books offered by publishers.

One shortcoming of the list is that it is an attempt to strike a balance between the ideal, lengthy survey which would leave no question unasked and a shorter one which had more chance of being used. Our earlier attempts to use lengthier lists such as those prepared by Jones (1993), reviewed above, suggested that shorter, while not better, was more practical. However, we are considering ways of getting more detailed information, possibly by administering different sets of questions to different students.

As we implement this tool and learn more about the characteristics of resources used for self-access, this will enable us to further develop and improve on the checklist. We see the use of lists like the one proposed in this article as paramount for self-access centres to offer suitable resources.

Individual centres may wish to add their own questions to make the list suitable to their specific context.

Final revised version received September 2004

References

Breen, M. 1989. 'The evaluation cycle for language learning tasks' in P. Rea-Dickins and K. Germaine (eds). *Evaluation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dickinson, L. 1987. *Self-instruction in Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ellis, R. 1997. 'The empirical evaluation of language teaching materials'. *ELT Journal* 51/1: 36–42.

Gardner, D. and **L. Miller.** 1999. *Establishing Self-access: from Theory to Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jones, F. R. 1993. 'Beyond the fringe: a framework for assessing teach-yourself materials for ab initio English-speaking learners'. *System* 21/4: 453–69.

Lockwood, F. 1998. *The Design and Production of Self-instructional Materials*. London: Kogan Page.

Masahura, H. 1998. 'What do teachers really want from coursebooks?' in B. Tomlinson (ed.).

Nedkova, M. 2000. 'Evaluation' in M. Byram (ed.). *Routledge Encyclopedia of Language Teaching and Learning*. London and New York: Routledge.

Reinders, H. and **C. Cotterall.** 2001. 'Language learners learning independently: how autonomous are they?'. *Toegepast taalwetenschappen in artikelen* 65/1: 85–97.

Sheerin, S. 1989. *Self-access*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tomlinson, B. (ed.). 1998. *Materials Development in LanguageTeaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The Language Resource Centre Project: www.lrcnet.org/html/en/handbook.html

The authors

Hayo Reinders (www.hayo.nl) is Director of the English Language Self-Access Centre at the University of Auckland and Visiting Professor at Meiji University in Tokyo. He is co-editor of *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching,* published by Multilingual Matters, and is co-founder of the Independent Learning Association. His research interests are in SLA (noticing processes), learner autonomy, and online and mobile language learning.

Marilyn Lewis is an Honorary Research Fellow in the Department of Applied Language Studies and Linguistics at the University of Auckland. She continues to be involved in language teacher education in her retirement, particularly through working with voluntary tutors of refugee and immigrant new learners of English in their homes in New Zealand. She also works with teachers in South-East Asia from time to time.