

Textbook Evaluation : the Algerian Experience

The aim of this paper is to discuss the procedure followed for the evaluation of school textbooks and how they reach the classroom. Thus, we must say from the onset, that we are not concerned with the theoretical assumptions behind textbook evaluation, nor the theoretical tenets of the teaching approach which sustain these textbooks (i.e. the Competency Based Approach, henceforth CBA) as these are beyond the scope of the present paper. We believe that introducing teachers to the technicalities of textbook evaluation will be of great help to them, because as Williams (1983, p.251) puts it:

It is ironical that those teachers who rely most heavily on the textbooks are the ones least qualified to interpret its intentions or evaluate its content and method.

When dealing with textbook evaluation we must be cautious however, because as Cunningsworth (1995) and Ellis (1997) have suggested, that there are three different types of material evaluation. They argue that the most common form is probably the '*predictive*' or '*pre-use*', that is designed to examine the future or potential performance of a textbook. The other types of textbook evaluation are the '*in-use*' evaluation, is designed to examine material that is currently being used, and the '*retrospective*' or '*post-use*' (reflective) evaluation of a textbook that has been used in any respective institution. This particular paper will report on the first type of evaluation exclusively , i.e. before the textbook reaches the teacher.

The other important element that teachers should be familiar with is the theoretical assumption(s) supporting the design the textbook and the choice of the teaching materials which are included, *i.e.* the CBA. We shall consider CBA here, is its most general term as defined by Schneck (1978: vi) , and not as applied to a specific school subject:

Competency-based education has much in common with such approaches to learning as performance-based instruction, mastery learning and individualized instruction. It is outcome-based and is adaptive to the changing needs of students, teachers and the community ... Competencies differ from other student's goals and objectives in that they describe the student's ability to

apply basic and other skills in situations that are commonly encountered in everyday life. Thus CBE is based on a set of outcomes that are derived from an analysis of tasks typically required of students in life role situation.

Given this holistic approach, therefore, we shall not concentrate on any particular textbook. Rather, our aim is to offer the reader and mainly teachers, a comprehensive view about the complex process that leads to the acceptance or rejection of a textbook. This paper thus, must be seen a 'technical' discussion in as much as it concentrates primarily on facts and practice rather than theoretical issues. This, of course, will not bar us from providing some theoretical explanations when deemed necessary. In addition, we shall provide in our references below, a list of relevant documents related to the CBA and textbook evaluation which may be helpful for those readers who have a special interest in these fields.

So, until the implementation of the recent reform of the educational system (2001) all school textbooks, irrespective of content or level, were introduced in class without undergoing any prior (proper) evaluation by teachers and/or experts in education. The process leading to the submission and acceptance of a given textbook followed the same procedure: An official structure under the direct control of the Ministry of Education, the National Institute for Pedagogy, (IPN) contracted, and sometimes appointed, potential textbook writers, usually experienced teachers and/or inspectors in a given school subject, to write a given textbook. Once written, it was printed and then dispatched to all schools in the country.

The IPN, and thus the Ministry of Education, had total control, not to say the monopoly of the whole process. Needless to say that there were numerous negative consequences both at the educational and political levels. For the former, for example, textbooks contained many errors at the levels of printing and, even worse, at the level of content was at times outdated, or erroneous. As for the latter, the major problem was the overloading of some textbooks (History, Civic and Religious Education, for example) with political and ideological content/issues which reflected one-sided views, i.e. those of the ruling party.

With time, it was clear that this procedure had reached its limits, and that there was an urgent need for a deep review .

In addition two factors have contributed to speed up this review process. First, the pressure of the changing social and economic world environment (or 'Globalisation' it is commonly referred to) which required a new approach to education in a given country and the role of its citizens. And, on the other hand, there was a tacit adoption by Algeria of the Council of Europe's recommendations embodied in the 'Common European Framework of Reference' (CEFR)¹. The CEFR was developed through a process of scientific research and wide consultation and provided a practical tool for setting clear standards to be attained at successive stages of learning and for evaluating outcomes in an internationally comparable manner. It is the result of extensive research and ongoing work on communicative objectives, as exemplified by the popular 'Threshold level' concept. The CEFR provides a basis for the mutual recognition of educational qualifications, thus facilitating educational and occupational mobility. It is increasingly used in the reform of national curricula and by international consortia for the comparison of language certificates.

It is in this context then, that the Ministry of Education was led to introduce a reform of the educational system in 2001. This reform was a very ambitious one as it encompassed all the school subjects at all levels;

Among the objectives this reform has set up, the most important one was to reconsider the whole procedure for textbook writing and selection. For that purpose, the Ministry entrusted the newly created National Institute for Research in Pedagogy (INRE, formerly IPN) for the supervision of the whole process : i.e. programme elaboration, textbook writing, editing and printing, and most important of all, evaluation and approval. For that purpose, three major bodies were set up

> The Committee for the Development of National School Curricula (CNP)², whose mission² was to establish and coordinate the programmes of all the school subjects. The work of this committee would then serve as the basis for the second body,

➤ The Specialized Committee per School Subject (GSD)³, whose task was to establish a detailed programme for each school subject and eventually come up with an official document which would be made available to the potential authors who would tender for the writing of a given textbook. Finally,

➤ The National Committee for the Official Approval of School textbooks (CAH)⁴ The role of this Committee as set up in the ministerial decree is fundamental since it has, in theory, the last word as to whether a textbook is accepted or not : No textbook in any subject can be used in class if it does not bear the stamp of the committee's approval. Its decisions are final and with no appeal.

The CAH is composed of twenty permanent members appointed through a ministerial decree by the Minister of National Education . They come from different horizons : experienced secondary school teachers and inspectors, university lecturers and experts in educational research, and covered all the school subjects (Arabic, History, Geography, Mathematics, Sciences, Physics, etc.). It can call for as many experts as it deems necessary/ advisable for its proceedings Because of the vital role of this committee, and we say 'vital' because no textbook can be introduced in the educational system without its approval, our present paper will be entirely devoted to its functioning, and in particular, to the evaluation grid it uses as a blanket tool for all the textbooks it evaluates. This is why we shall not mention any particular textbook in any subject as our aim is to discuss the procedure rather than the textbook. In a forthcoming paper, however, we shall discuss the textbooks for the teaching of English .

This paper is divided into four major sections. In the first section we shall discuss, albeit very briefly, the steps which potential authors have to follow in order to submit a given textbook for evaluation by the CAH. In the second section, we shall look at the procedure the CAH follows for textbook approval or rejection. In the third section, the core of our concern, we shall discuss the contents of the evaluation grid which is the main document upon which rests the decisions of the CAH . This grid is used for the evaluation of all the textbooks in the educational system, irrespective of any particular subject or level. Finally, in the last

section we shall mention some of the hurdles encountered in this process and the steps which have been taken to remedy.

1. Textbook writing and submission:

Once the CNP and the GSD have finalised their proposals in terms of general guidelines and detailed contents for a particular school subject for a particular level, calls for potential authors to submit their textbook for a particular class are made. Applicants are given three main documents which they must necessarily use as guidelines for their proposed textbook :

- *General Specifications* about the textbook (Cahier des Charges):

These are mainly detailed technicalities about the layout, the content, the presentation, the fonts to be used, the type of colours allowed, etc., which must be absolutely followed for any submission. There are also, detailed specifications about the nature of the teaching materials in terms of the approach to be used (CBA) and their use in class. Some of the most important points of these specifications will be briefly discussed in the next section. Furthermore, it compels authors to submit, in addition to their proposed textbook, proof about the accuracy of their textbook in terms of (i) linguistic and grammatical rules, and (ii) scientific pertinence, (i.e. that the proposed textbook is void of any linguistic mistake and misprints, and that the scientific content does not contain misleading, inappropriate or obsolete information). These two conditions must be evidenced by proper certification.

- the official '*programme*' for a particular class/level:

This is the most vital document since it spells out, in a very detailed way, all the areas of language which must be covered in a particular textbook. Potential authors are thus bound to follow these guidelines scrupulously.

- finally, in addition to the programmes mentioned above, authors are also provided with what is commonly referred to as '*accompanying/support documents*' which can be seen as a detailed rationale for a particular programme.

Once the proposed textbook is ready, and due to the various administrative constraints related to the printing and distributing of the textbooks, authors must submit their work for approval by

the end of December at the latest. The textbook is deposited at the CAH secretariat for evaluation by the committee.

2. The process leading to the evaluation of a proposed textbook:

The CAH meets regularly once every two months, but can, if requested by its chairman, hold an emergency meeting. The procedure leading to the final decision is an elaborate process which we shall discuss below. Once the textbook is in the committee's hands, it has to go through three major stages before being accepted or rejected.

First, a copy of the textbook is sent to three different teams of three to four assessors each, in different places in the country (regional committees). These groups are usually composed of experienced teachers under the supervision of an inspector. In addition to the proposed textbook, and similarly to the authors, they receive :

- A copy of the *specifications*, (Cahier des Charges), the particular programme related to the level the textbook is intended to, and the programme accompanying documents
- An evaluation grid, which we shall discuss in detail below, and A summary report

Each team thus, has to answer all the points included in the evaluation grid, and additionally , to establish a synthesis report which summarises their own evaluation according to the various parameters contained in the grid. Once the three duly completed grids and reports are handed back, the CAH then, designates a specialised subcommittee of two or three of its members who are specialists in that particular subject. This subcommittee then, studies all the grids and the reports written up by the regional teams, and ultimately writes up a final synthesis report which enshrines the main conclusions made by all the evaluators together with its own recommendations for acceptance or rejection of the proposed textbook. Usually, the CAH's final decision rests upon the recommendations made by the specialised subcommittee, but in case of disagreement another subcommittee may be appointed for a new report. But this seldom happens, although some proposed textbooks had to undergo such second evaluation.

It is only when the CAH gives its stamp of approval (*homologation*) that a textbook can be printed by the publishing house (ONPS) which is a subsidiary of the Ministry of Education.

In theory, no textbook can be printed nor distributed without such approval. Unfortunately, as we shall see below, under the pressure of time and deadlines, some textbooks were printed and distributed without having been submitted to the CAH

3. The Evaluation Grid:

Since this document is the major tool which determines the fate of a proposed textbook, we shall devote an important part of this paper to its description and discussion.

The grid was initially conceived by experts from Canada and Belgium, but was gradually improved and adapted to fit the Algerian context.

The grid is a thirty page document which covers four major areas called '*Parameters*'. Each of these parameters is described in detail through a certain number of '*criteria*', themselves divided into specific '*sub-criteria*'. Each of these sub-criteria is then defined in terms of '*indicators*' or '*pointers*'. As can be seen from this description the grid is too complex and detailed to be discussed at length in the present paper (see Table 1 and 2 below). We shall limit ourselves to discussing its most important aspects so that the reader has a clear picture of its contents and its relevance to the evaluation process.

Total Number of Parameters	4
Number of Criteria	10
Number of Sub criteria	27
Number of pointers	76

Table 1 : Number of evaluation items in the grid

Table 1 above shows, the total number of parameters (4) in the grid. These are further subdivided into 10 criteria which are themselves described into 27 sub criteria also developed into 76 pointers or indicators.

Table 2 below, shows how each parameter is subdivided into the various subcomponents mentioned in Table1. For example, the first parameter in the grid, i.e. '*compliance with the requirements of the programme*' is further developed into 4 criteria themselves

divided into 11 sub criteria further developed into 38 pointers or indicators

	Parameter I	Parameter II	Parameter III	Parameter IV
Number of Criteria	4	2	1	3
Number of subcriteria	11	4	2	10
Number of pointers	38	8	4	26

Table 2 : Detailed content of the grid

Let's now turn our attention to the a discussion of the grid's contents.

First, the '*Parameters*'. There are four main parameters which evaluators have to assess. They are as follows:

Parameter I: Compliance of the proposed contents with the requirements set up in the official programme : This parameter covers both the teaching and learning aspect. It has to do with the nature of the materials and activities being submitted, e.g. they must necessarily fit with the competency-based approach

Parameter II: Compliance of the socio cultural elements included in the proposed textbook with the requirements of the programme

Parameter III: How is Advertising used in the textbook ?

Parameter IV: Compliance of the textbook with the official specifications (Cahier des Charges)

As already mentioned, each of these parameters is divided further into a certain number of defining criteria which we now turn our attention to.

The first *parameter*, by far the most important in the grid since it deals with the pedagogical features of the textbook, is divided into four major *criteria* :

- *First criterion:* The compliance of the Teaching/ Learning methodology used in the textbook with the requirements of the competency-based approach, i.e. are the authors faithful to the tenets of this

approach both in terms of the teaching methodology to be used in class and in terms of the learning procedures expected from the learners.

- *Second criterion* : The *Accuracy* of the contents , both in terms of linguistic correctness, i.e. no errors, and in terms of scientific faithfulness, i.e. no scientific falsehood.
- *Third criterion*: The compliance of the *evaluation procedures* with the competency-based approach: does the textbook include both formative (i.e. ongoing evaluation though the learning process) and summative testing (i.e. evaluation at regular intervals during the learning process)?
- *Fourth criterion*., do(es) the author(s) provide *pedagogical aids* which may help both teachers and pupils in the learning task?

Thus, this parameter covers the most important pedagogical requirements that any textbook should meet. In addition, to make this analysis more accurate, each of these criteria is further subdivided into more specific sub-criteria, which themselves are described in a very detailed way through specific indicators.

The second *parameter* is concerned with the socio-cultural dimension of the Algerian society and with universal values : i.e. Is the textbook faithful to the programme in terms of these parameters as included/ defined in the programme ?

This parameter is further developed into two criteria:

- The first criterion, looks at whether the democratic and pluralist nature of the Algerian society is faithfully represented in the textbook? Some examples of the points involved will help us to better understand this criterion : e.g.
 - There must be no racial and/or sexist prejudice in the textbook
 - No mention of any handicap
 - There must be a balanced and faithful representation of the geographical specificities of the country (i.e., North/South, Rural/Urban, Rich/Poor, and so on)
- The second criterion is concerned with some universal values which are shared by all the peoples of the world: e.g. *Homeland, Peace, Work, Courage, Solidarity , Charity ,Compassion*, etc. Are these values sufficiently represented in the textbook as to increase pupils' awareness on these issues?

The third parameter is exclusively concerned with the content and nature of *Advertising* in the textbook . Evaluators have to pay attention to two major issues :

- (i) whether the textbook is used as a device for promoting well-know brand products
- (ii) whether pedagogical aids of any nature are promoted, which may lead pupils to buy them.

The fourth and final parameter is more technical and more straightforward : it has to do with the conformity of the textbook with the specifications already mentioned above. The corresponding criteria can be summed up as follows :

- Readability of the textbook (i.e. is it handy for manipulation, does it fit with the pupils' age?
- Lay out: clear? helpful for the teachers and the pupils? Clear Table of contents? Indications for use?
- Various technical specifications for:
 - the nature of the paper used
 - Types of colours, fonts and pitch
 - characteristics of the pictures included, etc.

Over the long term however, the evaluation grid itself, i.e. its structure and content, the rationale underlying the programmes and the accompanying documents, the procedure used for the selection of the team of evaluators and the whole evaluation procedure itself turned out to be the source of many problems which hampered, and sometimes blocked the evaluation process. These points, and possible solutions, will be briefly discussed below.

4. Problems encountered

Over the years the CAH met increasing difficulties in its proceedings because of the problems it encountered at various levels of the decision process. These problems can be classified under four major headings:

- (i) The structure and content of the evaluation grid
- (ii) The rationale of the programmes and the accompanying documents
- (iii) The choice of the evaluators
- (iv) The evaluation procedure

First, the nature of the evaluation grid. It quickly turned that this grid, originally conceived by Canadian and Belgian experts

was not really fully appropriate to the Algerian context. Furthermore, the grid turned out to be either too repetitive concerning some aspects of the textbook and totally lacking for others. Its nature as a 'blanket' tool to be applied for the evaluation of all the textbooks did not allow evaluators to deal with the specificities related to a particular subject.

Many evaluators expressed their frustration in evaluating a particular textbook because the lack of a 'specific' grid applicable to their particular subject did not give them the opportunity to express their views as specialists in their particular subject. Furthermore, many questions proposed to the evaluators covered theoretical issues which they could not confidently answer because they were not familiar with these topics. For example, nearly one third of the grid (Parameter I) was devoted to evaluating the teaching materials, teaching methodology and learners' evaluation procedures within the framework of the Competency Based Approach (CBA). Unfortunately, the various reports the CAH was receiving made it clear that very few teachers and inspectors chosen to constitute the teams of evaluators were really familiar with the tenets of the CBA and its demands.

In fact, it turned out that most of, if not all the evaluators did not only meet difficulty in handling the theoretical issues behind questions which were put to them in the grid, but more worryingly, they were also unable to fully grasp the details of the rationale which sustained the programme and the accompanying documents handed to them, supposedly, as an aid to using the grid. This explains the many discrepancies and sometimes contradictory conclusions in their final reports about a given textbook. The CAH, sometimes, had to call for another team of evaluators to establish another evaluation report to help them in their decisions.

The third problem was related to the procedure used for the selection of the teams of evaluators. These were chosen nearly arbitrarily since no criteria nor database existed as to who was eligible for such a task. We say 'nearly' because the only criterion used was '*experience*'. But, as it became clear right after the first evaluation reports reached the CAH, 'experience' in teaching did not necessarily qualify them as good '*evaluators*'. All the selected teachers and inspectors turned out to have two major handicaps:

First, unfamiliarity with , and sometimes total ignorance of, the theoretical tenets of the CBA and, second, lack of training and/or practice in textbook evaluation. This led not only to huge discrepancies in their evaluation reports but more worryingly, in many cases, to reports which, at best, were highly subjective and, at worst, derogatory.

To remedy this situation, the CAH has undertaken, over the past two years and under the supervision of some of its specialists members, a training programme aimed at teachers and inspectors from different local education authorities ('Academies') during the Winter and Spring vacation. These teachers and inspectors, who covered all the school subjects, were gathered for two sessions of two to three days each during the Winter and Spring vacation. This training programme, which turned out to be popular among the trainees, helped the CAH quite a lot in that it created more consistency and more homogeneity both in the use of the evaluation grids and the writing of the team of evaluators' final evaluation report. These in-service training sessions, which are still going on, have two main objectives :

- > familiarise the participants with the tenets of the CBA in terms of teaching/learning issues and classroom evaluation through a series of workshops. The newly acquired knowledge increased their confidence not only in handling the evaluation tools they had to use, but at the same time in their teaching practices, and
- > familiarise them with the use the various evaluation tools put at their disposal, i.e. the grid, the programmes, the accompanying documents and the specifications, and how to write a final synthesis report.

This experiment turned out to be so beneficial to the participants that many other teachers, through their local educational authorities, asked to benefit from the same training.

Finally, the last and probably most important problem encountered was the evaluation procedure itself which the CAH had followed. When the CAH was set up four years ago, it was under tremendous pressure to evaluate dozens of textbooks for the primary and intermediate levels within a very short period of time, usually between January and March. Table 3 below gives an indication about the number of textbooks the CAH had to evaluate and accept (or reject) in its first year of practice.

<i>Educational Levels</i>	<i>Number of textbooks submitted</i>
Primary	25
Intermediate	20
TOTAL	45

Table 3 : Number of textbooks evaluated in the first year

Added to this workload, not to say overload, came the pressure(s) exercised by the Ministry of Education on the one hand and the editing house on the other, who both insisted on the celerity of the CAH's decisions because of the urgency of having all the textbooks ready by the beginning of the coming school year. It was a permanent race against-the-clock. To make matters worse, because of this 'emergency', the CAH overlooked a very important condition laid out in the specifications (Cahier des Charges) namely, that any textbook submitted for evaluation be accompanied by two certificates established by experts, certifying each, its linguistic and scientific accuracy. Because of this time pressure, many members of the specialised sub-committees of the CAH found themselves compelled to turn into editors, proof readers, and sometimes, because of the need to rewrite large chunks of the textbook, as co-authors.

These combined pressures thus, led to hasty decisions being made at times, as many textbooks were accepted despite their weaknesses and shortcomings. Only those containing crying mistakes were rejected. Furthermore, many textbooks bearing the mention '*accepted with reservations*' were sent to the publishing house with the express recommendations that the authors should make the necessary corrections before the book be printed: all the errors were specifically mentioned in an accompanying report. The corrected textbook had to be re submitted to the CAH for final approval. Unfortunately, the publishing house, because of the pressure of time, ignored this condition and not only printed but distributed the textbook as well. This 'trick' as it were, explains why so many

textbooks which are used in class today contain an unacceptably rate of errors. They are the result of these combined pressures to which the CAH did not or could not resist and also to the not very regular procedures used in the decision process. The CAH has to bear full responsibility for its laxity. It should never have given its approval, even with *reservations*, unless the textbook was fully satisfactory.

The other element which contributed to the present state of affairs is the lack of competition between potential authors. The CAH found itself confronted to a *de facto* monopoly of textbook writers. Most of the time, it was the same authors who, for a given school subject, submitted textbooks for the different levels. It had no say about this particular point, as the call for potential tenders was made by the publishing house.

Conclusion

The CAH is now fully aware of the shortcomings which hampered its work over the last two years. This is why it has undertaken a series of steps, some of which have already been implemented, in order to prevent the same mistakes being made again:

- Organise in-service training sessions for the regional teams of evaluators, and select among these trainees the ones who are more likely to strengthen the teams which will take part in the evaluation process on a regular basis.
- Review the '*specifications*' to include additional criteria which guarantee the professionalism of the textbook being submitted.
- Refuse any textbook if it is not submitted together with the two required certificates attesting its linguistic and scientific accuracy.
- No books containing mistakes will be accepted with '*reservations*' as it used to be done before. Nor should any textbook be sent to the publishing house (ONPS) with the hope that it would ask its authors to proceed to the required corrections. Henceforth, textbooks which answer all the required criteria laid in the *specifications* will be 'Accepted' and thus, sent to the publishing house which can proceed with their printing and distribution, or in case they lack some criteria, '*Rejected*' outright which will compel their authors to submit a new version to the CAH and make sure that the rejected copy never reaches the publishing house.

> Finally, the CAH insists on opening textbook writing to competition. When the publishing house calls for tenders it must insist on having at least two competitors, and avoid by all means, the de facto monopoly situation which has prevailed so far.

NOTES

1. The complete document of the CEFR is available at the Council of Europe site: <http://www.coe.int>
2. CNP: Commission Nationale des Programmes
3. GSD: Groupes Spécialisés de Discipline
4. CAH: Commission d'Agrément et d'Homologation du manuel scolaire.

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