

An Evaluation Of The Listening Component Of The Material “Master English Iv” For The Second-Year Students At Thai Nguyen University Of Economics And Business Administration

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Abstract: *The present study was carried out to evaluate the material “Master English IV” which is currently in use for the second-year non-English-majored students at Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA). In addition, practical suggestions would be given for further improvements of the material in the near future to meet the target of ensuring the effectiveness of the teaching and learning practices at TUEBA.*

The subjects of the study were 300 second-year non-English-majored students and 18 teachers of English. The data collection instruments used in this study included document analysis and questionnaires. Research results have revealed some strengths and weaknesses of the material, which allowed the author to conclude that the material was not completely relevant to the course requirements in terms of aims, content and methodology. Based on the findings, the researcher attempted to provide some recommendations for modifying the material to make it more appropriate to the syllabus requirements.

Despite unavoidable limitations, it is expected that this study will provide a firm base for making adjustments to the material and some ideas for further evaluation projects.

Keywords: *material evaluation, listening components, ELT textbooks*

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I. Introduction

With the rapid advancements in educational settings, learners of English have a wealth of opportunities to be exposed to high-standard instructional materials, such as slides, films and recordings. Among teaching and learning materials, textbooks play a crucial part as appropriate materials to stimulate effective teaching and learning. Talking about the importance of textbooks, Benevento (1984, p.6) states that “whenever foreign language teachers meet each other, the first words after “How do you do?” are usually “What course books do you use?”

As textbooks are considered an important element in teaching and learning English, it is essential that ELT textbooks should meet some certain standards and criteria. In other words, so as to select an effective and appropriate textbook, material evaluation becomes an unavoidable process in relation to certain guidelines and criteria. That is the reason why the selection and evaluation of textbook seems to be a very crucial issue for all parties involved in the learning and teaching process.

Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA), a member of Thai Nguyen University, was set up in 2004 with various training fields such as accounting, tourism, business administration and banking. English is considered as the foreign language that has been compulsorily taught in five semesters, ranging from elementary to intermediate levels. In each semester, there are usually 50 classes of English with around 60 students in each.

Another important point of the English teaching and learning in TUEBA that should be noted is the program outcome standard. Students are required to pass the TOEIC test with the minimum score of 450 (equal to B1 level) in order to be entitled for graduation approval. For this reason, the current teaching material has been designed with priority given to English used in business contexts and supplementary practice for the TOEIC test. However, there remain some complaints and dissatisfaction about the mismatching between the design and content of the textbook and students’ needs and expectations. Until now, no research on “Master English IV” evaluation, however, has been carried out to examine how well the material being in use matches the course requirements.

The main purpose of this study is to evaluate the particular strengths and weaknesses of the material. The findings of the research will be of great importance to both teachers and students who are currently using the textbook “Master English IV”. Besides, the study will provide a reliable basis for further recommendation

and adaptation, which helps teachers – the designers of “Master English IV” to improve this material. Therefore, this study is intended to answer the following research questions:

- How well has the listening component of the material satisfied the requirements of the course in relation to aims, content and methodology?
- What improvements should be made to the component to make it more effective in responding to the course requirements?

II. Literature Review

Material in Language Teaching and Learning

According to Tomlinson (1998), the term “material” is used to refer to anything which is employed by teachers or students to facilitate the learning of a language. Teaching materials play a vital role in delivering instruction, making knowledge accessible to learners and encouraging learners to engage in knowledge in different ways. In general, material functions as:

- A source for learners’ self-practice and reference
- A framework/syllabus
- A source and guidance for teachers, especially inexperienced teachers.

There have been different types of teaching materials emerging to meet the particular demand of students and teachers as well as other factors contributing to the teaching-learning process such as environment, culture and politics. The task of choosing an appropriate material has been raised for argument by specialists in the field of English language teaching for years.

Richards (2001) classifies materials into three kinds: printed materials, non-printed materials and materials comprising printed and non-printed sources. Printed materials include books, workbooks and worksheets; non-printed materials consist of cassette, audio, video or computer-based material; and the leftover such as self-access materials or materials on the Internet are combination of both printed and non-printed materials. According to Richards’s (2001) classification, the material “Master English IV” is a type of printed materials.

On the other hand, Grant (1987) divides materials into two kinds: traditional books and communicative books. Based on Grant’s (1987) classification, “Master English IV” belongs to communicative books since it put an emphasis on the interactive features with a balance among four skills.

Material Evaluation

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p.96), evaluation can be seen as “a matter of judging the fitness of something for a particular purpose”. In other words, evaluation of English language teaching material is the assessment of its strengths and weaknesses and to fulfill the needs of material users as well as determined objectives and requirements in the given educational context.

In spite of being a complex task, a thorough material evaluation would enable teachers and material designers to determine whether the chosen material works well after having been used for a period of time as well as adapt unsatisfactory ones.

There are different types of material evaluation; hence, evaluators have to determine what type of material evaluation will be suitable with their work. As for the material “Master English IV”, the author decides to use summative/post-use/retrospective evaluation in order to determine whether this material is effective or not and offer some recommendations for further improvement of the material.

Models of Material Evaluation

Evaluation by Cunningsworth (1984)

Cunningsworth (1984, p.15-17) proposes four general guidelines for textbook evaluation. Based on the guidelines, an evaluative checklist is developed.

1. Textbook should correspond to learner’s needs. They should match the aims and objectives of the language-learning program.
2. Textbook should reflect the uses (present or future) which learners will make of the language. Textbooks should be chosen that would help equip students to use language effectively for their own purposes.
3. Textbook should take account of students’ needs as learners and should facilitate their learning processes, without dogmatically imposing a rigid "method".
4. Textbook should have a clear role as a support for learning. Like teachers, they mediate between the target language and the learners.

Evaluation by Hutchinson and Waters (1987)

Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p.97) consider material evaluation “a matching process: matching needs to available solutions”. This matching process featuring four stages will be chosen as the framework for the material evaluation performed in this study.

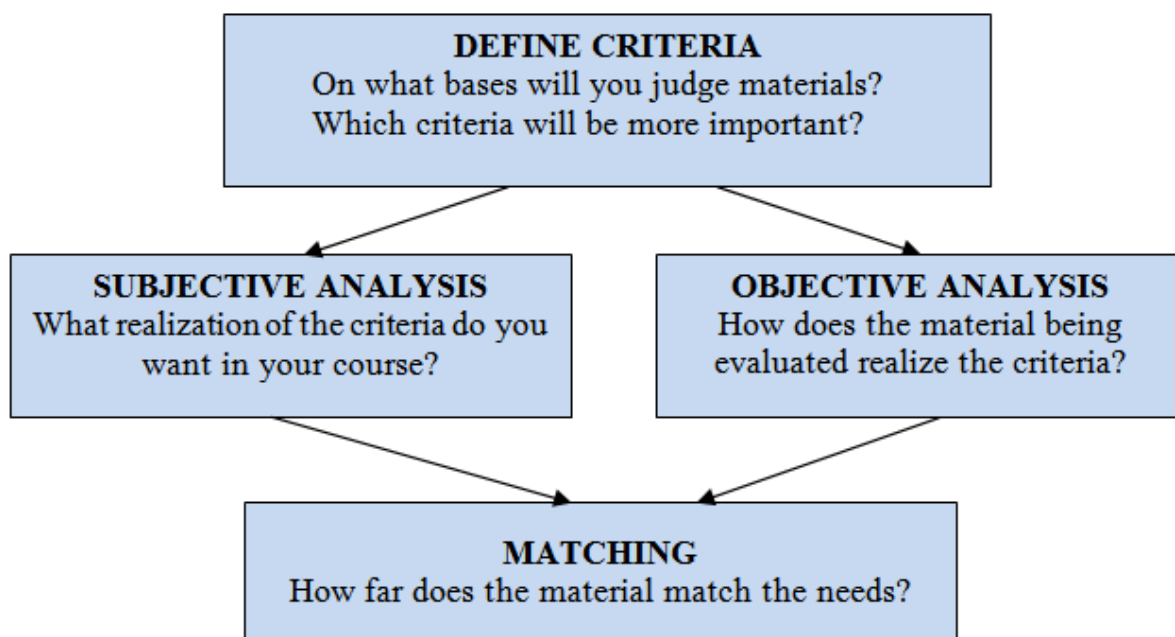


Figure 1: Material Evaluation Process (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987)

Evaluation by Littlejohn (1996)

Littlejohn (1996) suggests a preliminary framework for materials analysis and evaluation as follows:

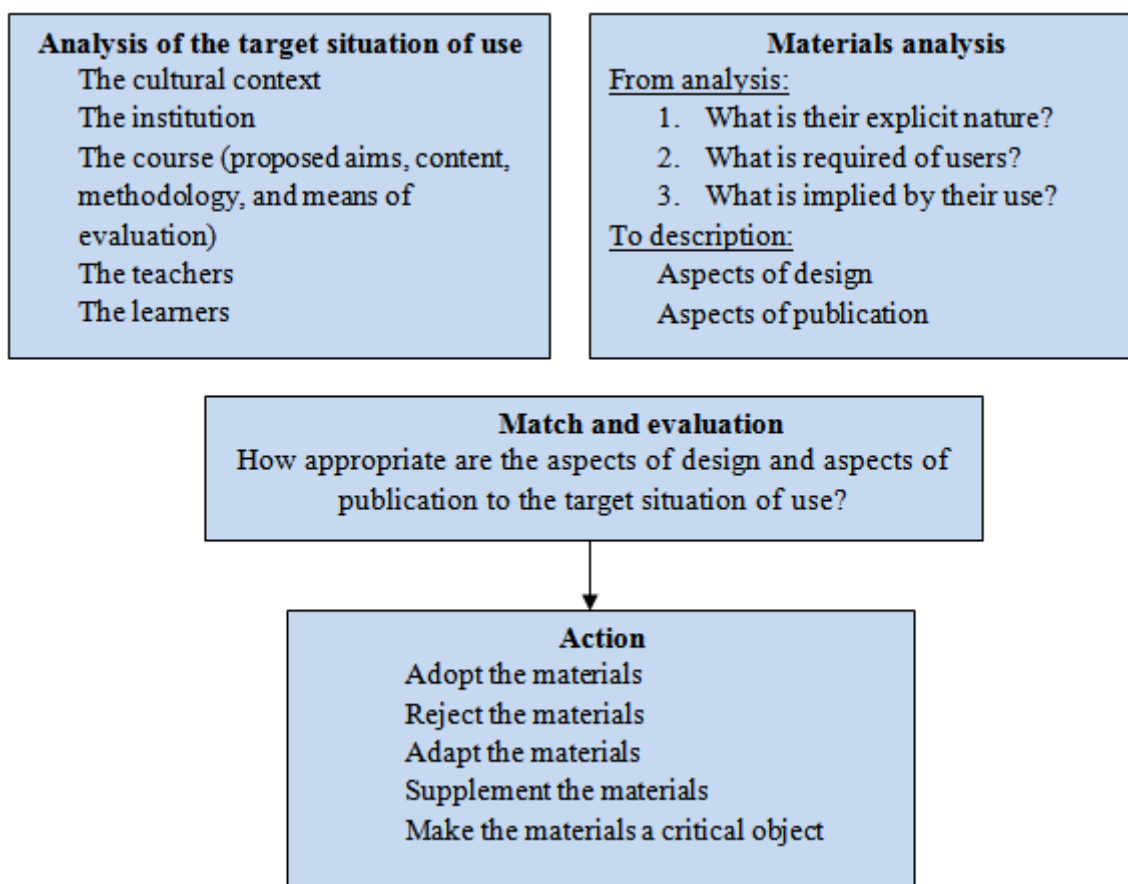


Figure 2: Material Evaluation Model (Littlejohn, 1996)

In this study, evaluation framework by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) will be chosen to check whether the in-house material “Master English IV” is suitable for the students at TUEBA. Based on the research results, strengths as well as problematic parts of the material can be identified, which may serve as a reliable foundation for further suggestions on material improvements.

III. Research Methodology

Subjects of the study

The first group of respondents includes 300 random second-year non-English-majored students at TUEBA who have had experience of studying English for from three to seven years before they entered the university. Moreover, they all had two semesters of the first year and the first half of the second year in which “Master English I”, “Master English II” and “Master English III” were introduced to them. At the time of collecting data, these students were on the 12th and 13th weeks of the semester that includes fifteen weeks.

The second group of participants in this study is 18 teachers of English. They are all from English department and they have been teaching English at TUEBA for more than three years with experience in teaching English for non-English majored students. In addition, these participants have been using this material to teach TUEBA students for at least two years.

Data collection instruments

Document analysis

In this study, the document analysis including syllabus analysis and material analysis were used to collect information required for the evaluation. The author was going to analyze material under the same criteria: aims, content and methodology used in syllabus analysis. By the material analysis, the information about whom the material is for, what objectives the material aims at, how and what the content and methodology in the material are sequenced or provided was analyzed. The results of syllabus analysis were then matched with the material analysis to see whether they were well matched to each other.

Questionnaire

The questionnaires were designed based on the results of syllabus and material analysis. Two sets of questionnaires were employed: one questionnaire for teachers and the other for students. Designing the questions was based on Hutchinson and Waters’ (1987) criteria checklist for material evaluation. The teachers and students were invited to give their opinions of agreement rating on each requirement items by choosing the number of rating scale.

Data collection procedure

Firstly, the syllabus and the listening component of the material “Master English IV” were analyzed and evaluated in terms of aims, content and methodology to collect the necessary information for the evaluation. Secondly, two sets of questionnaires for both students and teachers were redesigned and developed based on the results gathered from the first step. The questionnaires were distributed to the students on the 12th and 13th weeks of the semester (in the total of 15 weeks) while the questionnaires for teachers were delivered on the last week of the semester.

Finally, the data collected was summarized and analyzed. After gaining the final results, an overall conclusion about material evaluation was performed.

IV. Findings and Discussion

4.1. The results of document analysis and questionnaire

Based on the results and discussion of the data collected from the document analysis as well as the student and teacher questionnaires, the listening component of the material under evaluation had certain features, which were categorized into appropriate features and inappropriate features as bellows:

Categories	Appropriate features	Inappropriate features
Aims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The material covered all four English skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) with more focus on listening and reading skills. - It provided students with opportunities to practice listening skill through exercises supplied in the material. 	
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It provided authentic listening extracts to improve students’ listening skill. - The listening recordings were related to the topic of business with real situations of people in these fields. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The majority of the recordings were long, formal and fast-speech, which made students confused and hard to catch the important information. - The amount of vocabulary is excessive to

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The topics of the listening extracts were interesting and updated. - The material focused on listening and its sub-skills (listening for main ideas, listening for specific details, guessing ideas before listening, and note-taking) with the appropriate proportion of listening exercises in the four units and the listening supplementary for the TOEIC test. - The listening lessons were organized in the same model through the four units with three separate stages: pre-listening, while listening and post-listening. - The listening supplementary all began with language building section in which students were equipped with vocabulary and structures. 	<p>students.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The listening extracts were quite difficult to the students with many general idea questions put at the beginning of the lessons. - The proportion of each sub-skills was not equally weighed. - Excessive stress was given to the type of listening for main idea. - The material had few warm-up activities to help students get an overview of the lesson.
Methodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The material offered different types of tasks/exercises, such as answering questions, multiple choices, filling in the blanks, ordering. - The material made use of a variety of teaching and learning techniques. - Listening tasks were combined with speaking activities in the form of discussion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Few specific instructions for the techniques (individual, pair, and group work) were found in the material.

4.2. Suggestions from the respondents

Students' suggestions

- The content of the listening extracts is boring with too much new vocabulary.
- The speed of the listening recordings is too fast for students to catch up with.
- The types of listening tasks were too difficult to them with many listening for main idea questions.
- They need more easier listening exercises such as gap-filling, true/false and multiple choice.

Teachers' suggestions

- Listening task types should be simplified in order to reduce the level of difficulty.
- Easier listening questions such as gap-filling and multiple-choice should be given to students first instead of general questions.
- Some listening tasks should be redesigned like a gap-filling task for a summary of listening.
- Some more pre-listening activities should be added to help students listen more easily.

V. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

Material evaluation has been considered a professional practice in English language teaching. In order to utilize the material appropriately and effectively, material evaluation is indispensable. The results from material evaluation help to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the material in order to give suggestions for improvement or rejections of the material in use. Most of the studies so far have recommended some changes to promote the suitability and effectiveness of the material. Those are the encouragements for the researcher in conducting this study.

The material “Master English IV” which is currently used for the second-year non-English-majored students at TUEBA has been evaluated based on the model and criteria suggested by Hutchinson and Waters (1987). The data collection instruments were document analysis and questionnaires. Specifically, the course syllabus and the material were analyzed; two sets of questionnaires for 18 teachers and 300 students were designed to gather participants' opinions and comments on the material in terms of aims, content and methodology in order to determine how well the material realizes the course requirements.

The results showed that the material does not fully match the course requirements in terms of aims, content and methodology. Consequently, some suggestions for improving the material were provided through some possible methods of materials adaptation.

It is hoped that, this study may, to some extent, make a contribution to the improvement of the teaching and learning practices at Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration. Furthermore, the researcher also expects this evaluation project to be able to determine strengths and weaknesses of the material in order to have urgent and suitable improvement so that its effectiveness can be enhanced.

Although being carefully and seriously conducted, the study still has some unavoidable shortcomings. Therefore, further researches could be carried out to erase the limitations of this study and further develop the material so that it is the most appropriate with the requirements of the course.

5.2. Recommendations

Regarding the content of the material, the listening component of the four units contained long and fast-speech spoken texts with an excessive amount of vocabulary making students confused to catch the important information of the listening lessons. With the inappropriate feature of the listening component in terms of content, the researcher decided to choose modifying and adding techniques to adapt the material. The other adaptation technique that should be applied is the adding technique to solve the problem of the excessive amount of vocabulary.

Another shortcoming of the material in terms of content was the imbalance among the sub-skills. Regarding this inappropriate feature of the listening component, the researcher decided to choose replacing technique to improve the effectiveness of the material.

The last drawback revealed from the findings is the few warm-up activities to help students get an overview of the lesson. This inappropriateness of the material can be solved by applying the technique of adding.

In terms of teaching and learning techniques, as shown in the findings, the applied learning technique was mainly in form of working individually with a little integration of pair and group work in the pre-listening and post-listening stages of the lesson so that students had chances of learning by cooperating with each other in the listening lessons.

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