An evaluation of the coursebook used for Oral Communication One at a privately funded senior high school in Japan.

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A *Passport* to Learning?

1.0 Introduction

Coursebooks are evaluated by different people within education for different reasons, however, I would like to focus here on coursebook evaluation by teachers. Coursebooks are usually assessed before they are chosen, in order to find a suitable text from amongst the plethora available. In contrast to this, many teachers, especially junior ones, do not have the luxury of choosing their own books, 'previous decisions about the exact syllabus and the textbook to be used can often tie teachers to a style of teaching and to the content of the classes . . .' (Harmer 1991: 256). Coursebook appraisal is an important task for the teacher in this situation. It is essential to fully understand a book's content and style, as well as its strengths and weaknesses, so that the book can be adapted to suit factors such as course aims, student needs and teacher beliefs.

In this paper, I would like to look first at the literature on the subject of materials evaluation and discuss some of the important issues raised. I will then decide on a model to use, and apply this to provide a detailed evaluation of a coursebook that I am familiar with in my own context, *Passport* (Buckingham and Whitney 1995). I hope to show that textbook evaluation is a necessary and worthwhile process for teachers in any context and not only an exercise to be carried out before a book is used.

2.0 Models for Coursebook evaluation

According to Sheldon (1988), 'The literature on the subject of textbook evaluation is not very extensive.' (Sheldon 1988: 240). There does appear to be enough literature though, to select an appropriate method or framework by which to assess a coursebook.

Stern (1992: 352) identifies an important issue, 'The teacher's main problem is one of selection from an *embarras de richesses*.' This is undoubtedly true, as a visit to any large bookstore will reveal a wide and confusing array of seemingly similar books.

Nunan gives advice on what appears to be the most common reason for coursebook evaluation:

> When selecting commercial materials it is important to match the materials with the goals and objectives of the programme, and to ensure that they are consistent with one's beliefs about the nature of language and learning, as well as with one's learners' attitudes, beliefs and preferences. (Nunan 1991: 209)

Sheldon (1988: 237) suggests 'ELT books are frequently seen as poor compromises between what is educationally desirable on the one hand and financially viable on the other.' There are numerous factors to consider when choosing materials for a class and a compromise must be reached as it is almost impossible to find a product that satisfies all of these criteria in one neatly bound package. The same may be said of evaluative models. Sheldon states 'It is clear that coursebook assessment is fundamentally a subjective, rule of thumb activity, and that no neat formula, grid, or system will ever provide a definitive yardstick.' (Sheldon 1988: 245). There are a number of models and frameworks for assessing coursebooks. The reason, however, that there is not really one definitive model is that every teacher has different requirements to consider.

The majority of the evaluative models that I have found appear best suited to preliminary comparison of different books in order select a suitable coursebook. '[T]he checklists provided by Sheldon,

Littlejohn and Windeatt . . . only enable us to evaluate materials in a preliminary way.' (Nunan 1991: 211). This is also commented on by Block (1991: 211-212) 'Authors who have dealt with materials (e.g. Williams, 1983; Cunningsworth, 1984; Sheldon, 1987, 1988) have tended to focus on their selection and evaluation.' They do not exploit the teachers' knowledge of an existing coursebook.

Breen and Candlin's (1987) model, described by Nunan (1991: 209) as an 'accessible list of evaluative questions', seems to have some merits and 'invites the teacher to adopt a critical stance toward the materials' aims, appropriateness and utility.' (Nunan 1991: 209). Block (1991) offers an alternative perspective saying that Breen and Candlin's (1987) list is 'extremely complex'. (Block 1991: 212). Breen and Candlin's (1987) list, totalling more than 40 evaluative questions, does appear to be very complex. My main concern about the list is the highly subjective nature of the questions. I believe, as Nunan (1991:223) implies, answers to the questions would vary considerably from teacher to teacher.

Williams (1983) provides one of the earliest checklists for coursebook evaluation that I have discovered. He provides a sample checklist for evaluation with 28 separate items to evaluate. Williams suggests weighting each item for the purpose of 'adapting evaluative items to suit the particular demands of the teaching situation.' (Williams 1983: 253). He does not provide much guidance on how to calculate this weighting system, and I feel it is beyond the scope of this paper to apply such a cumbersome framework. Sheldon (1988) questions the ease of scoring when trying to quantify some of William's categories e.g. 'Whether or not a book is "based on contrastive analysis of English and L1 sound systems" (Williams 1983: 255) might present problems of clarification and scoring.' Sheldon (1988: 240).

McDonough and Shaw's (1993) two-stage model for coursebook evaluation is an apparently logical framework for conducting a detailed analysis of a coursebook. It provides guidance on how to perform the analysis but remains flexible. They describe it as 'a model which distinguishes the purpose behind the evaluation' (McDonough and Shaw 1993: 65) and continue to say that it is '[a]n external evaluation which offers a brief 'overview' of the materials from the outside (cover, introduction, table of contents), which is then followed by a closer and more detailed internal evaluation.' (McDonough and Shaw 1993: 66)

McDonough and Shaw make the distinction between evaluating to adopt and evaluating to adapt. In my case, I wish to use their model to evaluate a coursebook so that I can assess its strengths and weaknesses and identify areas to adapt to suit my own context. This use is highlighted by McDonough and Shaw, who say 'teachers . . . may well be interested in evaluation as a useful process in its own right, giving insight into the organizational principles of the materials . . . ' (McDonough and Shaw 1993: 65).

I propose to base this review on McDonough and Shaw's (1993) model as I believe it is well suited to my needs and appears methodical and easy to use. McDonough and Shaw (1993) make no reference to the assessment of the Teacher's Guide. 'Teachers' guides are an important part of a materials package, especially for teachers who are less experienced, or whose English is not strong.' (Cunningsworth and Kusel 1991: 128). I will include a section in this review on the *Passport* Teacher's Guide. I would like to supplement the model with a visual representation of the review based on the textbook evaluation

sheet provided by Sheldon (1988: 242). I believe a visual summary of the review would be beneficial as it is readily accessible and provides at-a-glance support for the main model.

3.0 External Analysis

I have used *Passport* (Buckingham and Whitney 1995) as a main coursebook at a private senior high school for first grade oral communication classes for three years. In this period, I have completed the book with fifteen different classes and have acquired a great deal of understanding about it. The students in the classes are aged fifteen to sixteen and each class has approximately 43 students (40% female: 60% male). The classes are "team taught" with myself, a British national, as the main teacher and a Japanese English teacher in the role of assistant which is in contrast to many other schools in Japan.

The first stage of McDonough and Shaw's two-stage evaluation is to look at the external (outside the core of the student's book) printed material. This includes 'claims made on the cover of the teachers/students book . . . [and] the introduction and table of contents.' (McDonough and Shaw 1993: 67). In the case of Passport, as well as many other books, the publisher's catalogue and Internet homepage are a good source of publisher's claims and the intentions of the authors. The Internet site for Passport is a nearly exact copy of the catalogue (http://www.oupjapan.co.jp/store/oupjapan?vgform=ProductInfo&tid=e579524cdd&product_id=1033). McDonough and Shaw also suggest examining the content page as this provides a 'bridge' between 'blurb' and book. I will use the term *Passport* to refer to the Passport range of books and associated materials.

3.1 The 'external' claims

The space constraints of this paper demand that I attach the 'external' material as appendices.

2001 OUP Japan Catalogue (See Appendix 1)

The Passport book covers (See Appendix 2 for a copy of the Workbook (WB) back cover).

The Passport introductions (See Appendix 3 for the Teacher's Guide's introduction)

The Table of Contents (See Appendix 4)

3.2 Application of the external stage of the model

McDonough and Shaw (93: 68-69) provide a list of areas that they expect to be commented on in the 'blurb', introduction and contents page:

- *The intended audience* In terms of age, students should be either adult, young adult or senior high school students. With reference to my own context, my students seem to just fit the intended audience profile, although my students may be a little young at only 15 or 16 and may not be sufficiently mature enough to realise the usefulness of the subject matter in their futures. Unit twelve is set in a pub in Sydney and some may feel this is inappropriate for high school students.

- *The proficiency level*. The catalogue states student ability should be within the range of 'false-beginner to pre-intermediate', but the Teacher's Guide suggests a narrower range, from 'false-beginner to elementary.'

- *The context in which the materials are to be used.* The book is written for students who are thinking of travelling overseas and it is also claimed to be suitable for a general English conversation class.

- *How the language has been presented and organized into teachable units/lessons.* There are twenty units in both SB and WB and a claim of 60-90 hours of class time in TG.

- *The authors' views on language and methodology.* The authors claim allegiance to a functional-communicative framework. The method proffered by the TG fits well with Finocchiaro and Brumfit's (1983) list of distinctive features of the Communicative Approach, and also fits neatly into Read's (1985: 17) outline of presentation practice and production (PPP). PPP 'has become the dominant model for "communicative lessons"' (Edwards in Willis and Willis (Eds.) 1996: 99). Ellis (1993) says this approach is just "presentation, practice and further practice" (Ellis 1993: 4). He continues to suggest that this approach is ineffective in achieving what it is intended to do. This is due to the controlled nature of the input that students receive.

  > [We] can do PPP until we are blue in the face, but it doesn't necessarily result in what PPP was designed to do. And yet there is, still, within language teaching, a commitment to trying to control not only input but actually what is learned. (Ellis 1993: 4).

  'How culturally appropriate is the communicative approach?' (Ellis, G. 1996: 213). The answer to this question is not a simple one. Hofstede (1986) says that Japan has strong *uncertainty avoidance*, that is, in general, Japanese students tend to avoid situations that they feel uncertain about. This means that students will 'feel comfortable in structured learning situations' Hofstede (1986: 314). *Passport* provides a very structured learning situation that I feel is compatible with Hofstede's findings.

In their external evaluation, McDonough and Shaw include a number of other points to be looked at and I will use some of their criteria here:

- *Is a vocabulary list included?* There is a bilingual (English-Japanese) word list at the back of the student book which contains approximately 250 of the more uncommon or context specific words featured in the book. This list may prove useful for out of class work, although some of the vocabulary in the workbook is not featured on the list, perhaps because the workbook was published four years after the student book.

- *What visual material does the book contain and is it there for cosmetic value or is it actually integrated into the text?* The SB contains colour illustrations in every unit. The purpose of these appears to be for the purpose of contextualization of the unit. The teacher's book suggests in every unit that the teacher "tell students to look at the picture . . . [and] read the caption aloud". In six of the twenty units, the TB suggests eliciting some of the vocabulary in the picture or the names of the characters shown. Eyles (1998) states that such an illustrative use of images is 'Passive in the sense that they do not require the learner to consciously articulate a response to the images in a written, spoken or kinetic form . . .' (Eyles 1998: 2). He continues to present a case for the use of more student generated images to be incorporated into pedagogy as it 'allows for the exploration and questioning of cultural norms between all participants and may lead to greater understanding and mutual respect of difference' (Eyles 1998: 5). The 'Out and About' sections of the book do

provide an opportunity for more student-centred use of image but the images are not student generated.

- *Is the presentation clear or cluttered?* The layout of each unit is well presented with a colourful illustration and quite a large amount of white space although some of the spaces for writing in listening gap-fill exercises would be insufficient for all but the smallest writing.

- *Is the material too biased or culturally specific?* The material in the book is written specially for Japan and Japanese students and therefore takes into account Japanese schemata, unlike many international books that are written for European students and contain a lot of references culturally unfamiliar to the Japanese learner.

- *Do the materials represent minority groups and/or women in a negative way? Do they present a 'balanced' picture of a particular country/society?* Men and women appear to be represented in a positive way throughout the book. The non-American characters in the book appear to be represented as slightly negative stereotypes of the kind perceived by Americans. All of the characters featured in the book are either Japanese or Caucasian. A few of the people in the illustrations are from other ethnic groups.

  The book is meant to be suitable senior high school students and yet includes a number of references to smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol. This may not seem particularly shocking but the legal age for both of these activities in Japan is twenty, with senior high students being between fifteen and eighteen. I know of one high school that has banned the use of Passport for this reason. At the schools I teach at just possessing cigarettes carries the penalty of an immediate one-week suspension. It may have been more appropriate to have omitted these items as they serve little purpose.

- *The inclusion of audio/video material and resultant cost. Is it essential to possess this extra material in order to use the textbook successfully?* There is no video material for this course but an audiocassette is essential to the use of the book. The cassette is reasonably priced and contains representative accents from America, Australia, England and France. The five main characters are portrayed by Japanese Americans.

- *The inclusion of tests.* Tests can be requested free of charge from OUP Japan and are of use in a high school environment. They do need be adapted and supplemented however as we test the students on five occasions through the school year and there are only two tests.

4.0 Internal Analysis

Having externally evaluated the book and decided that it is potentially suitable as a coursebook McDonough and Shaw's model prescribes an in-depth internal evaluation of 'at least two units (preferably more).' (McDonough and Shaw 1993: 75). I have included a copy of a typical unit in Appendix 5. All of the units follow a nearly identical cycle.

- *The presentation of the skills in the materials.* The student book focuses mainly on listening and speaking skills. Skills are presented in a manner nearer to what Stern (1992: 302) calls 'analytic' rather than in an 'experiential way'. The skills are presented in a reasonably integrated way, although I feel more truly communicative activities would enhance integration. In contrast to the student book, the workbook gives some practice in writing skills, which are usually given as

homework. I feel that in my context this balance fits with aims of the course as stated by the head of the English department.

- *The grading and sequencing of the materials.* The TG (Buckingham 1995: 5), makes the claims that:

> Passport is a complete course in itself and is intended as the sole text for a conversation class . . . Passport does loosely follow the adventures of the five main characters introduced at the start of the book and the authors wrote the course assuming that the units would be taught in order. (Buckingham 1995: 5).

I however feel that there is little grading in the book and the units could be taught in almost any order with perhaps the exception of Unit 19 which involves saying goodbye to your host family and friends and seems appropriate at the end of the book. There appears to be little recycling of lexis or grammar in the text.

- *Where reading/'discourse' skills are involved, is there much in the way of appropriate text beyond the sentence?* There is almost no reading beyond the sentence or short scripted dialogue within the student book. The workbook contains few exercises that include texts beyond sentence level, there are three texts that exceed six sentences with the longest being ten sentences in length. The 2001 OUP Japan catalogue (see appendix 1) has introduced a new graded reader to accompany the series 'that can be used together with the passport coursebooks. The reading level is set at a vocabulary of 400 headwords, making it ideal for out of class practice for pre-intermediate level students.' This would appear to provide some opportunity for students to practice extended reading.

- *Where listening skills are involved, are recordings 'authentic' or artificial?* There are two listening stages to each unit. The first of these is designed to 'introduce in context the target language of the unit, in a non-threatening way.' (Buckingham 1995: 6). All dialogues in the books have been specially scripted, but claim to 'incorporate hesitations and natural pauses to introduce students to these features of speech.' (Buckingham 1995: 6). Some of the dialogues, while containing natural-like pauses, contain questions and responses which I feel are unnatural sounding. Unit 10 of the SB (see appendix 5) contains a dialogue for students to practice and effectively memorise, I have included part of this below:

Rie:	Yes, I have one brother and one sister.
Amy:	I see. Tell me, where do you live?
Rie:	Well, we live in a small apartment in the suburbs of Tokyo.
Amy	I see. So, what do you usually do on weekends?
Rie	I like to play tennis.
Amy	Wow! I didn't know you could do that!

(Buckingham 1995: 105)

I feel that although this conversation is possible it is unlikely to occur in the same way.

The second listening activity is based on a dialogue very similar to the dialogues in the first stage but is a gap fill activity, which is practised by the students, in pairs, after they listen. The teacher's book suggests that the teacher models and drills the sentences before students practice. It may be better to use the cassette as a model, as this provides students with a variety of accents and offers

consistent intonation. The use of choral drilling may have some benefit for the students as they have had little opportunity to actually speak in English before and need some opportunity to connect the spoken sounds of English with its written form. The role of choral repetition in the classroom is criticised by many including Littlejohn and Windeatt (1989: 67) who say that 'simply repeating sentences . . . would appear to demonstrate clearly that [students'] role in the classroom is largely a powerless one . . .'

- *Do speaking materials incorporate what we know about the nature of real interaction or are artificial dialogues offered instead?* On first inspection of the book, I felt that speaking materials were real in nature, but closer examination has led me to a different opinion. The second stage of each unit is called 'Look and learn' and it 'sets out the target structures of the unit . . . commonly presented as questions and answers for the students to study and then practice in pairs' (Buckingham 1995: 6). I checked the validity of some of these questions and responses as set out in the book by asking a number of native or near native speakers of English a few of the items I felt were unnatural or strange. Page 26 of the student book gives these questions and answers for students to practice:

| What does your father do? | My father works in a bank. |
| What does your mother do? | My mother is a school teacher. |

(Buckingham and Whitney 1995: 26)

The replies given to me by the people I asked all started with "She/he's a . . ." or "He/she works in a . . ." and point to the examples given as being unnatural. In general, though I think most of the speaking material is natural sounding.

- *Is the teacher's guide efficacious in achieving its aims?* The TG is 112 pages long and this space could be used much more effectively. The layout and ordering of each unit is almost identical, and it would be greatly improved if it had outlined alternative approaches to presenting each unit, rather than repeating itself. There are a number of optional activities given, many of which are unsuitable for the large class sizes. Some of the instructions given in the book, especially the scripting of every instruction to give to the students, seems pointless in all but he first unit. Cunningsworth and Kusel (1991) provide a framework for evaluating teacher's guides. It would be beneficial to thoroughly examine the TG for Passport, however it is outside the scope of this paper.

5.0 A summary of the review

Sheldon (1988: 242) suggests an outline for an evaluation sheet, which would be very useful in many English departments. Reviewers would have to complete the appraisal in an objective way, however I feel factors such as teacher training, beliefs about how language is 'learned' and experience may influence overall opinion. I have completed Sheldon's evaluation sheet below as I feel it provides a visual and more accessible assessment. For more information on the criteria, see Sheldon (1988).

Table 1

| Factual Details: Assessment of Passport (OUP) for use as an Oral Communication One coursebook. |
| Title: Passport |

Authors: Angela Buckingham and Norman Whitney		
Publisher: Oxford University Press	Price: ¥ 1990	
ISBN: 0194513025	No. of Pages: 80	
Components: SB/TG(English + free Japanese)/WB/Cassette/Graded reader and free tests.		
Level: False-Beginner to Pre-Intermediate	Physical size: A4	
Length: 20 Units 30-40 Hours		
Target Skills: Listening and speaking		
Target Learners: Senior High/Adult		
Target Teachers: Native English speakers with some support for Japanese English teachers		
ASSESSMENT (✳ Poor ✳✳ Fair ✳✳✳ Good ✳✳✳✳ Excellent)		
Factor	Rating	
Rationale	✳✳✳	For college students going abroad.
Availability	✳✳✳✳	Readily available.
User definition	✳✳✳	Low-level Japanese false-beginner.
Layout/graphics	✳✳✳✳	Uncluttered and colourful.
Accessibility	✳✳✳	Well organised generally.
Linkage	✳✳	Connected theme but little progression.
Selection/grading	✳✳	Little or no recycling of linguistic items.
Physical characteristics	✳✳✳	More space to write notes required.
Appropriacy	✳✳	A little mature, needs more relevance.
Authenticity	✳✳	Lacks authenticity.
Sufficiency	✳✳	Needs supplementing and cassettes.
Cultural bias	✳✳	Contains doubtful stereotypes.
Educational validity	✳✳	PPP.
Stimulus/practice/revision	✳✳	Practice does not equal retention.
Flexibility	✳✳	Teachers Guide too inflexible.
Guidance	✳✳✳	Too much 'hand-holding'.
Overall value for money	✳✳	Expensive.

(Taken from Sheldon 1988: 242)

Passport is an accountable textbook and will provide the inexperienced teacher with a feeling of professionalism. Students may also respect this kind of teacher-centred control of lessons in Japanese high schools, as they experience this kind of control in other subjects. This may be one of the main reasons that passport is so popular in Japan.

Passport looks really good. The layout of the book is uncluttered and the graphics are colourful and interesting. Unfortunately, the benefits of such graphics are purely cosmetic, as they are not intended to be exploited in class, but are supposed to contextualize the listening activities. The artwork is well drawn but photographic images may have been better. The Teacher's Guide for Passport 'holds the hand' of the inexperienced teacher, but may be considered patronising by others with more experience or training.

The book is suitable for young high school students, as long as discretion is exercised on the part of the teacher when confronting the areas of smoking and drinking. These areas seem to have a very small part, both functionally and lexically, and I feel their inclusion is unnecessary. The questionable authenticity of the books is both regrettable and seemingly unnecessary in a book intended for students

who are going to study abroad. The authors hint that they have done some research into authenticity but in this situation, I see no reason to use non-authentic materials.

My main concern about the book is the methodology that accompanies it, but I feel suitable adaptation can redress the imbalance of what White (1988) in Skehan (1998: 94) describes as "a meaning impoverished methodology". These views are echoed by many others including Skehan, who writes:

> The underlying theory for a PPP approach has now been discredited. The belief that a precise focus on a particular form leads to learning and automization (that learners will learn what is taught in the order in which it is taught) no longer carries much credibility in linguistics or psychology (Brumfit and Johnson 1979; Ellis 1985). (Skehan in Willis and Willis 1996: 18).

There are many opportunities for students to practice speaking, but the nature of this output is very controlled and I feel that it is unlikely to lead to effective consolidation of language. I do not believe that the material is retained by the majority of students for more than a short time.

One more important factor is the price of the books. If students have both student book and workbook, the price is approximately double the price of a government authorised Oral Communication One textbook. This could be an important factor for many schools when choosing the books in today's economic climate.

6.0 Conclusion

The appraisal of coursebooks not only before selection, but also after they have been used, is a valuable exercise for any teacher. It provides a greater perception of the book's strengths and weaknesses, which enables the teacher to focus on the weak points and adapt or supplement them accordingly.

It seems unfortunate that in light of second language acquisition (SLA) research, this book is still based on PPP and there is no attempt by the authors to incorporate consciousness-raising (C-R) activities. There are some sections of the book that can be used to devise C-R activities, such as the bilingual background notes. The English halves of the background notes provides some of the only authentic materials in the book, as I do not believe it was written for the student to study. They are written in a natural style far beyond the comprehension of false-beginner/elementary students.

Although the book has many weaknesses it can be adapted and edited to provide a usable coursebook that I am convinced provides a valuable learning experience for the students. Some of the units are not very relevant for high school students but they can simply be omitted.

The Teacher's Guide provides a number of suggestions on how to supplement the lessons and some of these are reasonably communicative (see Stern 1992: 183-184 for examples of communicative tasks). The TG does however contain too much 'hand holding' and would benefit from greater focus on alternative ways to teach lessons.

In classes of over forty largely unmotivated high school students, the rigid nature of the book may be an important tool for managing students' activities. In classes of more motivated students this rigidity could become boring. At this time, I know of no other book that would be accepted by the parties concerned as readily as *Passport*.

The head of the English department seems particularly proud of Oral Communication One in the school and has invited the heads of English from a large number of affiliated senior high schools to come and watch the classes.

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