



## ELT MATERIALS FOR GENERAL FOUNDATION ENGLISH: A POST-USE EVALUATION

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### **Abstract:**

It is generally acknowledged that the college/university foundation programme, often instituted as a one-year course of instruction, plays a crucial role in preparing students for graduation to their various academic departments, which are usually located within the same educational institution. Foundation studies programmes in Oman are delivered to cater for the disciplinary, and almost invariably the closely related academic English language needs of the academic departments in addition to the requisite basic computer literacy and mathematical skills. The present study sought to evaluate two sets of teaching-learning ELT materials at a higher education college in Oman on a post-/in-use basis by the teachers of three general to intermediate level English language courses vis-à-vis the first set of *Linguaphone* courses forming the core, and of an *IELTS* Preparation course using the second set, respectively. All the courses were instituted in the General Foundation Programme (GFP). The main research instrument was the Checklist for ELT Materials Evaluation, adapted from Mukundan et al, 2011, that comprised 55 close-ended items and two open-ended items. It was discovered that 16 evaluative items relating to the use of *Linguaphone* course materials in the main were rated as "Good" (as expected, in the interest of target language/speaker authenticity), 29 items as "Adequate", and 10 items as "Weak", cf. cultural sensitivity). On the other hand, 43 items relating to the use of the *IELTS* Preparation course book were evaluated "Good/Excellent", with the remaining 12 items being evaluated as only "Adequate/Weak". The teachers also highlighted aspects of both sets of materials that worked well with their respective classes of students, as well

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as areas of their use that required improvement. While it was rather tempting to follow up the respective separate evaluation of the two sets of materials with a comparative one of the corresponding merits, or demerits as the case may be, it was determined that this would not be fair given the different levels, teaching-learning objectives, and content make-up of the courses, among other factors. On the global level, however, it was concluded that both sets of materials needed supplementary materials and/or adaptation work on the part of the teachers, with the Linguaphone courses requiring more resourcefulness on the part of the teachers as they endeavoured to meet the teaching-learning outcomes of the courses of instruction concerned.

**Keywords:** general foundation studies; post-use ELT materials evaluation; ESL textbook evaluation checklist; language learning materials selection and adaptation; materials and methods in ESL/EFL

## 1. Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that the college/university foundation programme, often instituted as a one-year course of instruction, plays a crucial role in preparing students for graduation to their various academic departments, which are usually located within the same educational institution. In the Sultanate of Oman, Foundation studies are currently called the General Foundation Programme across the country, and generally cater for the English language, as well as basic computer literacy, or ICT (Information and Communication Technology) and mathematical skills required by the academic departments of each higher learning institution. It is noteworthy that the bulk of the teaching-learning time is taken up by English language courses, and GFP students are generally expected to attain a level of competence in the language equivalent to IELTS (International English Language Testing System) Band 5.0 (See Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programs, or *OAS for GFP*, 2008, p. 5).

### 1.1 General Foundation Programme (GFP)

Students who were matriculated in the General Foundation Programme (GFP) at the college at that time were required to complete several compulsory courses of instruction in the English language area of learning (i.e. those who do not attain the required standard in the placement test or produce evidence of an IELTS band 5 pass), one of the four areas specified in the Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programs (*OAS for GFP*, 2008).

The OAAA (Oman Academic Accreditation Authority) had mandated GFP as “a compulsory entrance qualification for Omani degree programs” (*OAS for GFP*, 2008, p.

4), and therefore endeavoured to audit and accredit all Omani HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) that offered the programme locally. The OAAA specified the following purpose and overall learning outcome that was to be targeted in the GFP English language learning area: To extend the English language skills of the student to enable active participation in their post-secondary or higher education studies, which was to be realised via a series of learning outcome standards in various language skills and academic activity (*OAS for GFP*, 2008, p. 10). It was therefore clear that the overarching aim of the English language area of learning in the GFP minimum standards was preparing students for academic studies i.e. enabling “*active participation in their post-secondary or higher education studies*” (*OAS for GFP*, p. 10). The general aim and the learning outcome standards would fall, as it were, within the ambit of what is known in ELT circles as English for Academic Purposes (EAP), with the language learner progressing from the EGAP (English for General Academic Purposes or even “General English”) to perhaps to more discipline-oriented ESAP (English for Specific Academic Purposes) later on (Abdullah, 1998, 2009, 2017; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1988; Jordan, 1996). It is pertinent to note here that the OAAA emphasized that the outcome standards “*are not prescriptions for courses/modules*” in that the HEI could design for use a range of courses or modules to cater for its students’ needs (*OAS for GFP*, p. 7).

## 1.2 GFP English Language Courses and Learning Materials

At the time the present study was conducted, GFP students at the college were required to register in and complete four English language courses: Course codes 801, 803, 804 and 807, which were designated at Levels 1-4, respectively (they also did basic computer literacy, basic and pure/applied mathematics, as well as a study skills course in English towards the end of their Foundation year). Students who had transfer credits from another similar placed institution or those who held IELTS qualifications were exempted from one, two, three, or all the courses scheduled. The compulsory English language courses together with their areas of language focus, credit hours/course, teaching-learning materials in use, and number of teaching staff members at the time are presented in Table 1:

**Table 1:** GFP English Language Courses at the College

Course Code	Course Name	Language Focus	Credit Hours	Teaching-Learning Materials	No. of Teachers
801	Integrated Language Skills	Listening, speaking, reading, and writing	10	<i>Ware, D. (1988). Linguaphone Beginner’s English Course</i> (Units 1- 10)	4
803	Academic	Reading and	5	<i>Ware, D. (1988). Linguaphone</i>	4

	Reading & Writing	writing Skills		<i>Intermediate English Course: Programmes 11-20.</i> London: Linguaphone Institute Ltd.	
804	Academic Listening & Speaking	Listening and speaking skills	6	<i>Ware, D. (1988). Linguaphone Intermediate English Course: Programmes 21-30.</i> London: Linguaphone Institute Ltd.	4
807	IELTS Preparation		10	Brook-Hart, G., & Jakeman, V. (2012). <i>Complete IELTS: Bands 4-5.</i> Cambridge: Cambridge University Press	5

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 ELT Materials Evaluation Checklist

The evaluation of language teaching-learning materials in tertiary level ELT (English Language Teaching) programmes may be undertaken in two main ways as part of an ongoing curriculum review and subsequent renewal, that is, predictive evaluation, or retrospective evaluation (Ellis, 1997; see also Cunningsworth, 1995). In other words, the evaluation of a course book or set of materials for a programme of instruction may be: 1) pre-use or predictive in nature, that is, to analyse the materials in question for the purpose of possible adoption in a course of instruction, as “*basically a straightforward, analytical process*” to match needs to “*available solutions*” (Sheldon, 1988, p. 237), or 2) with materials and/or textbooks already in use, the evaluation may be post-use or in-use in that “*attention is given to retrospective evaluation...to help teachers to evaluate the effect of the materials they are using and make modifications*” (Tomlinson, 2012, p. 148). As Sheldon (1988) has also noted, post-use evaluation also enables the teachers to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the materials in use with a view to improving the materials further. The various evaluation processes may be conducted concurrently to review ELT materials with a view to modifying them and/or to analyse new ones to replace, even partially, existing sets.

Recently, Mukundan et al. (2011) have noted that ELT materials in general and textbooks in particular, have generally been evaluated qualitatively. For example, Ellis (1997) outlines a set of evaluative criteria which are used to collect data which is then analysed qualitatively to prepare “*a narrative description of the information, perhaps illustrated by quotations and protocols*” (p. 40). Mukundan et al (2011) argue the case for the use of an evaluation checklist that can be used to analyse data quantitatively. They state that such a checklist “*allows a more sophisticated evaluation of the textbook in reference*

to a set of generalizable evaluative criteria” and makes for an objective assessment that is quantitative via the use of Likert scale ratings (p. 22). Subsequently, they develop a textbook checklist that is based on a survey of a broad range of evaluative criteria concerning the teaching-learning context and the needs of the learner, as well as those of the teacher (e.g. Byrd, 2001; Sheldon, 1988), the physical and linguistic features of the materials or the course book itself (see Cunningsworth & Kusel, 1991), and the cultural backdrop to the presentation of language skills and functions (Alptekin, 2002; Cunningsworth, 1991; Harmer, 1991; Kilickaya, 2004). Mukundan et al. (2011) classify their resultant list of evaluative criteria into two general categories: 1) General attributes, and 2) Learning-teaching content, both of which further sub-categories of criteria. See a description of these in the “Materials and Methods” section below and a copy of the checklist appended to this paper.

## 2.2 Linguaphone English and IELTS Preparation Courses

Lam (2002) notes that Linguaphone materials are the earliest authentic native-speaker materials “from overseas” that he encountered in his “Advanced Teacher Training Course” in China. Lin et al. (2005) relate the experiences of another English language teacher in China, Wendy, who saw the Linguaphone English Course as “good pedagogy” as part of the communicative language teaching approach in the late 1970s besides serving as the only “*authentic material that was available for use*” (p. 11) in both the major varieties of “(British) English” and “American English” (Hartmann, 1996). Although Linguaphone enjoys “*a long history of success in marketing...audio-method packages for foreign language teaching*”, the company has published a composition textbook based on the American rhetorical approach for upper intermediate classes (Jenkins, 1992, p. 15). Generally, recording conditions and speech quality of Linguaphone materials are rated highly (Jha, 2014; Kamagata, 1975), as are some of their grammar teaching components (Yu-shi, 1983) and advanced courses (see e.g. Labeled, 2002). However, it is imperative to investigate how a set of basic Linguaphone materials work out in actual classroom teaching-learning applications as the present study set out to do in the case of a small higher education college.

The *Linguaphone English Course* in use at the college at the time of the present study comprised Beginner’s and Intermediate Level learning materials: eight audio CDs, a base module containing printed transcription of the CD recordings in MP3 audio format with illustrations, beginner’s level separate oral, and written exercise books, intermediate level course book comprising 10 “Programmes” and practice exercises (with an answer key) based on the programmes, as well as a user handbook in Arabic (for the students). The base module contained an introduction and a total of 30 lessons, each lesson comprising short dialogues relating to the central situational theme of the

lesson. All the lessons were authentic British native speaker situations (See Lin et al., 2005, and Hartmann, 1996 above) ranging from “The airport”, “The Beardsley hotel”, “The bank and the post office”, “Simon’s birthday”, “A nice quiet afternoon”, and “Sightseeing in Cambridge” to “Leaving the hotel”. Each lesson ends in a “Just for Fun” activities such as crosswords and quizzes.

The content of the *Complete IELTS Bands 4-5* course book is organised around 10 topics as diverse as “Great places to be”, “People’ lives”, “Getting from A to B”, “Literacy Skills”, and “Buildings”, each of which form a teaching-learning unit of materials. Hence it is claimed to be “*an enjoyable and motivating topic-based course designed to help students with a B1 level of English to achieve their best score at IELTS*” (Brook-Hart, Jakeman & Jay, 2012, p. 4). Each of the units contains tasks and exercises to help students practise listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills together with “*essential IELTS-related grammar and vocabulary*” and strategies and approaches to tackle the IELTS examination. O’Loughlin and Arkoudis (2009), who investigated the rate and nature of improvements made by 63 international students on an IELTS academic programme at a major Australian university, discovered that the key average improvement was in listening and reading skills, and least in writing with significant correlations among the three skills (but not with speaking). They also found that students with lower initial results in the three skills tended to improve at a greater rate than those with higher scores. In another study at the university of Melbourne, Bayliss and Ingram (2006) examined the expected English language competence improvements of 28 international students from China, Iran, Botswana, Malaysia, Japan, etc. from different campus departments on a six months IELTS study programme, and concluded that IELTS scores obtained by the students “*quite accurately predict...students’ language behaviour in the first six months of the program, even though individual students might perceive their language proficiency levels quite differently*” (p. 11). In sum, to answer “*Does IELTS preparation work?*”, Brown (1998) has observed that focused instruction with emphasis on IELTS writing task completion and its attendant “*strategies for writing under examination conditions, seem to assist students of IELTS preparation programs to achieve an average gain of one IELTS band score over a ten-week course of instruction*” (p. 20).

### **3. Purpose and Research Questions**

This paper reports the outcomes of a recent ELT learning-teaching materials evaluation, circa June 2015, that was undertaken among the teachers of four courses of instruction in the General Foundation Programme at a college of higher education in Muscat, Sultanate of Oman. The teachers had used the two sets of materials in question here in

their classes over several semesters of study at the college. In the main, the Mukundan et al. (2011) evaluation checklist was used to address the following research questions:

- 1) What attributes of the two sets of ELT materials, respectively, were desirable in terms of their facilitation of teaching-learning of the language in the Foundation programme?
- 2) What are the areas of strength and weakness/lack of the sets of materials in question?
- 3) How did the teachers as users of these materials complement them with other teacher-sourced materials, if at all these were deemed necessary?

## 4. Materials and Methods

### 4.1 Respondent Staff Profile

A total of 18 members of the General Foundation Programme (GFP) at the college participated in the study. Four teachers each were teaching courses 801 (Integrated Language Skills), 803 (Academic Reading & Writing), and 803 (Academic Listening & Speaking), while another five teachers taught course 807 (IELTS Preparation) (See Table 1.). All the teachers held Master's degrees in English Language or Literature, and had at least five years' experience teaching the course mentioned. Several teachers hold additional professional qualifications such as CELTA (Certificate of English Language Teaching to Speakers of Other Languages).

### 4.2 Materials Evaluation Checklist

For the purpose of the retrospective or post-use evaluation of materials currently in use in the teaching-learning of courses 801, 803, and 804 (Linguaphone English programmes), and 807 (IELTS Preparation: bands 4-5), copies of an evaluation checklist (slightly adapted from Mukundan et al, 2011) were distributed among 17 teachers of the English language courses in question in the General Foundation Programme at Al Zahra College for Women.

The minimal adaptation of the checklist included adding spaces for preliminary information about courses at Al Zahra and the sentence "*They cater for the learning outcomes expected of the course.*" to the initial "*General Attributes: The materials in relation to the syllabus and curriculum*" section. (See copy of checklist appended to this report).

The 55 close-ended items of the survey questionnaire comprised two major sections:

- I. General Attributes (18 items) – relevance to syllabus and expected learning outcomes, compatibility with ELT methods, suitability for learners, physical attributes, outlay of supplementary materials; and

- II. Learning-Teaching Content (35 items) – general utility, facility with language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as well as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and practice exercises.
- III. The two open-ended questions at the end of the instrument were retained to elicit teachers' views based on their experience with the materials they used in their teaching:
  - a. What other aspects of the materials seem to work with your students?
  - b. What areas of the materials need the most improvement?

### **4.3 Data Collection and Analysis**

Copies of the checklist were given to the 17 teachers during a brief meeting to explain the purpose of the checklist and the main areas of the evaluation. The teachers were asked to return the completed checklist the next day.

Responses to the various items of the checklist were then entered into the SPSS Ver. 20 program. Frequency counts and descriptive statistics (median, mean and standard deviation) for all the items were obtained separately for the Linguaphone (courses 801, 803 & 804) and IELTS (course 807) materials, respectively, and listed by descending median/mean values. Given the small sample of respondents in the survey (12 respondents in the Linguaphone sample, and 5 respondents in the IELTS text sample), the median values are of greater importance as indicators of the relative facility or utility of each evaluative criteria in the summary data tables in the next section.

The results of the various descriptive analyses were organised in tables for subsequent data commentary. Each table is based on the overall outcome of a set of evaluative criteria in terms of "Excellent", "Good", "Adequate", or "Weak" ratings except for the Summary Ratings of each set of texts which comprise general criteria stated in capital letters. Items in all tables are ranked from highest to lowest mean values together with standard deviation values to provide some indication of homogeneity (or its lack) of responses to each evaluative criterion.

## **5. Results and Discussion**

### **5.1 Linguaphone Beginner's and Intermediate Course Materials**

Table 2 lists evaluation criteria that have been used by the teachers to rate the Linguaphone materials as "Good" (median value = 3.00 or more). It is noteworthy that these criteria represent aspects that are important for the acquisition of the central language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and that the teachers using the materials find them useful in facilitating teaching-learning in the classroom. The 12



teachers who thought that the materials were “Good” overall were somewhat homogeneous in their rating (std. dev. <1.000) except perhaps on a number of important criteria for which views may be deemed somewhat divergent (std. dev. >1.000): authenticity of language and dialogue situations (No. 4 & 7), as well as topic variety, amount of teaching-learning materials available for use, and interactivity of tasks (No. 14, 13 & 15), in that order). The teachers thought that vocabulary and grammar items were appropriately contextual, and rightly so given the situational presentation of the Linguaphone materials (Lin et al, 2005).

**Table 2:** Summary Ratings of Linguaphone Materials, Aspects Rated “Good”.  
Ranked by Descending Means, N=12

No.	Evaluation Criterion	Median	Mean
1.	Words repeated and recycled	3.00	3.27
2.	Words contextualized	3.00	3.18
3.	Distribution of vocabulary load	3.00	3.18
4.	Natural and real language	3.00	3.09
5.	Grammar contextualized	3.00	3.00
6.	Audio materials support	3.00	3.00
7.	Natural dialogue situations	3.00	2.91
8.	Appropriate lesson vocabulary load	3.00	2.91
9.	Pronunciation contextualized	3.00	2.90
10.	Easy pronunciation practice	3.00	2.90
11.	Grammar spread achievable	3.00	2.82
12.	Simple to complex tasks	3.00	2.64
13.	Appropriate size or length	3.00	2.64
14.	Variety of topics	3.00	2.55
15.	Interactive tasks	3.00	2.55
16.	Achievable task objectives	3.00	2.55

**Note:** Median/Mean Values: 4=Excellent; 3=Good; 2=Adequate; 1=Weak; 0=Totally Lacking

A large number of the criteria that had been used to evaluate the Linguaphone materials were rated as “Adequate” (median value 2.000) by the teachers (see Table 3). The adequacy ratings range from the explicitness of the materials in dealing with grammar, having adequate print quality, and making for meaningful communication at the top-end to compatibility with students’ socioeconomic context and fun elements in the materials at the bottom-end. While the teachers’ views were generally divergent (std. dev. >1.000) across most of the survey items, perceptions seemed to be “bunched” together in a few criteria i.e. a relatively higher level of agreement in several areas of their evaluation: materials are just about adequate for language practice and for helping over/underachievers (No. 27 & 34) but only somewhat adequate in terms of text length and compatibility with students’ background knowledge and socioeconomic context

(No. 37, 42 & 44). As Kilickaya (2004) pertinently notes, although ESL teachers and their learners consider cultural knowledge desirable in the interest of authenticity in their classrooms, “*there seems to be no sensible reason for insisting on this in the process of language learning*” because “*absolute authenticity in the materials*” might not be necessary and that “*Teaching materials are proper to the extent that they are appropriate to learners’ needs, not the extent that they have to be appropriate*” (See also Alptekin, 2002; Canagarajah, 2005; and Widdowson, 1998 on the native speaker myth and authentic language in second/foreign language learning in non-native contexts).

**Table 3:** Summary Ratings of *Linguaphone* Materials, Aspects Rated as “Adequate”, Ranked by Descending Mean Values, N=12

No.	Evaluation Criterion	Median	Mean
17.	Grammar explicit	2.00	2.36
18.	Print quality	2.00	2.36
19.	Meaningful communication	2.00	2.27
20.	Balanced activities	2.00	2.27
21.	Compatible with student needs	2.00	2.27
22.	Address learning outcomes	2.00	2.27
23.	Graded texts	2.00	2.27
24.	Grammar reworked implicitly	2.00	2.25
25.	Interesting examples	2.00	2.25
26.	Authentic tasks	2.00	2.20
27.	Adequate for language practice	2.00	2.18
28.	Work with ELT methodology	2.00	2.18
29.	Students motivated to talk	2.00	2.09
30.	Durable for use	2.00	2.09
31.	Compatible with learner interest	2.00	2.09
32.	Appropriate lexical load	2.00	2.00
33.	Appropriate listening tasks	2.00	2.00
34.	Help over/under achievers	2.00	2.00
35.	Cost-effective	2.00	2.00
36.	Match syllabus specifications	2.00	1.91
37.	Appropriate text length	2.00	1.91
38.	Interesting tasks	2.00	1.91
39.	Activities exploited fully in ELT	2.00	1.90
40.	Interesting texts	2.00	1.82
41.	Attractive layout	2.00	1.64
42.	Compatible with background knowledge	2.00	1.64
43.	Interesting tasks	2.00	1.64
44.	Compatible with socioeconomic context	2.00	1.55
45.	Contain fun elements	2.00	1.55

**Note:** Median/Mean Values: 4=Excellent; 3=Good; 2=Adequate; 1=Weak; 0=Totally Lacking

Regardless of the popular observation that the audio-recordings and accompanying texts of *Linguaphone* materials are essentially self-language learning materials, the GFP English language teachers in the current sample rated a wide array of evaluation criteria as “Adequate” for their teaching-learning needs at the college (See Table 3). These adequate ratings range from grammatical explicitness of the materials, making for meaningful communication, compatibility with student needs, and authenticity of task to motivating students to talk and providing help to over-, as well as under-achievers. The teachers also seemed to think that the *Linguaphone* materials they used in their classes were amenable to exploitation for ELT activities besides leaving room for some fun in learning language. In response to the open-ended questions in the evaluation checklist, some teachers cited the following as further useful aspects of the *Linguaphone* materials in use: “debates”, “repetition tasks and some of the drills” (perhaps for their weaker students), and “exercise of writing”.

Table 4 presents the list of 11 *Linguaphone* course evaluation criteria that were rated “Weak” by the teachers, quite obviously because of the dearth of different genre-texts in the *Linguaphone* course materials besides other perceived lacks such as text visuals, graded tasks, clarity of instructions, non-availability of video clips, and relative cultural inaccessibility. Many teachers also perceived a lack of or minimal cultural sensitivity in the materials, well worth noting in this verbatim comment:

- Case 801(1): *Many of the items have to be updated: there is no mention about advanced media or contexts. Most of the contexts are related to travel and partying which is not appropriate to the cultural interests of the students.*

**Table 4:** Summary Ratings of *Linguaphone* Materials Rated as “Weak”,  
Ranked by Descending Median/Mean Values, N=12

No.	Evaluation Criterion	Median	Mean
46.	Different model genres	1.00	1.45
47.	Efficient text and visuals	1.00	1.45
48.	Graded tasks	1.00	1.45
49.	Clear instructions	1.00	1.45
50.	Up-to-date materials	1.00	1.36
51.	Complemented with video materials	1.00	1.27
52.	Culturally accessible	1.00	1.27
53.	Clear task instructions	1.00	.91
54.	Cultural sensitivities	0.00	.82
55.	Teacher's guide available	0.00	.64

**Note:** Median/Mean Values: 4=Excellent; 3=Good; 2=Adequate; 1=Weak; 0=Totally Lacking

As we can see in Table 4, some 10 items were rated as “Weak” by the teacher-users of the set of materials in question: a variety of model genres (or rather a lack thereof),

quality of texts and visuals, and particularly the dearth of clear task instruction for teachers/students to follow, “cultural sensitivities” mentioned above, and a useful teacher’s guide. As in most other ESL/EFL teaching-learning settings, the teachers themselves expend much effort to compensate for any perceived lack by adapting and/or developing new materials (See e.g. Gilmore, 2007; Tomlinson, 2003, 2012). Related ideas for improvement tendered by the Linguaphone course users are as follows:

- Case 801(2): *Supplementary materials need to be more contextualized*
- Case 801(3): *Layout, visuals, culturally inaccessible, outdated language, no reference to present time*
- Case 801(4): *Content; Updated situations. Recording: Not authentic at all (no outside world or natural sounds); Visuals: very bad quality; can't be exploited; Track no: completely absent in Intermediate books*
- Case 801(5): *The audio materials; The content of reading [texts. Need updating and improvement]*
- Case 803(1): *The writing materials as well as the reading ones [need updating].*

## 5.2 IELTS Preparation Materials

It was clear in the analysis that probably all of the teachers in the sample rated the IELTS Preparation course book rather favourably. A total of 43 items out of 55 were evaluated as “Good” (two items emerged “Excellent”: cultural sensitivities rated positively, and the welcome availability of a teacher’s guide) (See Table 5.). Quite obviously, the small sample of IELTS preparation teachers here was generally satisfied with the course book they used to facilitate appropriate teaching-learning activities in the course.

In addition to the long array of positive descriptives pointed up by the IELTS Preparation course teachers in Table 5, the following were listed as “Useful Aspects of IELTS Materials” in response to the open-ended questions of the checklist (including annotation for clarity in brackets):

- Case 807(1): *The extra workbook for IELTS created by the teachers of foundation [which worked well with the course book].*
- Case 807(2): *There is a great deal of variety and each language task is explained well. What's more there are effective guidelines for each question type across all 4 modules, [for eg. For True, False, question guidelines are given, consistent with requirements.*
- Case 807(3): *Extra model worksheets [worked well with the course book]*
- Case 807(4): *Using projector, extra worksheets [to work with the course book]*

Notwithstanding the positive evaluation about the IELTS materials above, some 11 sub-criteria produced “Adequate” ratings and one “Weak” rating (see Table 6). We

note that the teachers seemed to be rather focused on how grammar was treated/presented in the course book, whether it was implicitly or explicitly presented, or appropriately contextualized, and its spread achievable for the students. Similar concern tended to centre upon vocabulary load and its distribution, although both grammar and vocabulary aspects of the materials were generally rated as adequate by the teachers, perhaps to cater particularly for the writing needs of their students, in some ways somewhat reminiscent of the *High School English Grammar & Composition* approach by Wren and Martin (1935) that was popular in British post-colonial ESL/EFL settings such as India and Malaysia (see also the revised edition published in New Delhi in 1995). Still, all said, the remaining items in the “Adequate” list were related to the suitability of the book to learners’ interest and background knowledge within their socioeconomic, as well as sociocultural context. In sum, the present course book was rated as a good, suitable set of materials justified in use by the sample of teachers at the college, perhaps as a tribute of sorts to the immense value of focused IELTS preparatory work as noted earlier in the paper (Bayliss & Ingram, 2006; Brown, 1998; O’Loughlin & Arkoudis, 2009). The only weak point, as it were, was the non-availability of video-materials to complement the teaching-learning experience of the IELTS Preparation course.

**Table 5:** Teachers’ Ratings of 807 (IELTS Preparation) Course Book, Sub-Criteria rated as “Good”, Ranked by Descending Median/Mean Values, N = 5

No.	Evaluation Criterion	Median	Mean
1.	Cultural sensitivities	4.00	3.60
2.	Teacher's guide available	4.00	3.60
3.	Words contextualized	3.00	3.40
4.	Variety of topics	3.00	3.40
5.	Audio materials support	3.00	3.40
6.	Work with ELT methodology	3.00	3.40
7.	Interesting tasks	3.00	3.20
8.	Natural dialogue situations	3.00	3.20
9.	Print quality	3.00	3.20
10.	Appropriate size or length	3.00	3.20
11.	Efficient text and visuals	3.00	3.20
12.	Attractive layout	3.00	3.20
13.	Address learning outcomes	3.00	3.20
14.	Match syllabus specifications	3.00	3.20
15.	Adequate for language practice	3.00	3.00
16.	Clear instructions	3.00	3.00
17.	Different model genres	3.00	3.00
18.	Graded tasks	3.00	3.00
19.	Clear task instructions	3.00	3.00

20.	Appropriate listening tasks	3.00	3.00
21.	Natural and real language	3.00	3.00
22.	Interactive tasks	3.00	3.00
23.	Simple to complex tasks	3.00	3.00
24.	Activities exploited fully in ELT	3.00	3.00
25.	Meaningful communication	3.00	2.80
26.	Authentic tasks	3.00	2.80
27.	Achievable task objectives	3.00	2.80
28.	Interesting tasks	3.00	2.80
29.	Durable for use	3.00	2.80
30.	Compatible with learner interest	3.00	2.80
31.	Compatible with student needs	3.00	2.80
32.	Up-to-date materials	2.00	2.80
33.	Help over/under achievers	3.00	2.75
34.	Graded texts	3.00	2.75
35.	Easy pronunciation practice	3.00	2.60
36.	Pronunciation contextualized	3.00	2.60
37.	Words repeated and recycled	3.00	2.60
38.	Appropriate lesson vocabulary load	3.00	2.60
39.	Interesting texts	3.00	2.60
40.	Appropriate text length	3.00	2.60
41.	Students motivated to talk	3.00	2.60
42.	Balanced activities	3.00	2.60
43.	Cost-effective	3.00	2.50

**Note:** Mean/Median Values: 4=Excellent; 3=Good; 2=Adequate; 1=Weak; 0=Totally Lacking

As always, some improvements were deemed in order by the teachers to the course book in particular and the course of instruction in general:

- Case 807(1): *The extra workbook for IELTS created by the teachers of foundation [needs to be improved as well].*
- Case 807(2): *Perhaps some additional vocabulary activities can be included but overall it is a well-balanced book.*
- Case 807(4): *The course book can include some tasks (topics) like group discussion, debate which may guide them to be a good speaker [sic] in the future.*

**Table 6:** Teachers' Ratings of 807 (IELTS Preparation) Course Book, Sub-criteria Rated "Adequate/Weak", Ranked by Descending Median/Mean Values, N = 5

No.	Evaluation Criterion	Median	Mean
44.	Grammar reworked implicitly	2.00	2.40
45.	Grammar explicit	2.00	2.40
46.	Grammar contextualized	2.00	2.40
47.	Grammar spread achievable	2.00	2.40
48.	Distribution of vocabulary load	2.00	2.40

49.	Appropriate lexical load	2.00	2.40
50.	Compatible with socioeconomic context	2.00	2.40
51.	Culturally accessible	2.00	2.20
52.	Compatible with background knowledge	2.00	2.20
53.	Interesting examples	2.00	2.00
54.	Contain fun elements	2.00	2.00
55.	Complemented with video materials	1.00	1.00

**Note:** Mean/Median Values: 4=Excellent; 3=Good; 2=Adequate; 1=Weak; 0=Totally Lacking

## 6. Concluding Remarks

The value of general foundation studies at the tertiary level of education of most rapidly developing nations is now probably unquestioned. Normally instituted as a one-year course of instruction in several key areas of education such as English language instruction, core computer literacy skills, and general/pure/applied mathematics (depending on students' target discipline of studies), the General Foundation Programme, as it is called in Oman, prepares students at the pre-university level for more specialized study in their chosen discipline later. The programme is usually administered and taught in English, and herein lies the importance of English language courses that take up the lion's share of the curriculum in terms of staffing, time, and provision of key teaching-learning materials and other resources.

Hence, the evaluation of English language teaching-learning materials whether pre-, in-, or post-use in tertiary level foundation programmes cannot be over stressed. Such materials may take the form of a course book, as in the case of the present IELTS Preparation materials, or the form of an independent, commercial language learning programme such as the dual-level Linguaphone course of authentic British audio recordings and accompanying texts. As extant ready "solutions" available to the language teaching enterprise (Sheldon, 1988), these materials are also amenable to adaptation and supplementation with suitable teacher-sourced materials by the practitioners who use as well as evaluate them in their use (Mukundan e al, 2011; Tomlinson 2003, 2012).

Finally, while one has to heed principles of programme-fair evaluation (Beretta, 1986) when evaluating, in tandem, two or more sets of language teaching-learning materials, the undeniable "truths", as it were, must surely be the perhaps even trite observations that there is no set of materials that might be "perfectly suited" for a given course of instruction with a particular set of learners, and that the true tribute must go to the resourcefulness and dedication of the teachers who make the materials given to them work to best meet the ESL/EFL learning needs of their students.

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