

# How to Choose a Good ESL Textbook

For Adult Education and Family Literacy Learners

Colorado Adult Education and Family Literacy  
Independent Study Course



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Northern Colorado Professional Development Center

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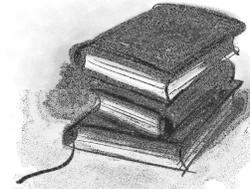
## **Independent Study Course for Colorado AEFLA Programs**

In order to use this material as an Independent Study Course for five professional development hours completion of the following sections is required: 1) The reflection questions in each section, 2) the evaluation form, and 3) the application activity. These sections must be completed under the supervision of the AEFL Program Director and evaluated using the attached form.

The Northern Colorado Professional Development Center is a project of the Colorado Department of Education under the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA). The NCPDC goals include: develop and maintain a collection of instructional and professional resources, provide technical assistance in teaching techniques, curriculum, assessment, and program development. In addition, the NCPDC provides professional development through teacher training.

## How to Choose a Good ESL Textbook For Adult Education and Family Literacy Learners

*He ate and drank the precious words  
His spirit grew robust;  
He knew no more that he was poor,  
Nor that his frame was dust.  
He danced along the dingy days,  
And this bequest of wings  
was but a book.  
What liberty a loosened spirit brings.*



*Emily Dickinson 1890*

### Introduction

The staff at the Northern Colorado Professional Development Center maintains a collection of over 1600 resources (*wings*). The resources include textbooks, reference books, videos, software, and more (*enough to loosen many spirits!*). Over three quarters of the collection is English as a Second Language resources including core textbooks, supplemental texts, and skill-specific texts as well as teacher reference materials.

The NCPDC staff is continually looking for new titles to add to the collection and their search is based on teacher requests, publisher contacts, and review of materials. One of the goals of the NCPDC is to keep the shelves stocked with innovative, effective, research-based, and adult-centered ESL textbooks. Clients who call or visit the NCPDC are continually asking, “How do we choose a good ESL textbook?”

The purpose of this document is to help Adult Education and Family Literacy teachers, program coordinators, and project directors to:

- ✚ Understand the benefits of using textbooks for classroom or individual instruction
- ✚ Identify types and major components of ESL textbooks
- ✚ Identify criteria for choosing and evaluating learner-centered, effective ESL textbooks
- ✚ Create program-specific criteria for choosing textbooks

The document is divided into the following sections:

- 1  Why a textbook?
- 2  Types of ESL textbooks and textbook components
- 3  Criteria for textbook selection and evaluation

Each section of the document includes questions for reflection. The questions can be used as a catalyst for ESL program staff discussions or for independent reflection. As with any other learning experience, reflection encourages long term use of new knowledge, so take time to answer the questions individually or with other adult educators. The reflection questions are part of the independent study course requirements.

## 1 Why a Textbook?

Certainly one important reason for using textbooks for instruction is simply that adult learners like books. In fact, adult learners seem to prefer having their own textbook rather than using non-disposable texts. Some pre-literate level learners may have never owned or even opened a book while others with extensive native language educational backgrounds may have studied countless textbooks in preparation for higher level degrees. Whatever the case, teachers can usually agree that learners consider books essential to learning to speak English.

Adult educators have the same kind of varied experiences as their students. Some teachers prefer using a core textbook following its contents in strict sequence. Other teachers prefer to use numerous textbooks without attention to sequential skill development for theme-based instruction. Still other teachers prefer to create their own instructional materials (Those must be the teachers with unlimited prep time. Do you know anyone like that?)

Betsy Parrish (2004, p.227) describes benefits of using a textbook:

-  It assures a measure of structure, consistency, and logical progression in a class.
-  It minimizes preparation time for teachers.
-  It allows learners to review material or preview other lessons.
-  It meets a learner's needs or expectations of having something concrete to work from and take home for further study.
-  It provides novice teachers with guidance in course and activity design.
-  It may provide multiple resources: tapes, CDs, videos, self-study workbooks etc.

In addition to the benefits identified by Parrish, textbooks may provide teacher resource material that implicitly trains the novice teacher in standard ESL approaches and techniques. Our experience in the NCPDC is that new teachers looking for direction appreciate and value a good teacher guide, just as an auto mechanic might value a car manual with step-by-step procedures in order to replace a transmission.

### Section 1 Reflection

1. Does your program provide direction on which textbooks to use for ESL instruction?
2. When and how did your program select the available textbooks?
3. Do you use an ESL textbook for instruction? If yes, do you like using a book? Why? How do you use the teacher guide that accompanies the book?
4. If yes, do you rely on one textbook or do you use a variety of texts? Why?
5. What have you learned about ESL methods or approaches from using a textbook?

## 2 Types of ESL Textbooks and Textbook Components

Before examining how to select a textbook, it may be beneficial to use common “textbook language” that describes types of materials. Also, it’s important for NCPDC patrons to learn the terms used to categorize or label textbooks. Below are the definitions of terms that are used throughout this document and that are used in the NCPDC catalogue of materials.

### Core Textbook Series

Texts in a leveled sequence for pre-beginning to high-intermediate or advanced level that integrate listening, speaking, reading and writing in each unit are called **core textbooks** or **basal series**. Leveled sequence is usually based on grammatical structures, vocabulary, and readability of narratives. Most **core textbook series** have correlations to standardized assessments such as CASAS or BEST Plus in addition to national standards such as EFF\* and SCANS\*.

Core series also usually consist of **ancillaries** -- resources that support the core series student books. **Ancillaries** can include but are not limited to teacher books, workbooks, audio CDs/cassettes, multilevel activity books, literacy workbooks, CD-ROMs, assessments etc. In addition, recent publications can include publisher websites with web-based activities.

### Supplemental Texts

Books that can be used alongside a **core textbook** are called **supplemental texts**. At the NCPDC these resources appear on the shelves in the following skill categories:

- |   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
|  Listening      |  Reading  |  Grammar     |
|  Speaking      |  Writing |  Vocabulary |
|  Pronunciation |   |  |

Many programs elect to use a **supplemental text** that helps prepare learners for specific assessment types. For example, programs that are using the *CASAS Life and Work Reading* assessment may choose a core textbook and a level-appropriate **skill specific text** that focuses on reading strategies such as predicting, using context clues, or identifying main idea and detail. Choice of an appropriate **supplemental text** should be based on learner proficiency level, identified needs, and interests as well as educational goals.

### Grammar Texts

There are two categories of grammar texts: core series or reference books. **Core grammar series** include usage and rules followed by oral and written practice and assessment. **Reference grammar texts** don’t contain activities or practice, but list and index English grammar rules. **Grammar texts** usually act as references or supplemental books and should not be considered core texts for Adult Education and Family Literacy programs in order to meet both funding requirements and learner needs.

### Content-based Texts

Texts that address specific subjects or topic areas such as citizenship, social studies, academic preparation, or workplace ESL are **content-based texts**. These books are published as individual stand alone texts or in leveled series.

\* EFF- Equipped for the Future

\* SCANS - Secretary’s Commission on Acquisition of Necessary Skills

## Dictionaries

A variety of **picture dictionaries** are available as adult ESL student reference books; very few are appropriate for direct instruction because few include lesson plans and classroom activities. In addition, a variety of ESL reference dictionaries are available that include definitions that draw from limited, high-frequency vocabulary. These dictionaries vary from 1,000 to 3,000 common English words.

While the terms defined above may vary from publisher to publisher and from library to library, they are the terms used to catalog and organize ESL books at the NCPDC. In addition to those types defined, the NCPDC collection includes a great number of **teacher reference books** that describe Second Language Acquisition research, explain theory, suggest learning strategies or activities and provide information on how to adapt textbooks.

## Textbook Components

Many ESL core textbook series for adult learners are designed with similar components or sections. This common design or “lay out” can help teachers compare and contrast content and instructional methods used in different textbooks.

A typical ESL student book may contain these major components.

- Introduction -- notes to the teacher and/or learner
- Scope and sequence -- a table of contents listing the topics, vocabulary, skills, outcomes and standards covered in each unit
- Units -- each unit may include a presentation of new language (vocabulary, content, structures), practice activities, application activities, and an evaluation or end of unit performance assessment
- Tape scripts
- Answer keys
- Grammar appendices
- Index

A typical ESL teacher book or guide may contain these major components.

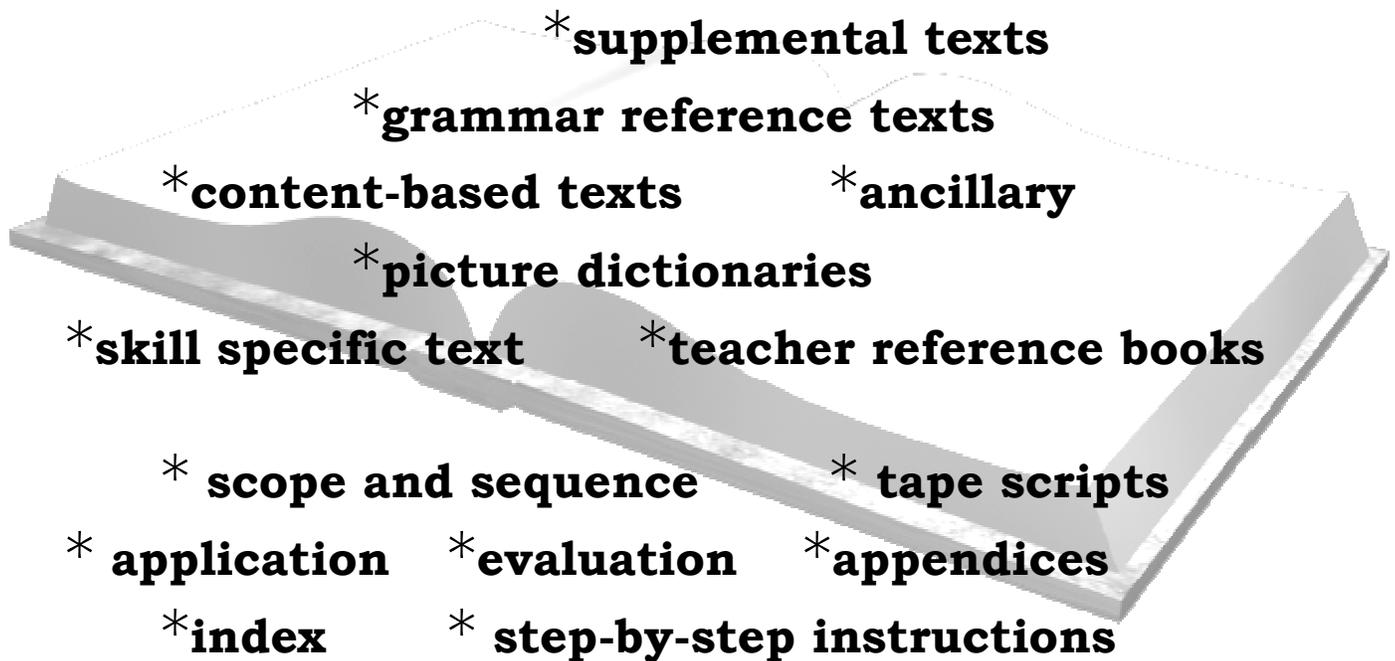
- Notes to the teacher
- Scope and sequence
- Objectives for each unit
- Lists of vocabulary, structures, or skills covered in each unit
- Correlations of textbook levels and standardized assessment levels used in adult education programs
- Lists of needed materials
- Step-by-step instructions for each lesson in a unit
- Suggestions for supplemental or extension exercises
- Reproducible illustrations, worksheets, quizzes etc.
- Suggestions for multi-level instruction

While the components listed above are found in most core textbook series, there are certainly books with additional components and features. The above components are usually included by publishers because textbook consumers (teachers and students) find them helpful in designing effective, level-appropriate curriculum and course design.

## & Section 2 Reflection

1. Look at the textbooks available at your program. Can you identify textbooks that match each of the five types described in this section?
2. Do you use a core textbook series? If yes, which one? How are students assigned to specific levels of the textbook?
3. If you use a core textbook series, do you use any supplemental texts that address skills needed for the standardized assessment used by your program?
4. If you use a core textbook series, do you use any ancillaries? Which ones and why?
5. What other types of textbooks do you use for individual or group instruction?
6. Using one of the core textbooks in your program, find the major components of the student book listed in this section. Find the major components of the teacher book.
7. Compare and contrast two core textbooks using the components of the student book. How does this task assist in the selection of a book appropriate for your students?

### \*core textbook series



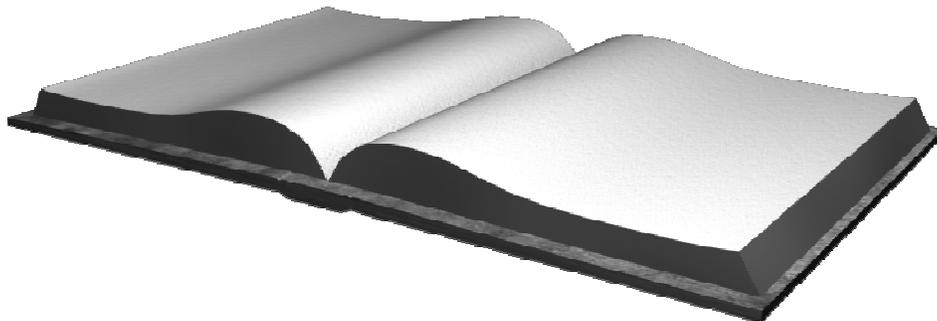
### 3 Selection Criteria

In the present day and age there is a multitude of core textbook series available for use in Adult and Family Literacy ESL programs. Major publishers are continually keeping educators aware of new and “old reliable” materials with catalogues, flyers, ads, and conference displays. In addition, program staff and coordinators introduce teachers to “really good books” that have been introduced at conference presentations or program visits. It sometimes seems like everybody has an opinion about what makes the ideal curricula. Even in the midst of various opinions and testimonials, educators can all agree that there is no such thing as the “perfect book for beginning to advanced level ESL”. So, how do educators choose a good ESL core textbook?

One way to answer the question is to agree on criteria for choosing a core textbook series that will address adult learner and program needs. There are a variety of resources that are designed to help educators make decisions. On the next few pages you will see three selections from sources that provide criteria or standards for selection of textbooks for adult ESL learners who attend Adult Education and Family Literacy programs. The source for the criteria is given for each selection.

Each of the selections was prepared by providers from agencies with different purposes, but with common expertise in adult education. After reviewing the selections, notice that the standards or checklists identify criteria for instructional materials and curriculum that have the following attributes.

-  The book contains learner-centered materials and content.
-  The book contains teacher-friendly instructions and reference material.
-  Principles of effective ESL instruction are the basis for format, context, and design (including art work, layout, font style/size etc.).
-  Language skills are incorporated throughout instruction.
-  Principles of adult education are implemented in lesson format, context, and design.
-  The textbook series is affordable and can be used as a non-disposable resource if possible.



## Selection #1

Source: *TESOL Standards for Adult Education Programs (2002)*

### **Standard #2 Curriculum and Instructional Materials (page 20)**

2A. The program has a process for developing curriculum that is based on a needs assessment of learners and includes participation and input from other stakeholders.

2E. The curriculum and instructional materials are easily accessible, up to date, appropriate for adult learners, culturally sensitive, oriented to the language and literacy needs of the learners, and suitable for a variety of learning styles.

### **Sample Measures for Instructional Materials: (page 79)**

1. They are up to date (e.g. published within the past 10 years).
2. They contain relevant content.
3. They take into account the linguistic and cultural diversity of the student population.
4. The layout and formatting (including font size) is appropriate for the student population.
5. Visuals and graphics are clear, appropriate for adults and culturally sensitive.
6. Voice and sound in audiovisual materials are clear, authentic, and appropriate.
7. The materials address a variety of learning styles.
8. The materials are conducive to being used with a variety of grouping strategies.
9. The materials contain exercises in which learners share previous experience with prior knowledge of the content.

## Selection #2

Source: *Los Angeles Unified School District Textbook Evaluation (2002)*

The following model standards, current teaching strategies and methods are used to rate textbook effectiveness:

- Integrates four language skills: speaking, listening, reading, writing
- Incorporates life skills included in course outline.
- Receptive skills before productive (listen/read before speak/write)
- Integrates different learning styles: aural, oral, visual, kinesthetic
- Incorporates and varies different methodologies and techniques: Natural Approach, Communicative Competence, TPR, meaningful interchanges, conversations, drill, role play, information gap, problem solving, jazz chants, interview etc.
- Grouping strategies: individual, pair, group and team work
- Incorporates higher level thinking skills and problem solving
- Sufficient student practice
- Grammar: taught in context; spiraling activities
- Interactive/communicative approaches
- Vocabulary: target vocabulary in lesson, recycled in lesson
- Reading: pre-read, read, post-read activities; theme recycled
- Writing activities integrated in text
- Assessments and self evaluations at end of unit; final tests
- Design and Format: illustrations, type size, color/black white, layout
- Pace appropriate to level
- Promotes cross-cultural awareness

### Selection #3

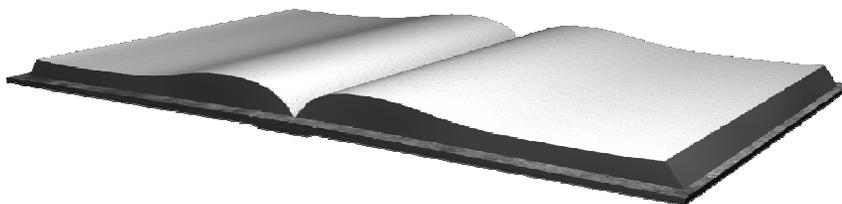
Source: *Bridges to Practice, A Research-based Guide for Literacy Practitioners Serving Adults with Learning Disabilities (1999)*

The following standards are taken from a list of standards in Section 4 on materials selection. These standards are the ones from the list that are not specific to adults with disabilities, but are universal for adult learning:

#### **Standards for Selecting Instructional Materials**

1. The instructional material is appropriate for an adult, regardless of the person's age, gender, race, ethnicity, and primary language.
2. The instructional principles used to promote learning are clearly stated and consistent with what is known about adult learning.
3. The learning outcomes that can be expected are clearly described.
4. The results achieved by using the instructional materials can be used to make decisions regarding further instruction.
5. The procedures for checking the learner's progress are clear and easy to use.
6. The requirements for literacy practitioners to learn to use the material are reasonable.

The three selections above are examples of lists of criteria used to help select and evaluate adult ESL core textbooks. While the selections come from different sources, one can see some criteria that are consistent in each list.



In addition to lists of standards of effective instructional materials, it may be important to consider how textbooks practice adult learning theory in an ESL context. On the next page is a table that identifies conditions of adult learning (Knowles 2005). For each condition there are several related questions about textbooks. Answers to the questions provide educators with a means of evaluating textbook effectiveness as well as criteria for selecting effective instructional material.

## Textbooks and Conditions of Adult Learning

<b>Knowles Condition of Adult Learning</b>	<b>Related Questions about Textbooks</b>
1. The learners feel a need to learn.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Does the textbook explicitly assess learners' needs using a level-appropriate format?</li> <li>2. Do the exercises or activities address the identified learner's needs?</li> <li>3. Does the textbook include clearly stated objectives for each unit or chapter so that learners are aware of outcomes?</li> </ol>
2. The learning environment is characterized by physical comfort, freedom of expression, and acceptance of differences.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Is the textbook designed for adult learners using appropriate visuals, topics, exercises and format?</li> <li>2. Is authentic language used in the lesson content?</li> <li>3. Does the textbook address cross cultural awareness?</li> <li>4. Does the textbook progress at a comfortable pace?</li> <li>5. Is there opportunity for open-ended conversation or unguided practice of language?</li> </ol>
3. The learners perceive the goals of a learning experience to be their goals.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Is there opportunity in the textbook to continually revisit learner goals that were identified initially?</li> <li>2. Are the topics and themes in the textbook related to adult needs and interests?</li> <li>3. Is the learner asked to apply skills or knowledge in appropriate activities or exercises?</li> </ol>
4. The learners participate actively in the learning process.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Does the textbook include a variety of activities that encourage interaction?</li> <li>2. Does the textbook allow for communicative practice that asks learners to negotiate for meaning?</li> <li>3. Does the textbook include level-appropriate questionnaires or activities that ask for learner opinion on the lesson design, content, or visuals?</li> </ol>
5. The learning process is related to and makes use of the experience of the learner.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Does the textbook include unit openers that elicit previous knowledge?</li> <li>2. Does the textbook include opportunities for learners to apply content to their own lives?</li> </ol>
6. The learners have a sense of progress toward their goals.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Does the textbook make use of learning logs or checklists regarding skills learned?</li> <li>2. Does the textbook allow for learner self-evaluation of performance of objectives?</li> </ol>

## *& Section 3 Reflection*

1. *After reviewing the three selections of criteria for textbook selection, what are specific similarities?*
2. *Using the table on page 11, answer the questions about the core textbook series that you are currently using.*
3. *What are your textbook strengths? How will you want to address the conditions of learning not met in the textbook?*

### **Conclusion and Application Activity**

Adult educators choose textbooks using a variety of methods. Some teachers say they can make decisions by simply flipping through the pages to evaluate the art work, topics, page design, or charts. Other teachers elect to carefully examine the scope and sequence and teacher guide to determine if the text will meet learner needs as well as coordinate with program curriculum standards and assessment requirements. While there may not be the “perfect book” for all learners and instructors, there can be selection criteria that help in deciding how to choose a good ESL textbook.

1. Using the information from this independent study course, create a checklist of standards or criteria to be used for textbook selection in your program. Be sure to add any criterion that specifically addresses learner needs in your setting.
2. After your checklist is complete, ask at least three other instructors or staff members to review it and write their comments about its effectiveness.
3. Share your checklist with the program director and complete the evaluation form on the final page of this course.

### **Extension Activity**

If you have identified a potential core textbook series using the checklist developed in the application activity above, here are some other steps to take before investing in a complete curriculum.

1. Ask the publisher representative for sample copies of the book and ancillaries. Contact other adult education programs who have used the textbook and ask about their experiences.
2. Ask one or two teachers in your program to pilot the text with one or two classes. Collect feedback from the teachers. Often publishers provide pilot pages from one unit or chapter of a core text series so that interested programs don't need to purchase books in order to try out materials.
3. Ask adult learners for their feedback regarding the text.

There is no frigate like a book  
To take us lands away,  
Nor any coursers  
Like a page of prancing poetry.  
This traverse may the poorest take  
Without oppress of toll;  
How frugal the chariot  
That bears a human soul!

-- Emily Dickinson 1980



## References

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Knowles, Holton, Swanson (2005) *The Adult Learner*. Elsevier Publishers: Burlington, Maine

Parrish, Betsy Teaching Adult ESL A Practical Introduction 2004 McGraw Hill: New York, NY

*Bridges to Practice, A Research-based guide for Literacy Practitioners Serving Adults with Learning Disabilities* (1999) Guidebook 3 "The Planning Process" National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center, Washington D.C.

ESL/CBET and Citizenship Programs, Division of Adult and Career Education, Los Angeles Unified School District 2002

## Major Publishers of ESL Textbooks for Adult Learners

Cambridge University Press [www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Thomson Heinle [www.elt.thomson.com](http://www.elt.thomson.com)

Pearson/Longman [www.longmanusa.com](http://www.longmanusa.com)

McGraw Hill [www.esl.mcgraw-hill.com](http://www.esl.mcgraw-hill.com)

Oxford University Press [www.oup.com/us/esl](http://www.oup.com/us/esl)

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## Independent Study Course Evaluation Colorado AEFL Programs

**Instructions for project directors and coordinators:**

1. Print the evaluation form below and discuss the outcomes with the teacher
2. Make notations on the evaluation form
3. Keep this form as evidence of completion for Professional Development Hours

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Teacher Demonstrates Knowledge of this Topic</b>	<b>Teacher Needs to Expand Knowledge in this Topic</b>	<b>Teacher Demonstrates Little or No Knowledge of this Topic</b>
Understand the benefits of using textbooks for classroom or individual instruction.			
Identify types and major components of ESL textbooks.			
Identify criteria for choosing and evaluating effective ESL textbooks.			
Create program-specific criteria for textbook selection.			