

# Thinking Globally, Acting Locally: Selecting Textbooks for College- Level Language Programs

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**Abstract:** *This article examines the process by which college-level foreign language programs evaluate and select instructional materials for beginning level courses. A review of the relevant literature reveals an ambivalent relationship with textbooks, often the default curriculum for language courses. Despite textbooks' apparent key role in language programs, there is a surprising lack of cohesive recommendations from the field on evaluating and selecting textbooks. Results of an informal survey illustrate how the textbook selection process, individuals involved, and individuals' satisfaction with the selection process varied across programs. Respondents with established selection processes involving more stakeholders tended to be more content with process and selection. The authors conclude that there is a need for greater transparency and a broader professional discussion of this critical matter in language learning and teaching.*

**Key words:** *textbooks, introductory language, selection process, language program director, materials*

**Language:** *relevant to all languages*

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## Introduction

Choosing a new textbook for the beginning language sequence at the college level is a ritual that many faculty are involved in sooner or later but that few look forward to with much pleasure. The stakes are high: textbooks have far-reaching implications for language programs and are important determiners of beginning language curricula. Yet the process of selecting a book is time-consuming and full of potential pitfalls, including ultimate dissatisfaction with a hard-fought choice. In recent years the process has grown increasingly challenging, as textbooks have become only one element of “packages” consisting of a dizzying array of multimedia components. Industry sales representatives and publishers’ promotions ostensibly support the process, but the burden of dispassionately selecting materials that match programs’ individual cultures falls ultimately on faculty and program administrators.

Although the authors of this article are familiar with the gamut of textbooks in our respective languages and with the industry (each of us has authored materials with a major publishing house), we are routinely daunted by the investment of time and energy involved in selecting books or packages that fit our programs. In this article, we synthesize some of the parameters of the adoption process through an overview of published discussions and of peer perspectives based on results of an informal survey. We also offer recommendations for approaching the selection process, arguing for a global view with an ecological consideration of the local context. A global perspective situates the textbook within the context of the educational mission of an entire language program, not merely the first-year sequence. A local perspective, on the other hand, takes into account the particular characteristics of a department’s ecology (e.g., the students and the extent to which the materials are used in the courses) and relies on responsible stakeholders for input. As we discuss in subsequent sections, our investigations and experience

suggest that a balance between these perspectives enables a more thorough evaluation, and a more satisfactory outcome.

## Textbooks and the Challenges of Selection

The significance of the adoption process is richly reflected in published discussions of the subject, in part because textbooks are perceived as defining “the basis of much of the teaching that takes place in colleges and universities” (Heilenman, 1993, p. 61). Indeed, the beginning level textbook “is more often than not the de facto curriculum in university-level classrooms” (Heilenman & Tschirner, 1993, p. 138) that ultimately shapes not only course syllabi but even entire language programs (Byrnes, 1988). There are even arguments that a textbook is in fact the program, “laying bare its shape, structure, and destination, with progress, programme, and even teacher quality being assessed by learners in terms of sequential, unit-by-unit coverage” (Sheldon, 1988, p. 238).

The profession invests considerable confidence in authors and publishers in allowing their products to determine objectives, methods, evaluation practices, and content. Although individual programs or instructors probably do not slavishly follow textbooks to the letter, it is commonplace that many routinely consign major decisions about what is taught and how it is taught and tested to commercial materials developers and authors. These practices in terms of textbook use foster a curious culture of ambivalence, in which textbooks, often criticized and viewed as “necessary evils” (Sheldon, 1988, p. 237), are simultaneously despised and embraced: “On the one hand we are uneasy and skeptical about what is being offered, whether we see it as too avant-garde or too traditional. On the other hand, we buy into textbooks in a wholesale fashion, expecting them to provide everything, from course and program goals, to content, and sequence” (Byrnes, 1988, p. 29).

Given their near-monumental stature in some language programs, it would seem advisable that the profession espouse some general procedures for reviewing and selecting books and materials. Despite repeated calls for guidelines, however, textbook packages tend to be selected “in haste and with a paucity of systematically applied criteria” (Sheldon, 1988, p. 238) and evaluations done “in an ad hoc, impressionistic way” that may prejudice the process by unintentionally favoring “materials which have face validity (i.e., which conform to people’s expectations of what materials should look like) and which are visually appealing” (Tomlinson, 2003a, p. 5). The problem of creating general procedures is rendered even more difficult by the divergent expectations of adopters, the textbook market itself, and the variety of approaches among textbooks.

Clearly, authors and publishers seek to make books attractive to students, the “end-users,” but their efforts ultimately target adopters. In reality, textbooks have several constituencies, even within a given program, each of whom might define differently what makes a book “work”: “For the publisher, ‘work’ means sells well; for the administrator, it often means ease of standardization, and examination success for the institution; for the teacher, it often means ease of preparation and fit with the syllabus and the timetable; for the learner, it can mean interesting and achievable or matching expectations” (Tomlinson, 2003c, p. 102). The difficulty for those responsible for selecting a book is choosing one that represents a compromise among the needs of these groups, balancing ease of standardization, comfortable fit with program conditions, and content interesting to students.

Further complicating this compromise is the sheer number of titles available in some languages. Individual publishing houses may list anywhere from two to eight titles for the beginning language sequence in Spanish, French, and German alone. The size of the market and the number of

titles produce fierce competition among a handful of dominant textbook companies for a share of the college-level market and an active sales environment in which publisher representatives vie for decision-makers’ favor. Depending on the size of the potential adoption, efforts to influence the process can include meetings with selection committee members or program directors, e-mail campaigns, meals, and seminars.

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges to prospective adopters is the recent trend among publishers to expand the ancillary offerings that accompany each new edition, typically every four years. Today, the textbook package is a cluster of resources, with the paper textbook itself almost overshadowed by ancillaries. Minimal components of a typical full package include instructor and student activity or workbook manuals; electronic workbook options; audio and video materials to accompany textbooks and workbooks or as supplements; paper and CD-ROM test banks; companion Web sites with further student exercises and instructor resources; and printed instructor resource guides, complete with video and audio transcripts, course syllabi, and even lesson plans. An even more recent development intended to help instructors monitor student progress online is a trend toward proprietary, password-protected companion Web sites. Publishers are racing to implement new versions of these sites, designed to combine many of the ancillaries currently marketed separately, as well as to house instructor support, testing, multimedia resources, and a direct connection to online materials.

### *Factors in Evaluating Materials*

In light of the increasing complexity and diversity of materials packages, their prominence in language programs, the challenges of the selection process, and the financial and pedagogical stakes of adoption decisions, some contend that the profession could benefit from “procedures which are thorough, rigorous, systematic and principled” (Tomlinson, 2003a, p. 5). Others

argue that overly rigorous guidelines might be too specific to reflect the local character of programs and faculty or the variation among materials. Efforts to develop guidelines are also stymied by the dearth of systematic reviews of current materials. The literature is particularly rich in denunciations of textbook reviews as not only unhelpful but as often exhibiting “a dramatic lack of systemic analysis which employs the accepted criteria of the FL teaching profession” (Pfister & Troyanovich, 1971, p. 99; see also Pfister & Rada, 1974). Reviewers are faulted for not making their own evaluative criteria explicit, and are moreover accused of confounding rather than assisting the textbook adoption process, either out of excessive politeness, a desire to entertain, or simple idiosyncrasy (Sheldon, 1988; Tomlinson, 2003b). Indeed, systematic analysis is often tainted by bias or rendered impossible by the quantity or disparity of criteria and vague or superficial criteria.

There have been notable attempts to design a universally applicable, public set of criteria, however. In October 1960, the Modern Language Association, supported by the U.S. Office of Education, held a conference intended to “establish criteria for a new evaluation of all teaching materials” for elementary and secondary schools (Ollman, 1962, p. v). The resulting criteria were then used by ten committees (184 teachers) to evaluate over 2,000 items, e.g., textbooks, readers, tapes, etc., 1,850 of which were rated acceptable enough to be included in the *MLA selective list of materials*. This official set of criteria was deemed incomplete and its sanctioning of certain books held to be methodologically biased (Pfister & Troyanovich, 1971).

Other taxonomies of criteria have been published over the years, each reflecting their author’s theoretical and methodological biases as much as they do aspects of textbooks or programs themselves. They generally include a number of categories, checklists, questions, or ideal features that evaluators can use to analyze and/or rate all

aspects of the textbooks (e.g., Bragger, 1985; Hadley, 2001; Williams, 1983). Proposed criteria include everything from binding and quality of paper (Chabe, 1962), to “[e]mphasis placed upon the three steps in language acquisition” (Chastain, 1971, p. 485), and inclusion of “extensive drill material” (Mazel, 1941, p. 444). Others have argued for a focus on a single criterion, such as textbooks’ treatment of culture (see, e.g., Dechert & Kastner, 1989; Joiner, 1974; Kramersch, 1987; Pfister & Borzilleri, 1977), or how well tasks are integrated into textbooks (Ellis, 1998).

One criterion that arguably transcends these theoretical and methodological biases is the extent to which textbooks enact new theories or findings in second language acquisition or current teaching methods (Aski, 2003, 2005; Olivares-Cuhat, 1999), or follow a proficiency-oriented approach (Hadley, 2001). Birckbichler (1987), however, holds that few evaluation instruments are grounded in knowledge about the process of teaching and learning, emphasizing that the primary criterion for selection should be the extent to which materials promote students’ “linguistic or cultural proficiency” (p. 299). Front matter and margin suggestions in instructors’ editions have been criticized for exhibiting “a terminological looseness (for example, ‘communicative’, ‘authentic’, ‘notional/functional’, ‘lexical syllabus’, etc.) that makes meaningful comparisons of textbooks difficult” (Sheldon, 1988, p. 239). These comments suggest the need for an informed, critical, and systematic analysis of textbooks instead of reliance on marketing materials, the influence of industry sales representatives, book reviews, or other indirect sources such as word-of-mouth. Tomlinson (2003b) is particularly adamant that faculty should “decide for themselves which findings of SLA research they will use to develop principles for their evaluation,” noting that “a textbook selected mainly because of attractive appearance could turn out to be very boring for the learners to use; a review which overemphasizes an irritating aspect

of the materials (e.g., a particular character in a video course) can give a distorted impression of the value of the materials" (p. 22).

Regardless of the criteria that they encompass, checklists have historically been used to safeguard against personal or impressionistic criteria and promote objectivity (Green, 1926). A countervailing perspective cautions that checklists may embed implicit assumptions that promote "general, impressionistic judgments on the materials" in lieu of an in-depth, case-by-case analysis (Littlejohn, 1998, p. 191). Similarly, rigid, generic guidelines contradict the "emphatically local" character of selection criteria and ignore the inherent variability in language programs and in individuals' second language acquisition (Sheldon, 1988, p. 241). While objectivity may, according to some, discourage decisions based on idiosyncratic approaches and individual preferences (see Birckbichler, 1987), others note that evaluations are inherently and inescapably subjective, since evaluation "involves making judgments about the effect of the materials on the people using them" (Tomlinson, 2003b, p. 15).

Pursuing this point of view, one author concludes that only a subjective, locally-based approach can match materials appropriately to "the context in which they are going to be used and the needs and interests of the teachers and learners who work within it, to find the best possible match between them" (Rubdy, 2003, p. 37). Because generic ("objective") checklists are considered as problematic as they are useful, a more constructive approach may be to employ looser frameworks (Littlejohn, 1998) or "evaluative parameters" (Rubdy, 2003, p. 44). Such frameworks may promote primary consideration of the local context while drawing attention to larger, programmatic issues and relevant questions in the field of adult second language acquisition and language teaching methodology.

### *Peer Perspectives: Input from an Open-Ended Survey*

To extend our understanding beyond published discussions and the authors' personal biases and experience, we sent an informal, open-ended survey via e-mail to a group of peers, after initially piloting the survey with immediate colleagues. We were particularly interested in gathering input and advice based on personal experiences with the selection process. The survey (see Appendix A) solicited a description of the evaluation and selection process in respondents' programs and of their views on the process, its effectiveness, and its eventual outcome.

We e-mailed the survey in spring 2005 to the entire membership (235 e-mail addresses) of the American Association of University Supervisors and Coordinators (AAUSC). The AAUSC membership includes many language program directors, a group often identified as key players in the realm of textbooks. According to Heilenman and Tschirner (1993), "by virtue of their professional responsibilities, FLPDs [Foreign Language Program Directors] are in positions of influence in regard to the production of college-level foreign language textbooks" (p. 111), whether through selecting and implementing materials, reviewing or even authoring them (see also Bragger, 1985).

Although the overall response rate was low (32 responses, or 7%), the responses included perspectives from programs of a variety of sizes and compositions. Responses represented 32 institutions and 18 languages, and program sizes ranged from 30 to well over 1,000 students. Languages included French (8), German (8), Spanish (8), and a wide selection of less commonly taught languages (7), including Arabic, Asian, Slavic languages, Greek, Latin, and Portuguese. The majority of responses (29) came from programs with a language program director or coordinator. The section that follows highlights several interesting points that arose in the responses and that enrich the discussion of the selection process.

### *Initiation and Frequency of the Selection Process*

The survey first asked respondents to explain what prompts the decision to adopt a new book in their programs. About a third of respondents said they begin the process because students or teaching personnel (TAs, instructors, or faculty) were dissatisfied or bored with the current text; no further explanation was provided. Others were prompted to review and select a new book because of problems with the publisher, and a few reported that a new edition of their current text was coming out. A small number reported that an impetus for changing books was a change in the program curriculum.

The adoption cycle appeared to be highly context-dependent. Adoptions occurred according to different schedules among institutions and programs, ranging from five to ten years. Some reported that adoptions follow a regular schedule, while others follow the publication of new editions. A few respondents said that they rarely underwent the textbook adoption process, while several others, in contrast, reported that they were “always” or “constantly” involved in the adoption process. Involvement in the process varied from individual decisions to full committees of faculty, instructors, or TAs. In most smaller programs and in the less commonly taught languages, however, the decision was made by the individual who taught the course, and two responses indicated that the textbook selection was made by authors of a textbook (in the language program).

### *Features Influencing the Decision*

When participants were asked to note which features of their program, the materials, and publisher support influenced the process and eventual selection, responses commonly blurred the distinction between internal program features and features of the materials themselves. In fact, half of the respondents commented solely on features of the materials in response to the question asking specifically about features of their

program, and four noted that program features are secondary to the materials themselves. This tendency implicitly confirms that textbooks are significant determiners of the language curriculum for a number of individuals.

Other respondents did cite a number of program features that influenced their selection process including, in larger programs, a preference for texts that worked for novice teachers such as TAs or a staff of lecturers or adjuncts. Several responses mentioned their particular program's philosophy, however vaguely defined, including a preference for “something that is communicative,” materials that are “proficiency-oriented” or that “cover grammar accurately and in a reasonable sequence,” or, finally, that “incorporate the most current findings of SLA research.” Only a few referred directly to curriculum-related concerns such as articulation with a second-year textbook or how well a book meets course objectives or curricular goals.

The quantity and quality of ancillaries were noted by many respondents, but overall the responses indicated that the textbooks themselves play the most significant role in the materials selection process. Some respondents focused on how textbooks treated a particular component, such as grammar, culture, readings, or methodology. A final feature of materials that was mentioned was “coverage,” referencing either the time structure of their institution (quarter system, distance education, intensive courses) or language requirements (e.g., need to cover four semesters).

The significant efforts of publishers' sales personnel to influence selection were reflected in fewer than half of the responses as an important factor in their decision-making. Those who did acknowledge an influence cited preadoption services like “availability and responsiveness of the sales rep,” and “receiving the materials on time” (such as desk copies, instructor copies, and various ancillaries). A handful also mentioned postadoption support—or lack thereof—such as TA workshops or mainte-

nance and repair of companion Web sites as influencing subsequent adoptions. Only two respondents mentioned the cost to students as a criterion for selection.

### *Evaluation of the Selection Process*

Survey respondents' advice regarding the selection and adoption process exhibited internal inconsistency between reported and suggested processes, while nevertheless expressing overall satisfaction with their own process. For example, at least ten responses explicitly suggested setting goals or articulating the objectives of the course and/or sequence of courses prior to engaging in the process; however, only two of these individuals mentioned meeting curricular goals as a weighty factor in their own evaluations of new pedagogical materials. Likewise, many of the participants advised others to identify goals and objectives of a program prior to reviewing books but neglected to identify this as a step in their own process.

The thread of apparent contradiction between advice and practice was present in other process-related suggestions, including examining all of the ancillaries (rarely cited as standard practice), consulting colleagues who use the book (only one respondent noted this as part of the actual process), and using a reviewer rubric to guide the process (mentioned by only two respondents). Several individuals indicated that those who actually teach introductory language classes lacked a voice in the adoption process. Their advice and comments on this subject included: "Have respect for the suggestions by those who teach the class," "The final choice should rest with the person in charge of the language program because they have to deal with it," and "The supervisor's opinion should carry a lot of weight. If the textbook isn't in agreement with the supervisor's views . . . the program suffers."

Mirroring published scholarship on the subject, there was a clear divide between those who envisioned textbook selection as an objective process, a scientific quest for

the best book on the market, and those who saw it as a subjective search for the best current match for their particular context. Over half of the responses indicated a preference for subjective methods that favor their own local situation over a generically "good" book, with comments such as "set your goals, then look at materials." Those who tended to use a more subjective method for evaluation reported significantly higher satisfaction with the materials than those who indicated a preference for objective methods.

### **Discussion**

Our review of the literature and small-scale survey confirm our prediction that textbook selection is an underexamined process whose actual procedures reflect the idiosyncratic institutional culture and composition of individual programs. Some programs adopt books by fiat from a single individual, others after extensive, committee-based evaluation. Some programs develop their own, specific criteria, while others rely on impressionistic views, tradition, or having an author on the faculty.

The published discussions propose a wide array of approaches, particularly regarding how specific or how subjective or objective one can or should be, and the hazards of either extreme, a variation that is loosely corroborated by the survey. The survey results further suggest greater satisfaction with the process and its outcomes in programs in which the instructors who teach the courses make the final adoption decision and in which the subjective features of the program are accommodated. Conversely, lower satisfaction was expressed by individuals describing programs with participation by nonteaching faculty and those that tend not to consider the specific local context. In light of these factors, programs should be encouraged to consider adopting a process that situates relevant criteria within an evaluative framework that takes into account their specific curricular goals, programmatic needs, and teaching methods.

Developing and maintaining a more transparent evaluative framework that reflects local character and global criteria and involves all of a program's stakeholders is time- and labor-intensive. To ensure adequate attention to this crucial task, appropriate incentives and rewards for those responsible is essential. Masuhara (1998) observes that "these non-teaching activities seem to be considered as part of teachers' duties without them being properly appreciated or acknowledged. More systematic materials selection, for example, could really be achieved if teachers were given the time, a place and encouragement" (p. 252). In addition to providing such incentives, a healthy process might include a regular adoption cycle that involves a range of stakeholders in developing and applying organically-generated criteria.

Other important suggestions regarding the timing of the selection process surfaced from both the surveys and articles. Programs are advised to evaluate materials even after they are selected in an ongoing manner rather than solely prior to adoption (Tomlinson, 2003b) and to provide feedback to publishers regarding problems and suggestions (Steiner, 1973). Ideally, then, programs would engage in a continuous approach to evaluation, evaluating instructors' and students' views on textbooks and the relative success of their integration into the curriculum during the first year and even communicating their results to the publisher. Another potentially valuable suggestion was that programs in doubt about an adoption pilot a book with a single section, formally evaluating both during and afterwards how well the textbook matches their expectations and goals.

## Conclusion

Appropriately enough, no definite consensus or perfect "one-size-fits-all" recipe for reviewing and adopting textbooks emerged from this investigation. Instead, an ecological approach that balances global concerns with considerations of the local context appears the ideal compromise. Thinking

globally implies that faculty involved in evaluation and selection keep up to date about changes in the textbook market and maintain a healthy skepticism about any book's claims to meet the needs of any program, regardless of the local context. A global perspective entails situating the textbook and the basic language sequence within its dual function as integral to the humanities' mandate to shape the intellectual development of students and as the recruiting ground for potential future language scholars. To the extent possible, those responsible for textbook selection may find it helpful to stay abreast of major trends in foreign language pedagogy, teaching methodology, and technological developments. Global thinking implies that entire departments work together to frame an articulated curricular vision, with the basic sequence a key component. Such a vision would consider how each level reinforces and builds upon students' emergent knowledge in literature, culture, and language, as well as in core competencies. A global view entails clear articulation between the beginning sequence and intermediate and upper division curricula, thus bridging these traditionally well-marked boundaries.

Acting locally flows logically from a global perspective. Individual programs and departments have diverse administrative and supervisory structures; some have language program directors and exclusively TAs, others mostly lecturers, still others comprise only a handful of senior faculty. As some respondents indicated, the staffing of programs with novice teachers such as TAs or with part-time faculty has important implications for textbook selection. Evaluation guidelines could be negotiated among instructors and regularly updated to reflect changes in program constituencies, missions, or particularly newer technologies or methodological shifts. Guidelines should aim for a balance between overly constraining and "objective" and excessively open-ended and "subjective." Other local, logistical considerations need to be



taken into account, such as placement policies, available technologies, class sizes, and semester or quarter schedules. Additionally, variation in the dispositions of a department's faculty toward technology-based ancillaries and Web sites needs to be factored into a textbook search. Most importantly, familiarity with the context—the nature of the program but also of the students and teachers—will lead to a more satisfactory process and ultimate selection.

Finally, this investigation has highlighted a subtle but pervasive passivity with respect to the selection of teaching materials and the beginning language sequence generally. The introductory sequence is often the bread-and-butter of larger departments and the recruiting ground for minors and majors, yet decidedly little attention appears to be given in the literature or among our respondents to discussion of global evaluative criteria for textbooks, or to curriculum development for the beginning levels that is distinct from the curricular vision that textbooks embody (notable exceptions exist, see, e.g., Bernhardt & Berman, 1999; Bollag, 2007; Byrnes, 2001). This gap in published discussions of materials, the low response rate to our survey, and our own experience underscore the need for adopters to critically examine prospective teaching materials, particularly given their prominence in the daily life of departments. There is a possibility that the profession may be so accustomed to accepting textbooks as complete curricular and instructional roadmaps that we may not examine the materials as rigorously as we should.

We suspect, though, that the important role of the textbook in language programs and the increasing cost and complexity of the materials packages will induce language programs to reexamine how their materials are evaluated and selected. This study suggests that programs should establish a selection process that incorporates global and local criteria and the perspectives of multiple stakeholders while following a regular, perhaps continuous, schedule and and rewarding evaluators for their contri-

butions. As faculty, instructors, and program administrators, we are responsible for being informed, critical consumers and adopters of language materials, continually advocating on behalf of our students for materials and curricula that articulate a rich pedagogical vision of what it can mean to learn another language.

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## APPENDIX A

### *Survey on Language Materials Selection*

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you in advance for taking the time to respond to this open-ended survey on the foreign language materials selection process. Your responses and perspectives are critical to our goal of shedding light on this important process. We believe that our goal, a Web-based clearinghouse of information, rubrics, and a summary of the survey results, will provide a useful service to the profession. Please know that the results will be compiled confidentially, and no individual, institution, publisher, or textbook will be identified at any time.

1. Describe briefly your basic language program
  - a) language/s
  - b) number of students
  - c) number of courses in basic language sequence
  - d) total number of sections
  - e) sections taught by TAs
  - f) sections taught by instructors
  - g) sections taught by faculty
  - h) supervisory structure (i.e., coordinator/s, LPD, other)
  - i) additional pertinent remarks about your program
2. Describe briefly the process used in your program to select materials, like a textbook for the elementary/beginning language courses.
  - a) Who is involved in review and selection? (individual, committee, administrator role . . .)
  - b) How often does your program go through the process of evaluating/selecting new materials?
  - c) What causes your program to consider new materials?
3. What specific features of *your own program* influence the selection process? (Examples: Authors on faculty; We have lots of TAs, so we want a textbook that includes extensive lesson plans.)
4. What features of *the materials themselves* tend to play an important role in the consideration of materials for adoption? (Examples: Our students are into technology, so the materials we choose must have lots of tech-based features like an “e-workbook.”)
5. What features of the publishing, sales, and/or services provided by publishers tend to influence the review process or adoption decision?
6. In your view, how effective is the review *process* used by your program in identifying the best materials? What changes would you make to improve the process?
7. How satisfied are you and/or your teaching personnel with the materials currently being used?
8. What advice would you offer for programs contemplating starting the process of materials selection?
9. What information or resources independent of that provided by publishers would be helpful in the process of review and selection?
10. What additional remarks or perspectives on this topic do you wish to contribute?