

Textbook Selection and Evaluation in EFL Context

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Abstract

Decisions related to textbook selection and evaluation are of great importance. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the three English language textbooks currently used at high schools in Iran from the high school English teachers' point of view.

For this purpose, a 46-item questionnaire was developed about the five sections of the textbooks (vocabulary, reading, grammar, language functions, and pronunciation practice), their physical make-up, and practical concerns. Fifty high school teachers with more than five years of teaching experience were asked to reflect on the questions by checking one of the four options included.

The results indicated that the textbooks are not acceptable from the teachers' point of view considering their five sections, their physical make-up, and some practical concerns.

Keywords: Textbook evaluation, syllabus design, textbook selection, curriculum, EFL context, materials development

1. Introduction

It is a fact that selecting and evaluating textbooks in EFL context is of utmost importance. However in Iran, there is limited research conducted to evaluate the textbooks that are already in use or those that are intended for use in future. In most of these studies, the researchers have themselves evaluated different textbooks by means of the checklists and questionnaires suggested by other scholars (Aliakbari, 2004; Jahangard, 2007; Razmjoo, 2007; Azizfar, Koosha and Lotfi, 2010). However, the primary users of textbooks are the teachers. So a comprehensive evaluation can only be carried out while the teachers and their view points are also taken into consideration.

2. Literature Review

Textbooks play a pivotal role in language classrooms in all types of educational institutions - state schools, colleges, language schools – all over the world. According to Lamie (1999), that is why despite the development of new technologies that allow for higher quality teacher-generated materials, demand for textbooks continues to grow, and the publishing industry responds with new series and textbooks every year. According to Razmjoo (2007) many students working with a textbook feel secure and have a sense of progress and achievement. Cuuingsworth (1995) also argues that textbooks are an effective resource for self-directed learning, an effective resource for presenting materials by the teachers, a source of ideas and activities, a reference source for students, a syllabus that reflects pre-determined learning objectives, and support for less experienced teachers who have yet to gain in confidence.

According to Daoud and Celce-Murcia (1979), information on textbook selection is useful since it is sometimes part of the ESL/EFL teacher's responsibility to select the textbook she/he will use in a given class. Such a decision should be made carefully and systematically, not arbitrarily. They add that even in countries where the choice of the textbook does not directly involve the teacher, teachers may be asked to submit reports on the usefulness of the textbooks they are already making use of. Several possible criteria and procedures for carrying out a sound selection of appropriate

textbooks have been suggested. However, selecting an appropriate textbook is not a wholly objective process. While many guidelines are suggested, the individual subjective judgments of the teachers are central to it.

Tomlinson (2001) contends that textbook evaluation, on the other hand, is an applied linguistic activity through which teachers, supervisors, administrators and materials developers can make sound judgments about the efficiency of the materials for the people using them. Cunningsworth (1995) and Ellis (1997) declare that textbook evaluation helps teachers move beyond impressionistic assessments and it helps them to acquire useful, accurate, systematic, and contextual insights into the overall nature of textbook material.

3. Method

3.1 Research Questions

To what extent are the textbooks acceptable in terms of vocabulary presentation and practice?

To what extent are the reading sections acceptable in presentation and practice?

To what extent are the textbooks acceptable in terms of grammar presentation and practice?

To what extent are the textbooks acceptable in terms of presentation and practice of language functions?

To what extent are the textbooks acceptable in terms of pronunciation practice?

To what extent are the textbooks acceptable in terms of physical make-up?

To what extent are the textbooks acceptable considering practical concerns?

3.2 Materials

The materials to be evaluated in this study included the three English language textbooks currently taught at high schools throughout the country.

3.3 Instruments

The data collection instrument utilized in this study was a questionnaire prepared by the researcher. In order to do so, several questionnaires suggested by different scholars were scrutinized and the items relevant to the textbooks under study were selected. A 48-item questionnaire was so prepared, and a pilot study was conducted with 5 female and 5 male teachers with more than 10 years of teaching experience. The final questionnaire (see Appendix) included 46 questions.

3.4 Participants

The population for this study consisted of all the high school English teachers in Tabriz, Iran that are teaching English at high schools at present. The sample included 60 high school English language teachers out of which 50 (30 female and 20 male) accepted to answer the questionnaire.

3.5 Procedure

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the English language textbooks currently in use at high schools all over Iran. In order to do so, the following steps were taken. After a pilot study of the questionnaire prepared by the researcher, the 46-item questionnaire about different characteristics of the high school English language textbooks was finalized. 50 English language teachers were given the questionnaires, and let answer the questions on their own. The questionnaires were collected a few days later so that the participants would have enough time to reflect on the questions. Later these survey results were quantified and analyzed in order to answer the research questions.

4. Results

For analyzing the survey data collected by means of the questionnaire, first the answers were quantified. Each option of the items was ranked (not at all 1, not satisfactorily 2, to some extent 3, to a great extent 4). In order to provide a clear picture of the responses given to the 46 items of the questionnaire, the items were group together and analyzed (Vocabulary, Reading, Grammar, Language Functions, Pronunciation Practice, Physical Make-up, and Practical Concerns). Median was selected as the best representative of central tendency among the three measures of central tendency because of the fact that it is less affected by the extreme data at either end of the scale (1 and 4). The individual items of the questionnaire were in fact grouped together and analyzed based on the median of the answers given to them. Table 1 provides the results of descriptive statistics applied.

<Table 1 about here>

As can be seen, the mode and median of the items about the Vocabulary section of the textbooks turned out to be 2. The mean (2.16) can also be considered as 2 with 95% confidence level. Since number 2 represents the second option of the

answers (not satisfactorily) it was concluded that the textbooks are “not satisfactorily” acceptable in terms of Vocabulary presentation and practice. Similar results were obtained considering the Reading sections and Pronunciation Practice sections of the textbooks. The textbooks are also “not satisfactorily” acceptable in terms of Practical Concerns and their Physical Make-up. However, the mode and median of the items about the “Grammar” section turned out to be 3. The mean (2.52) can be considered as 3 with 95% confidence level. Since number 3 represents the third option of the answers (to some extent) it can be concluded that the textbooks are “to some extent” acceptable in terms of “Grammar” presentation and practice. Considering the Language Functions sections of the textbooks under analysis, the mode and median of the items about turned out to be 2. However, the mean (1.85) cannot be considered as 2 with 95% confidence level, but 1. Since number 1 represents the first option of the answers (not at all) it can be concluded that the textbooks are “not at all” acceptable in terms of presentation and practice of Language Functions.

5. Discussion

The results of this study are in line with the not very comprehensive research literature in the field of textbook selection and evaluation in Iran. . Jahangard (2007) in his analysis of the high school English textbooks has also argued that there is a lack of correspondence between the vocabulary items introduced. He believes the paper of the books is of low quality, and it would be more appealing if colorful pictures of real people and real environment were used in the books. According to Dahmardeh (2009), new words in the textbooks under analysis are presented out of a plausible context as isolated sentences. Sarhady (2009) contends that language functions presented in the textbooks are so context-limited that it is too difficult for students to visualize the situation in which communication has happened. And finally, Azizfar et al (2010) have stated that the materials designers have just focused on the mechanical drills. They believe textbooks are limited to substitution and repetition drills, and students are required to produce simple sentences, and that they are not provided with the opportunity to practice communicatively the language they are learning.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study offer convincing evidence that the English language textbooks that are currently taught at high schools in Iran do not meet the teachers' expectations. The results expand the existing research in the area of textbook selection and evaluation in our country. However, in order to be able to make more sound judgments about different characteristics of these textbooks, more research of this kind needs to be conducted.

7. Implications

Findings of this study may offer insights for those involved in educational administrations, syllabus design, curriculum planning, and materials development. Different sections of the textbooks can be modified by the committee of textbook developers of the Iranian high schools in order to improve their quality. Teachers may also get insights from the findings and employ different strategies to compensate for the weak points of the textbooks.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics: the results of Medians, Means and Standard Deviations

	Median	Mean	SD
Vocabulary	2	2.16	0.572
Reading	2	2,16	0.435
Grammar	2	2.52	0.580
Language Functions	2	1.85	0.629
Pronunciation Practice	2	1.92	0.652
Physical Make-up	2	2.02	0.533
Practical Concerns	2	2.07	0.544

Appendix: Questionnaire

Sections of the Textbook		To a great extent	To some extent	Not satisfactorily	Not at all
Vocabulary	1. Does the vocabulary load throughout the textbooks seem to be reasonable for the students of each level?				
	2. Are the vocabulary items systematically graded from simple to complex items?				
	3. Are the vocabulary items repeated in subsequent lessons for reinforcement?				
	4. Are the vocabulary items presented in a variety of ways?				
	5. Are the vocabulary items introduced in motivating and realistic contexts?				
	6. Do the new items receive sufficient practice through different kinds of exercises?				
	7. Do the vocabulary exercises promote internalization of the previously and newly introduced items?				
Reading	8. Are the texts interesting for the students?				
	9. Are the texts authentic pieces of language?				
	10. Do the texts cover a variety of topics and themes?				
	11. Do the topics dealt with meet local and national standards?				
	12. Are the topics up-to-date?				
	13. Do the texts serve as a window into learning about the target language culture?				
	14. Do the texts present information in a way that the students will understand?				
	15. Is the content age-appropriate?				
	16. Are there enough exercises and activities accompanying the texts?				

Sections of the Textbook		To a great extent	To some extent	Not satisfactorily	Not at all
Grammar	17. Is the number of grammatical points introduced in the textbooks appropriate?				
	18. Are the grammatical points presented in an increasing level of difficulty?				
	19. Are the new grammatical points presented in a meaningful context to facilitate understanding?				
	20. Are the explanations easy to understand?				
	21. Are there enough examples accompanying the explanations?				
	22. Do the grammatical points receive sufficient practice through exercises and activities?				
	23. Are the grammatical points repeated and reinforced in subsequent lessons?				
Language Functions	24. Is the number of language functions introduced in the textbooks appropriate?				
	25. Are the language functions presented in meaningful contexts?				
	26. Do the language functions introduced accompany practice of different kinds? (e.g. in pairs, in groups) help				
	27. Are the language functions repeated and reinforced in subsequent lessons?				
	28. Do the language functions exemplify English in its authentic use?				
	29. Are the pronunciation points presented in meaningful contexts?				
Pronunciation Practice	30. Is there enough practice accompanying each pronunciation point introduced?				
	31. Are the pronunciation points repeated and reinforced in subsequent lessons?				

Physical make-up	To a great extent	To some extent	Not satisfactorily	Not at all
32. Are the textbook covers attractive?				
33. Is the paper utilized of satisfactory quality?				
34. Are the type size and font appropriate for the learners?				
35. Are there enough illustrations accompanying texts in the textbooks?				
36. Are the illustrations colorful and attractive?				
37. Are the illustrations informative and functional?				
38. Do the illustrations provide appropriate representations of local and national standards?				
39. Do the size and weight of the textbooks seem convenient for the students to handle?				
Practical Concerns				
40. Are the objectives explicitly laid out in the introduction part?				
41. Do the textbooks support the goals and objectives of the program and the curriculum?				
42. Are the textbooks sufficiently challenging for the students?				
43. Do the textbooks raise the students' interests in further language study?				
44. Does each textbook cohere both internally and externally with the other ones in the series?				
45. Do the textbooks contain periodical review sections and exercises throughout lessons?				
46. Is the methodology proposed to the teachers appropriate for the teaching/learning situation and the students?				