English Language Textbook Evaluation “English for the Students of Humanities (I)”

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ABSTRACT: One of the most salient factors for the students’ accomplishment in second language learning in the English language learning programs is the ELT textbooks. In spite of remarkable progresses in teaching methodologies, developing new technologies and facilities to enhance learning effectiveness, textbooks still have a very crucial effect in the process of language teaching and learning context. In Iran, textbooks have a key role to provide the foundation for language input that the learners receive. In effect, the present study attempts to investigate the English textbook taught to the students of humanities in B.A. level in order to explicate and analyze the possible weaknesses of the textbook, namely, English for the Students of Humanities (I). To this end, Los Angeles Unified School District Textbook Evaluation (2002) checklist is selected and adopted. It is worth mentioning that this checklist is selected as an instrument in evaluating the textbook because of its convenience and effectiveness.

Keywords: English Textbooks, Evaluation, Effectiveness, second language learning, checklist

INTRODUCTION

However, teaching English language involves considering many issues; textbooks and materials seem to be crucial for many context especially foreign context. Hutchinson and Torres (1994) argued that

“The textbook is an almost universal element of teaching. Millions of copies are sold every year, and numerous aid projects have been set up to produce them in countries...No teaching-learning situation, it seems, is complete until it has its relevant textbook.” (p.315).

Investigating ELT materials has a long history resorting to a vast variety of methods and angles. One of the issues attracted the attention of many researchers is the framework and presentation of different steps in teaching English which are designed and merged in different ELT textbooks. One of the most important factors for the students’ accomplishment in learning English in the language learning programs is the ELT textbooks. In spite of remarkable progresses in teaching and developing new technologies, textbooks still have a very crucial effect in the process of language teaching and learning context. In Iran, textbooks have a key role to provide the foundation for language input that the learners receive. Jahangard (2007) asserts that students’ oral skills are not emphasized in Iranian prescribed EFL textbooks. They are not tested in the in the final exams. Teachers put less emphasis, if any, on oral drills, pronunciation, listening and speaking abilities than on reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary. The main focus is to help students pass tests and exams, and because productive abilities of students are not tested, most teachers then skip the oral drills in the prescribed books (ibid).

As Ghorbani, (n.d.) articulated, before 1990’s, English education focused on reading skills in order to help students read and translate materials written in English. The curriculum in general, thus, was aimed at promoting students’ grammar knowledge in reading, translation and grammar. Consequently, English teachers essentially used grammar translation method to meet the expectations of the national curriculum. According to Hosseini (2007) the revised curriculum in the last decade seems to have put more emphasis on communicative competence. Nonetheless, it is still far from being called ‘communicative’. Teachers continue to use the grammar translation method through textbooks which lack listening and speaking activities.

One of the courses apparently essential for students studying in different majors in B.A. level is General English course. Among different majors, students of humanities have to pass a course in English, titled as English for the Students of Humanities (I) in order to handle the English sources written in English. The book is written by Nowruzi and Birjandi (1989) and republished during next years. It means that the book is taught for twenty four years to different students of humanities.

Considering the fact that the textbook has been exposing to many students; it is crucial to have an in-depth analysis of the textbook seems to be a reading textbook in order to underscore its possible weaknesses.
To this end, Los Angeles Unified School District Textbook Evaluation (2002)'s checklist was used and adopted because of the merits the checklist presents in dealing with EFL/ESL textbooks.

**Review of Literature**

There are many controversies on the importance and the role played by textbooks in learning a language. Sheldon (1988) argued that textbooks are "the visible heart of any ELT program" (p. 237). Hutchinson (1994) pointed out that "textbook is an almost universal element of ELT teaching" (p. 315). In analyzing language textbooks, a vast variety of theoretical and practical problems are recognized for textbooks (e.g. Allwright, 1981, Hutchinson & Torres, 1994 and Sheldon, 1988). Sheldon (1988) argued that "textbooks merely grow from and imitate other textbooks and do not admit the winds of change from research, methodological experimentation, or classroom feedback" (p. 239).

It is obvious that textbook is an essential part of any course but a good a textbook should have some criteria in order to meet the needs of not only society but also learners. Moreover, it is crucial that any course book, according to Richards (2001), be evaluated systematically. In evaluating a textbook, some criteria should be considered. Bruder (1978) argued that in evaluating a textbook, a checklist of eight criteria should be applied, namely, level, objectives, style, language, age, time, convictions, and competency.

Cunningsworth (1995) in his categorization, argued about seven main criteria, namely, language content, selection and gradation of language items, presentation and practice of new language items, developing language skills and communicative abilities, supporting materials motivation and the learner, conclusions and overall evaluation. In another classification, Tomlinson (2003) argued about fourteen subcategories as follow:

- The appeal of the materials
- The credibility of the materials to learners, teachers, and administrators;
- The validity of the materials;
- The reliability of the materials;
- The ability of the materials to interest the learners and the teachers;
- The ability of the materials to motivate the learners;
- The value of the materials in terms of short-term learning;
- The value of the materials in terms of long-term learning;
- The learners' perceptions of the value of the materials;
- The teachers' perceptions of the value of the materials;
- The assistance given to the teacher in terms of preparation, delivery and assessment;
- The flexibility of the materials;
- The contribution made by the materials to teacher development;
- The match with administrative requirements. (p. 16)

Evaluation, according to Brown (1989) refers to "the systematic collection and analysis of all relevant information necessary to promote the improvement of a curriculum, and assesses its effectiveness and efficiency, as well as the participants' attitudes within the context of the particular institution involved" (p. 222). Lynch (1996) refers to evaluation as "the systematic attempt to gather information in order to make judgments or decisions" (p. 2). McGrath (2002) emphasized that "materials could include realia: real objects such as a pencil, a chair or a bag and representations such as a drawing, a photograph of a person, house or scene" (p. 7). Moreover, Carter and Nunan (2001) define evaluation as "the process of measuring the value of learning materials (that is) predictive pre-use evaluation, ongoing whilst-use evaluation (and) retrospective post use evaluation" (p. 223).

Harmer (2001) distinguished between evaluation and assessment. He pointed out that whereas, “the assessment of a course book is an out-of-class judgment as to how well a new book will perform in class; course book evaluation is a judgment on how well a book has performed in fact” (p. 301)

Tu'eimah (1985) argued about three different tools in evaluating a textbook, namely, a tool for language teaching textbook analysis, a tool for language teaching textbook evaluation, and a tool for measuring language teaching textbook readability. The analysis tool consists of fifteen categories of the book’s physical make up, the nature of the course, pre-preparation studies, the language of the book, method of teaching, language skills, grammar, vocabulary, linguistic drills, assessment and evaluation, cultural content, aids and activities, individualized learning, the teacher’s manual and others; the evaluation tool of eight categories of pre-preparation studies, language content, language skills, methods of teaching, drills and evaluation, aids, physical make up, and overall impression; and cloze tests for measuring readability. Sheldon (1988), in his categorization, provides an expansive checklist of 53 questions under 17 major criteria, namely, rationale, availability, user definition, layout and graphics, accessibility, linkage, selection and grading, physical characteristics, appropriacy, authenticity, cultural bias, educational validity, practice and revision, flexibility, guidance and overall value for money.
Skierso (1991) argued that textbook evaluation may be conducted under some criteria. In effect, he argued that after collecting some background information about the learners, the teacher, the course, and the institutional objectives, the following criteria should be considered:

**The criteria related to the textbook**
- Bibliographical data
- Aims and goals
- Subject matter
- Vocabulary and structures
- Exercises and activities
- Layout and physical make up

**The criteria related to teacher**
- General features
- Supplementary exercises
- Methodological and pedagogical guidance
- Linguistic background information

Hedges (2000) argued about a two-stage process for evaluating the relevance of a book to a particular group of students. Whereas, “the first stage is to assess the content of a book in relation to its professed aims; the second is to assess the book against the needs and context of the intended learners” (p. 357). She continued five main categories; each involving a number of questions adoptable based on learner factors, institutional setting, and sociocultural context, namely, the view of language, the view of language learning, learner, and the view of education and the environment of learning.

**METHOD**

This study is an ex-post facto design, which aims at investigating the current state of affairs, regardless of what has occurred and carrying out a treatment or any manipulation will be utilized.

**MATERIALS**

An ELT textbook was selected as the materials of this study, namely, English for the Students of Humanities (I). The English for the Students of Humanities (I) is almost a mono skill reading-based English textbook authored by Mehdi Nowruzi and Parviz Birjandi and published by SAMT publishing and released in 1989 and republished during next years. English for the Students of Humanities (I), a requisite course in B.A. level for the students of humanities includes two main parts of class activities and students’ homework.

**Model of Analysis**

In conducting the present study, Los Angeles Unified School District Textbook Evaluation (2002)’s checklist was adopted in order to evaluate the textbook. There is no doubt that a vast variety of checklists have been suggested in determining the efficacy of a textbook. Hence, Los Angeles Unified School District Textbook Evaluation (2002)’s checklist was selected among a wealth of checklists because of its convenience as well as its effectiveness recognized by the researcher. The following sheds light on the factors involved in the checklist:
- 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

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

English for the Students of Humanities (I) is almost a mono skill reading-based EFL textbook designed and developed for the students of the BA degree studying humanities in the universities of Iran. In effect, the textbook is supposedly composed of two main parts of class activities and students’ homework. Whereas, class activities involve pronunciation, meaning and application of the new vocabularies used in the reading passages; students’ homework of application of different parts in a sentence, application of new vocabularies, matching new vocabularies and their synonyms, grammatical points, reading and comprehension. In effect, the textbook is exclusively a reading-based textbook composing of twenty lessons which is a reading passage. The lessons are as follow:

Artists as teachers
The written word
Modern art
What is literature?
Science and art
The origin of language
What is pottery?
Cave art
Short story
Building a picture
Why do we read fiction?
Not a bit like the book
What is literary analysis?
Motion picture
Correctness in language
Style
Sociocultural aspects of the arts
Irony
Characterization
Islamic art

Having a glance at the topic of the lessons revealed that the textbook is not appropriate for all majors of humanities. The first criteria investigated in the textbook are related to the integration of the four skills which is neglected in this textbook. Since this textbook is a reading-based textbook, no part is dedicated to oral skill. Moreover, the writing skill is just partially considered in terms of application of the new words or grammatical points.

The second criteria investigated in the textbook underscore the fact that whether this reading-based textbook covers life skills which equip the students in order to handle the challenges and ambiguities expose to them. Unfortunately, this textbook hasn’t considered this item and the themes covered by the textbook have not any relationship with life skills and in some cases the passages are not authentic. Accordingly, the second item is a weakness of this textbook.

Furthermore, the third, fourth and fifth items of the checklist are not considered in designing and developing of the textbook. In other words, the only skill considered by the authors or curriculum is reading and being familiarized with some general and specialized lexis along with their collocations. In addition, there is no trace of integrating different approaches in teaching or ordering different skills since it is a mono skill textbook. Hence, different styles are not considered in this textbook, too.

Yet, the textbook is apparently suffering from two main pitfalls, i.e. strategies and thinking skills and problem solving. The textbooks did not consider communicative approached in designing and developing the textbook. The outline of the textbook showed a wealth of exercises and homework though the focus of the exercises is put on memorization. In fact, every lesson gets started with a list of vocabularies along with phonetic presentation which highlight the significant of pronunciation. Furthermore, the list of vocabularies is equipped with their definitions and in some cases with some examples. Finally, the pre-reading stage involves a list of the grammatical points presented in the reading comprehension passage but without any warm up of the passage and post discussion after it. One of the main criticisms regarding the textbook is that pre-reading stage is defined in terms of the pronunciation, definition of the vocabularies or elaboration of the grammatical points applied in the reading text; whereas, pre-reading stage should involve a list of questions to raise the background knowledge of the students regarding different themes. Furthermore, the reading passages are not supplemented with images shedding light on their themes.
Hence, the textbook is weak in dealing with assessments and self-evaluations at end of unit, final tests, or even illustrations, type size, and layout. Also twenty units may not be covered in one semester. The textbook is not doing well in promoting cross-cultural awareness.

REFERENCES

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