
An ELT textbook evaluation: A two-phase criterion

Negin Samoudi ^{(1)*}, Mohammad Mohammadi ⁽²⁾

⁽¹⁾⁽²⁾Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Urmia University, Urmia, Iran

*Corresponding author. Email: n.samoudi@urmia.ac.ir

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Abstract: It is by now well established that materials may have an impact beyond simply learning a language they present. Thus, we need to survey thoroughly the materials to find out the influence they might have on learners' progress and attitude. Hence, in this study attempts have been made to investigate the cons and pros of a textbook (Summit 2B) which is currently being widely used in Iranian EFL classes. The textbook has been evaluated based on a model provided by McDonough and Shaw (1993) on the basis of two stages: an external evaluation that offered a brief overview of the textbook from the outside and a closer and more detailed internal evaluation. Efforts have been made to critically evaluate the textbook in terms of the layout, design, content, language type, different activities, tasks, as well as the skills emphasized in the book. The findings showed that albeit there appears to be some shortcomings, this book (Summit 2B) seems to be more efficient to meet the requirements of the Iranian EFL learners as compared with the older textbooks which have hitherto been used at different language classes. Accordingly, investigating and evaluating the book proved to be very lucrative and valuable in terms of pedagogy as well as the efficient attributes that suits the context of the present study. Finally, the implications as regards the efficiency of this particular course book as the consequence of evaluating it have been put forward and the strengths and weaknesses related to it have been argued.

Keywords: EFL classes, EFL learners, materials, Summit 2B

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Introduction

Textbooks hold a paramount status as an indispensable ingredient of language teaching profession than ever before, especially after numerous ELT preparatory classes have been established for a large number of departments at universities, private schools, and some state schools. Moreover, the school boards and circles of English teachers prefer ready-made course books because they possibly provide ready-made syllabus to be followed by teachers. Thus, the course books have gradually turned to be the most pervasive tool for language instruction. Textbooks play a very significant role in the teaching and learning especially in developing countries where teachers and students can utilize them according to their needs (Mahmood, 2011). Richards and Rodgers (2001) believe that, course books are unavoidable elements of the curriculum because they specify content and define coverage for syllabus items. As Grant (1987) states, course books aim to solve the problem by creating opportunities for learners to use the target language in the classroom, before using it in real life. Surtikanti (2020) asserts that one main factor determining the success or failure of a teaching/ learning program is the quality of its course book. Even though course books are seen as an indispensable tool of the language arts instruction, they are rarely evaluated for their appropriateness to meet teachers' and learners' needs and interests (Ajayi, 2005). Despite the abundant research on course book evaluation, still the literature in general and in ELT textbook evaluation is not convincing (Shahmohammadi, 2018). Therefore, the necessity of course books leads the way to the exploration of the course book evaluation by teachers especially in formal educational settings of language teaching. To this vein, this study focuses on the evaluation of an ELT



textbook "Summit 2B" (Saslow & Ascher, 2006) which is widely used in English language teaching contexts of Iran.

Textbooks play a prominent role in the teaching/learning process and they are the primary transfers of knowledge to the learners. Besides, one of the basic functions of textbooks is to make the knowledge available and apparent to the learner in an easy and organized way. Hutchinson and Torres (1994) argue that the textbook has a very vital role to play in teaching and learning English. They state that textbooks provide the necessary input into classroom lessons through different tasks, readings and explanations. Thus, they will always survive on the grounds that they meet certain needs.

Regarding the multiple roles of course books in ELT, Cunningsworth (1995) introduces a course book as a resource in presenting the material, a source for learners to practice the activities. They also provide the learners with a reference source on grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. What is more, textbooks serve as a syllabus and a self-study source for learners. They also serve as a support for the beginning teachers who have not gained confidence yet. Thus, it can be said that the fundamental role of textbooks is to be at the service of teachers and learners but not their boss. Richards (2001) states that without textbooks, a program may have no impact, therefore, they provide structure and a syllabus. Besides, using a textbook in a program can guarantee that students in different classes will receive the same content and therefore, can be evaluated on the same basis. In other words, textbooks provide the standards in instruction. Moreover, they include a variety of learning resources such as workbooks, CDs, videos, and etc., which makes the learning environment interesting and enjoyable for the learners.

In order to use the textbooks effectively, it is essential for the practitioners to evaluate the materials since evaluation plays a key role in education and can provide valuable information. In fact, one school of thought in curriculum development states that the achieved curriculum is the effective one. To determine whether or not the curriculum is achieved, evaluation is the yardstick. In other words, if we accept the value of textbooks in ELT, then we must be sure of usefulness of the textbooks, and their appropriateness for the context and people with whom they are being used. Sheldon (1988) has offered several reasons for textbook evaluation. He suggests that the selection of an ELT textbook often signals an important administrative and educational decision in which there is considerable professional, financial, or even political investment. A thorough evaluation, therefore, would enable the teaching staff of a specific institution to discriminate between all of the available textbooks on the market. Moreover, it would provide for a sense of familiarity with a book's content thus assisting educators in identifying the particular advantages and disadvantages in textbooks already in use. As discussed above, it seems that to find out the extent to which a course book fits a pedagogical program, a thorough review of it is inevitable (Nursyahrika et al., 2019).

Evaluation, therefore, is an indispensable factor in curriculum development and implementation. We are able to evaluate the curriculum through appraising the textbook and its approaches and methods of achieving the educational aims, goals, and objectives. This study, accordingly, planned to assess the teaching and learning strategies adopted by the authors of Summit 2B book.

Methodology

Course book appraisal, undeniably, is an integral task in the professional lives of English language instructors; they study their textbooks and determine which activities to teach and how to teach them on a regular basis (Bouزيد et al., 2016). In the literature of textbook evaluation many different schemes and checklists have been offered by different writers and evaluators. In this vein, here we try to introduce a few of those. As Cunningsworth (1995) states, effective evaluation relies on asking appropriate questions and interpreting the answers to them. The creation of extensive evaluation checklists by leading experts provides criteria for detailed course book analysis. Cunningsworth's checklist for evaluation and selection contains 45 questions, covering criteria such as aims, design, language content, skills, and methodology, as well as practical considerations such as cost and availability.

Sheldon (1988) provides an expansive checklist of 53 questions classified under 17 ajor criteria, which appraises content factors such as accessibility, content, layout And authenticity. Because of the wide variety of ELT course books available, he advocates The use of evaluative measures, yet admits dissatisfaction with the "uneven quality" of these "evaluative tools," (Sheldon 1988, P. 240) stating the lack of any standardized global checklist or approach to materials analysis.

Checklists such as these, as well as others (Breen & Candlin 1987; McDonough & Shaw 1993; Skierso, 1991) imply that designers are striving for comprehensiveness in evaluation procedures. Swales (1980, as cited in Wharton, web site) has criticized this inclination, claiming that the more questions one asks of a set of teaching materials, striving for some kind of intricate discovery, the more likely one is to be disappointed. Rather, teachers should look at the evaluation process from a more subjective view (Sheldon 1988; Cunningsworth, 1995) realizing that any checklist requires adaptation before being submitted to the personal requirements of individual teachers. As Cunningsworth (1995, p. 5) mentions, "the selection procedure is intended as a framework, not a straitjacket, and any procedure should be modified to suit personal circumstances". Similarly, Sheldon explains that, "course book assessment is fundamentally a subjective, rule-of-thumb activity, and that no neat formula or system will ever provide a definite yardstick." (Sheldon, 1988, p. 245).

McDonough and Shaw (1993) provide a flexible two-stage model for the comprehensive evaluation of course books. A brief external evaluation includes criteria which gives an overview of the organizational foundation of the course book, 'as stated explicitly by the author' through the cover, introduction and table of contents statements. Following this is an in-depth internal investigation of the course book, 'to see how far the materials in question match up to what the author claims as well as to the aims and objectives of a given teaching program.' (McDonough & Shaw, 1993, p. 64). Unique in their coverage of criteria, their 22-point framework is designed both for teachers looking to select a course book, a predictive evaluation, as well as for those teachers looking to identify strengths and weaknesses in course books already used in their working context, a retrospective evaluation.

For the purposes of this evaluation, we followed the model provided by McDonough and Shaw, applying pertinent criteria to the course book used in our working context. The model's procedural format and flexibility allowed evaluator to fully assess the strengths and weaknesses of the under study material. Furthermore, taking a retrospective approach to the evaluation gave the evaluator "insight into the organizational principles of the materials," and thus highlighted "realistic ways of adapting the materials to a particular group of learners." (ibid, p. 64).

Results and Discussion

1. External evaluation

At this initial 'external overview' stage of the evaluation of the Summit 2B course book, the authors aim to examine "what the books say about themselves." (Cunningsworth, 1984, as cited in McDonough and Shaw, 1993, p. 67). This is done by looking at what has been stated explicitly in the 'blurb,' or claims made on the cover of the teachers/students book... [and] the introduction and table of contents." (ibid, p. 67). Investigation of this kind can justify or disprove author/publisher claims.

1.1. *The intended audience*

Although no exact age group is stated, but as claimed in the back cover page, adults and young adults, who have passed any intermediate course book can be the audience.

1.2. *The Proficiency Level*

As claimed in the blurb of Summit 2B, it is the second of a two-level-intermediate/advanced level books, but we have reason to dispute this claim, according to the authors' experience of teaching these series, they have observed that Summit 2B is surprisingly less challenging for learners than the two or three previous books in these series.

1.3. *The context in which the materials are to be used*

McDonough and Shaw (1993) make reference for distinguishing between teaching general learners and teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP). As stated in the Introduction, Summit 2B is designed "to help students develop confidence and skill in using English for communication," and makes no claim to be focused on specific learners or purposes. Its effectiveness in a general English conversation class has been evident in our teaching context, our students having no specific intentions for English.

1.4. *How the language has been presented and organized into teachable units/lessons*

Summit 2B contains 5 main units. Each unit includes 5 two- page lessons. The units have got the following format:

- Preview: It introduces the unit's goals and theme

- Sound Bites: It presents an authentic conversation and following exercises to practice the new expressions
- Grammar Snapshot: it presents authentic texts consisting the new grammatical point being taught followed by grammar exercises
- Conversation Snapshot: It presents an informal conversation followed by a Vocabulary part providing more collocations or other alternative forms of the vocabularies or terms in the conversation and Listening practices
- Reading: It presents reading followed by comprehension questions, Discussion and Word Skills sections
- Listening Comprehension: It provides a listening activity followed by pair work, group work, and discussion
- Writing: It presents a rhetorical rule followed by 3 steps
- Checkpoint: It is an activity at the end of each lesson

Each student book is designed for 60 to 90 class hours. The length of each main unit must be realized by the teacher when deciding how it will harmonize into a given educational program. (McDonough & Shaw 1993, p. 69). Each main unit of the Summit 2B course book has been designed for approximately three 60-minute class periods, or two 90-minute periods per section. While agreeing with McDonough's and Shaw's comment that the length of each unit must be understood to facilitate a program, the times provided in the Teacher's Manual have been easily adaptable in the author's teaching context. In our use of Summit 2B, activities which we feel create a more positive student response are given more class time, while more passive activities that do not promote oral skills production can be glanced over or skipped altogether. Given the autonomy of each section within the unit, this does not create a gap in gradation. Indeed, little gradation or sequencing exists. In addition, not finishing a unit in the allotted time doesn't affect students' interest.

1.5. The author's views on language and methodology

When looking at the author's view on language and methodology, it is important to consider the relationship between the language, the learning process and the learner. As stated in the course book's Introduction, the Summit series is designed to help develop competence in all skills and provide strategies for confident communication. Priority thus given to the process of developing second language competence would follow what White (1988) has termed 'the Type B syllabus', a learner-based course of action in which "both the content and the processes of learning become part of the language learning experience." (White 1988, p.101). This is opposed to a 'Type A Syllabus,' in which functions and content are predetermined and learner involvement is non-interactive. However, we find White's models too contrastive for analysing a modern course book such as Summit. Rather, we would refer Summit 2B as following a 'multi-syllabus' approach, which integrates the two methods of White, thus increasing ability on a range of communicative criteria while, at the same time, acknowledging the need to provide systematic practice in the formal functions of language. (McDonough & Shaw 1993, p.50).

Moreover, the Summit 2B book provides activities to encourage interaction through expression of meaning which as well as advocating communicative language teaching, this statement adheres to a functional view of language, whose characteristics are provided by Richards and Rodgers (1986) below:

1. Language is a system for the expression of meaning.
2. The primary function of language is for interaction and communication.
3. The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses.
4. The primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional and communicative meaning as exemplified in discourse (Richards & Rodgers 1986, p. 71).

The Summit 2B course book repeatedly provides activities for students to interact through the expression of meaning.

1.6. Are the materials to be used as the main 'core' course or to be supplementary to it?

In discussing the total cost of a course, McDonough and Shaw state that just economics might dissuade a teacher from selecting certain materials. (1993, p. 70). The Summit 2B course book, while being reasonable priced at roughly 1200,000 Rials, is designed to be used as the 'core' course. In addition to the course book, a workbook called Summit 2B Workbook is available embedded in the same cover with the student book, created by the two course book developers. It is designed to supplement the course

book, we found the workbook especially effective for homework review. Although less communicative than in-class activities, we found the activities helpful for explicit grammar teaching. In addition, teacher-led checking of the homework at the beginning of class provides a guided initial activity to 'warm-up' the class.

The teacher's manual is not locally available wherever the course book is found. It is mostly available for institutions. The manual provides valuable teaching tips addressing common problems and concerns. I believe the Summit 2B manual can be a useful resource for both beginning and experienced teachers. Although offering much prescribed programs on how to teach the material, experienced teachers can benefit from the variations provided. The manual provides support for both.

1.7. Is a vocabulary list/index included?

There is no appendix of key words or expressions. Sinclair and Renouf (1988), however, dispute the addition of vocabulary lists found in many modern course books. The approach taken to vocabulary is not systematic, there is little coordination in establishing targets, and there is no repetition of the new vocabularies introduced in the previous lessons. According to Sinclair and Renouf (1988), most modern course books "attempt to coordinate several parallel threads of syllabus...the variety is often bewildering, and the actual coordination minimal." (p.144).

1.8. What visual material does the book contain and is it actually integrated into the text?

Photographs, drawings and graphs are all attractively done and add an artful, contextual element to the activities. Most of the pictures are photos taken from real life which adds the sense of usefulness and authenticity to the material. Most photos and illustrations are incorporated into the tasks. In all the units, as a pre-task to the activity, the course book explicitly asks the students to look at a picture and comment in some way.

The layout is very professionally presented and not overly cluttered, and can be an initial positive factor in selection of Summit 2B as course book for an instructor. All 5 main units follow a standard format of six sections: Preview, Grammar, Conversation, Reading, Listening, and writing. Each lesson consists of two pages each, typically consisting of a five-stage activity process. This standard procedure can lessen student unfamiliarity, and after covering a couple of units, students know what to expect in terms of teacher direction and meta-language.

1.9. Is the material too culturally biased or specific...[or] ...represent minority groups and/or women in a negative way?

Summit 2B book is not written explicitly for a certain nationality or cultural group, as the topics which divide each unit are international in nature. All in all, in Summit 2B book attempts have been made to be universal both in topics and cultural matters as well as in pronunciation.

According to Maley (1986), when a teacher introduces language teaching materials, such as books or handouts, they must understand that these will be viewed differently by students depending on their cultural views. For instance, westerners see books as only pages which contain facts that are open to interpretation. This view is very dissimilar to Chinese students who think that books are the personification of all wisdom, knowledge and truth (Maley 1986). As in the case of Chinese students, the Iranian EFL learners are also very sensitive to the culture that the book brings into the classroom, therefore attempts should be made to choose as culturally unbiased materials as possible.

2. Internal evaluation

In this stage of the analysis, as designed by McDonough and Shaw, the internal consistency and organization of the materials is examined, to discover the extent to which external claims made by the author/publisher correlate with the internal content (McDonough & Shaw 1993, p. 75).

2.1. The presentation of the skills in the materials

Integration of the receptive and productive skills is the trend in modern course book design (Brown 1994; White 1988; Stern 1992; Cunningsworth 1995; McDonough and Shaw 1993). Each unit of the Summit 2B course book contains sections on listening,

Speaking, reading, and writing while speaking skills are integrated into most activities. Although equal weighting seems to be given to the four skills, developing oral communication skills is the authors' main intention. In addition to conversation practices throughout all the lessons, there are six Discussion parts in the six lessons of each unit. This coincides with White's statement on general course books, that "of the four skills speaking will have been given more weighting than any of the others, even though reading and writing will have been used as a means of presenting and practicing the language." (White, 1988, pp. 68-69).

This is parallel to intentions of the authors of this study as teachers, that oral communication skills be weighted more, considering that students at their schools receive abundant writing and reading classes. They find that allotting more time to more communicative activities benefits their students to a greater degree.

2.2. *The grading and sequencing of the materials*

If language is a system, gradation is of great importance. According to Mackey (as cited in White 1988, p.48), "in a system one thing fits into another, one thing goes with another, and one thing depends on another." However, there seems to be few guidelines or principles following the assumption that language can be divided into structures for organizing language content. In the Summit 2B course book, there are no criteria for sequencing the topics of the 5 main units. Indeed, Unit 1, titled "Travel hassles and experiences," could easily be interchanged with Unit 5, "An interconnected world." There seems to be no sequencing to lexical items, and expressions. On the other hand, grammatical rules and exercises are well graded.

2.3. *Where reading/'discourse' skills are involved, is there much in the way of appropriate text beyond the sentence?*

The written materials in each unit of Summit 2B provide reading practice using a variety of writing style extracts, such as magazine articles, biographies, advertisements, and personal and business letters. Scanning, identifying and evaluating skills are practiced for comprehension, as well as preparation for 'shared writing,' where students read and react to partners' ideas. In addition to extended readings, scripted dialogues are also central to the High Impact course book. These, we believe provide valuable pieces of natural sounding discourse, not only as examples for study, but to raise the consciousness of students' through exposure to English linguistic data.

2.4. *Where listening skills are involved, a recordings 'authentic' or artificial?*

There is much debate concerning the use of 'authentic' language in course book activities. Nunan defines 'authentic' language as samples of spoken and written language that have not been specifically written for the purpose of teaching language, "which learners will encounter outside the classroom." (Nunan 1991, pp. 37-38). Its use allows for students' unconscious mechanisms for acquiring language to operate effectively (Swan & Walter 1987, as cited in Nunan 1991; 226, Skehan 1996; Carter 1998; D. Willis 2000; J. Willis 1996). In addition, authentic materials can bring greater realism and relevance while increasing learner motivation. (Cunningsworth 1995, p.66). However, J. Willis (1996) believes that, "the hurly burly of native speech creates difficulties for students who need to focus on certain lexical items". The role of course books, then, is to select, idealize and simplify the language to make it more accessible to students, while still providing natural input for unconscious acquisition (Cook, 1998, p. 61). Recordings in Summit 2B, though not authentic according to Nunan's (1991) definition, do provide semi-authentic input for learning purposes, as the following script excerpt reveals:

F: I'm really fed up with working for a large corporation.

M: Huh? What are you all ticked off about?

F: I'm just tired of having to do what other people tell me to do. I want to be able to make my own decisions for a change.

M: Ok...So, like, what are you going to do about it? F:

start my own business.

M: Start your own business? ...You're dead serious, aren't you!

F: You bet I am. Don't tell anyone, but I've already applied for a loan.

M: Good for you!

While being available for specific grammar and lexical study, recordings found in Summit 2B still hold a degree of natural authenticity.

2.5. *Do you feel that the material is suitable for different learning styles...and is it sufficiently 'transparent' to motivate both students and teachers alike?*

Based on Ellis (1996), teachers and materials writers must be aware that the input provided by them might be processed by learners in ways different from intended. It is important, then, that materials meet students' needs by catering for different learning styles. However, it is crucial to highlight that there has been a trend to make students the center of language education since the 1970s, and it is likely safer to see textbooks as tools to meet targets and goals that are being set in respect of learning objectives (Mohammadi & Abdi, 2014).

In the case of Summit 2B, pair work and group activities are popular strategies for practicing information-gathering skills and expressing personal opinions. Five to six exercises of the six lessons of each unit explicitly require group work of some kind. For students preferring a more teacher-led approach, this could create discouraging affects, leading to a lack of motivation. Being aware of this inevitable situation, students must be reminded that the more they engage in oral communication, the more their overall communicative competence will improve. As explained by Brown, many students will find group work frustrating because they are accustomed to the answers being given to them. Brown (1994) states, language learning is not a skill “where you can simply bone up on rules and words in isolation.”(p.177).

Conclusion

English has become an international language and this book Summit 2B is a fruitful effort to make the EFL learners in general and Iranian EFL learners in particular more proficient and fluent in their use of English language. Through the multi-syllabus approach followed in Summit 2B, students receive a merging of two broad procedures; that of a view of language as use, including categories of function, context and language skill, and a more formal linguistic syllabus comprising elements of grammar and vocabulary (McDonough & Shaw 1993, p. 51). An approach of this kind makes Summit 2B easily adaptable to more precisely fit teacher's focus on oral production skills, given the autonomy of individual exercises which can be modified or deleted. The Teacher's Manual, in addition, provides several suggestions for supplementing the course book to acquire a more communicative approach.

Though there are some flaws in the book, as new vocabularies are not recycled, but overall this book is very effective for the students' use. However, the teacher should use the book in the way he/she may be able to assess the strengths and flaws. Textbook evaluation should be included in the English language teacher' training. Through the evaluation of the text books they can consider the logic behind the organization of the given materials and its strengths or weaknesses.

In the current study attempts have been made to identify the quality of the Summit 2B textbook used in language classes in Iran. It is assumed that language practitioners can acquire some insight of how to conduct this technique for themselves from this textbook review.

Implications indicate that textbook creators can provide more universal features in their English language textbooks by using suitable checklists and questionnaires that are at the same time personalized and suited to the learners' requirements. Further experiments can be carried out with various tests on different course book packages.

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