An Evaluation of Grammar and Vocabulary Consciousness-Raising Activities in Current ELT Materials

Hassan Soodmand Afshar a*, Mohammad Bagherieh b

a Assistant Professor in TEFL, Bu-Ali Sina University, Hamedan, IR Iran
b MA in TEFL, Bu-Ali Sina University, Hamedan, IR Iran

Abstract

Five current international ELT books used in Iran were scrutinized regarding inclusion of grammar and vocabulary consciousness-raising activities. To this end, a twenty-seven item, five-point Likert-scale questionnaire filled out by 90 Iranian EFL teachers and 170 students, triangulated by a semi-structured interview conducted with 20 EFL teachers and 20 students were adopted. A Chi-square analysis and an independent sample t-test were run to compare teachers and students' responses. The findings revealed although the five ELT books used different kinds of grammar and vocabulary activities, they did not include some of the major grammar and vocabulary consciousness-raising activities (e.g. making generalizations, cross-referencing, reconstructing, etc). The findings might be beneficial for ELT material developers, syllabus designers and practitioners.

Keywords: Grammar and vocabulary consciousness-raising activities, current international ELT books, materials;

1. Introduction

It is generally believed that the mastery of grammar and vocabulary as building blocks of the English language might ease the burden of the learning process for the students.

Regarding the crucial role of vocabulary, (Decarrico, 2001, p.285) maintains that "vocabulary learning is central to
language acquisition, whether the language is first, second, or foreign”. Krashen (1982) believes that grammar is synonymous with conscious learning and it has two possible roles in second language teaching including grammar as "monitor" and grammar as "language appreciation". Prabhu (1987) stresses the importance of meaning-focused tasks and their contribution to L2 grammar acquisition. Both teachers and foreign language teaching/learning materials can put consciousness-raising activities into effect. However, of paramount importance here is the role of materials in general and course books in particular which provide a blueprint of activities to be done by both teachers and students. As Cunningsworth (1995, p.1) maintains, "The wealth of published materials for English language teaching (ELT) available on the market makes selecting the right course book a challenging task". This statement clearly demonstrates the necessity of course book evaluation in any ELT program. Tomlinson (2003, p.15) defines course book evaluation as "a procedure that involves measuring the value (or potential value) of a set of learning materials". The present study aimed at evaluating current ELT materials taught in Iran with regard to grammar and vocabulary consciousness activities. Consciousness rising, (C-R) according to Richards and Schmidt (2002, p. 109) is a "technique that encourages learners to pay attention to language form in the belief that an awareness of form will contribute indirectly to language acquisition".

Willis and Willis (1996, p.71) suggest different grammar consciousness raising activities including:

- Identify/consolidate: Students are asked to search a set of data to identify a particular pattern or usage and the language forms associated with it.
- Classify (semantic; structural): Students are required to work with a set of data and sort it according to similarities and differences based on formal or semantic criteria.
- Hypothesis building/checking: Students are given (or asked to make) a generalization about language and asked to check this against more language data.
- Cross-language exploration: Students are encouraged to find similarities and differences between patternings in their own language and patternings’s in English.
- Reconstruction/deconstruction: Students are required to manipulate language in ways, which reveal underlying patterns.
- Recall: Students are required to recall and reconstruct elements of a text. The purpose of the recall is to highlight significant features of the text.
- Reference training: Students need to learn to use reference works - dictionaries, grammars and study guides.

Moreover, vocabulary consciousness according to Scott and Scott (2010, p.1), "is an interest in and awareness of words as building blocks of communication, the ability to reflect on, and manipulate words as units of language". Graves & Watts (2002) maintain that word consciousness refers to an awareness of, and interest in words and their meanings. Within the same line of reasoning, Anderson and Nagy (1992) believe that word consciousness integrates metacognition about words, motivation to learn words, and deep and lasting interest in words. There are different approaches and activities to enhance word consciousness. Graves (2007) maintains that enhancing the metalinguistic awareness of students; the ability to consciously think about and reflect on linguistic characteristics, such as the characteristics of words will make learners more conscious of words. According to Graves (2007), activities like modelling skilful word choice, promoting skilful word choice, encouraging word play and word lay books, offering instruction that is rich and robust, having students take part in novel explanation of words and providing instruction on words can be implemented by the teachers to help the students to become conscious of words. Graves & Taffe (2007, p.159) suggest five approaches to foster word consciousness including:

- Modeling, recognizing and encouraging adept diction: This approach includes using unfamiliar words to describe the concepts they are familiar with to make them curious about the world of words. For instance,
asking the students to close the door because it is *ajar* instead of asking the student to close the door because it *not completely closed*. One approach to model adept diction is to use the "word-of-the-day" approach. Another approach in students' writing and speaking is to scaffold their use of new words.

- Promoting word play: This approach includes reinforcing the use of homophones, homographs, idioms, clichés, puns and word play books.

- Providing intensive and expressive instruction: This approach requires students to be immersed in a rich, precise, interesting and intensive use of vocabulary (i.e. using children's literature). It also requires students to work extensively and intensively with words. The third step in this approach, is writing extensive essays using much of the words they have learned. Finally, the last step involves discussions about the word choices they make, why they make those choices, and how adroit use of words makes speech and writing more precise, more memorable and more interesting.

- Involving students in original investigations: This approach involves students in systematic efforts (research done by the students themselves) to investigate different data sources including both written and spoken ones.

- Teaching students about words: This final step involves the knowledge of words, which teachers should have, and the possibility of explicitly instructing students in this knowledge. Nagy and Scott (2000) believe that word knowledge comprises knowledge of five aspects including incrementality, multidimensionality, polysemy, interrelatedness and heterogeneity.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The participants of the present study were 90 male and female Iranian EFL teachers with different university degrees (at least a BA) in TEFL and translation and also with different teaching experiences (at least 2 years of experience). The participants also included 170 male and female EFL learners studying one of the five current international ELT books in different private ELT centres of Hamedan. The proficiency level of students included intermediate, high-intermediate and advanced levels based on the book they were studying. Both teachers and students were conveniently sampled from the available private ELT centres of Hamedan.

2.2. Materials

The materials for the present study included five current international ELT books widely used in private ELT centres in Iran. The researchers evaluated the following ELT course books based on the criteria features regarding grammar and vocabulary consciousness raising activities based on Willis and Willis (1996) and Graves and Taffe (2007) respectively. The particulars of the ELT books evaluated in the study are:


2.2. Instruments

The instrument adopted for collecting the required data was a 30 item five-digit Likert-scale questionnaire which
was filled out by both EFL teachers and EFL learners. Second, an open-ended questionnaire was administered to the EFL teachers. Finally, for the purpose of data triangulation, a semi-structured interview was conducted on both ELT teachers and EFL learners.

2.3. Procedure

To evaluate the aforementioned ELT materials first, the researchers subjectively scrutinized each book against 30 criteria features. The criteria features to evaluate the incorporation of grammar raising activities were drawn up from the model suggested by Willis and Willis (1996). In addition, Graves and Taffe's (2007) model regarding word consciousness activities was considered as the criteria for the incorporation of vocabulary consciousness raising activities into the course books. Second, to include the teachers ‘and learners’ voices in this subjective evaluation, both EFL teachers and learners filled out a questionnaire. The items of the mentioned questionnaire were obtained from the responses which 20 other similar EFL teachers gave to an open-ended questionnaire and also the criteria suggested by Willis and Willis (1996) and Graves and Taffe (2007). Finally, to triangulate the obtained data, a semi-structured interview was conducted with 20 ELT teachers and 20 EFL learners each one teaching or studying at least one of the five ELT books mentioned earlier. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and coded by the researchers to find the recurring themes and patterns mentioned by the interviewees who were then quantitated and frequency analysed.

2.4. Data analysis

The results obtained from the teachers' questionnaires and those obtained from the students' questionnaires were compared using chi-square analysis to find any significant differences between teachers and students' responses to each individual item. An independent sample t-test was also run to compare the teachers and students' overall responses to find any significant general differences among the perceptions of both groups. Furthermore, the semi-structured interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and coded by the researchers, which were then quantitated, and frequency analysed. Finally, the results of the researchers' subjective evaluation, the teachers' responses to the questionnaire, and students' responses to the questionnaires as well as the results gained from the semi-structured interview were compared, contrasted and discussed.

2.3. Results and discussion

The subjective evaluation of the researchers revealed that although the current books enjoyed incorporation of different vocabulary and grammar consciousness raising activities, they lacked some of them. The results of the scrutiny showed that activities like making generalizations, cross referencing, reconstructing, discussing word choices, researching about vocabularies were lacking in the books. The reason might be due to the nature of the language teaching theories behind the books. Four Corners, which is a recently published series, seems to have incorporated more activities of the ilk. However, vocabulary has not received due attention in Four Corners. Interchange series, which was the previous version of the Four Corners showed no significant difference in presenting grammar and vocabulary. Thus, it might be concluded that four corners did not improve much regarding vocabulary and grammar. The scrutiny also revealed that English Result, which is also a recent material in ELT, enjoys different vocabulary and grammar teaching strategies. It was also concluded while American English File was rich in presenting grammar; it did not well emphasize teaching vocabulary. Total English was concluded to be weak in presenting both grammar and vocabulary. The results of the chi-square analyses indicated that although teachers answered some of the items in the same manner and students, teachers and students' opinions differed in some items. The items included making students to work with a sort of data and sorting it according to similarities and differences based on formal and semantic criteria, emphasizing the use of different grammar learning techniques and strategies and using an explicit approach in teaching grammar and vocabulary. The reason might be the fact that students' perception of different activities and methods in teaching grammar and vocabulary might be different from that of the teachers'. In other words, students may not be aware of the concepts of the activities included in the questionnaire. Furthermore, the results of the independent sample t-test showed that, students and teachers' opinions did not differ significantly. Table 1 shows the results of the t-test.
Finally, the results of the semi-structured interviews also corroborated the teachers and students' opinions. It can be concluded that both teachers and students are not aware of the potential value of the grammar and vocabulary consciousness raising activities included in the books. Material developers are also recommended to put a wider range of the activities in the current ELT books to enhance and ease the burden of learning English as a foreign language.

References


Graves, M. F., & Watts-Taffe, S. M. (2002). The place of word consciousness in a research-based vocabulary program. What Research Has to Say about Reading Instruction, 3, 140-165.


