International Conference on Current Trends in ELT

Textbook Evaluation: A Case Study

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Abstract

Textbooks provide novice teachers with guidance in course and activity design; it assures a measure of structure, consistency, and logical progression in a class. This paper reports on a study that investigated one of the textbooks (\textit{Top Notch}) which is used in some of the Iranian English language institutions. The purpose of this research project was to determine the overall pedagogical value and suitability of the book towards students’ needs. For this purpose, 105 students and 32 teachers were selected and data were gathered by two questionnaires which were prepared by Litz (2001). The teacher questionnaire consisted of 40 items and the student version consisted of 25 items. An additional component of the study consisted of a student “needs analysis” that was conducted at the same time as the textbook evaluation survey. After analyzing data, it was shown that although the textbook had some shortcomings, it had met students’ needs and it could be a good book in the hand of a good teacher.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Urmia University, Iran.

Keywords: textbook evaluation; students' needs

1. Introduction

English language instruction has many important components but the essential constituents to many ESL/EFL classrooms and programs are the textbooks and instruction materials that are often used by language instructors. As Hutchinson and Torres (1994) suggest:

The textbook is an almost universal element of teaching. Millions of copies are sold

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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).

Textbooks are commodities, political objects, and cultural representations and, therefore, are the site and result of struggles and compromise in order to determine how and by whom they will be produced, how and by whom their contents will be selected, how and to whom they will be distributed, and how teachers and students will make use of them (Shannon, 2010).

The role of the textbook in the language classroom is a difficult one to be defined perfectly and exactly. Using only textbooks, from cover to cover, without any supplemental material is not the most satisfactory method for meeting students’ needs. However, both teachers and students need a framework on which to build and textbooks definitely provide this. It is important that instructors strike a balance between being a slave to their texts and providing organized, objective-based instruction. (Garinger, 2002).

There appears to be very little research, however, on the exact role of textbooks in the language classroom. Allwright (1981) suggests that there are two key positions. The first— the deficiency view— sees the role of textbooks or published materials as being to compensate for teachers’ deficiencies and ensure that the syllabus is covered well thought out exercises. Underlying this view is the assumption that good teachers always know what material to use with a given class and have access to, or can create, them. They thus neither want, nor need, published materials. The difference view, on the other hand, sees materials as the carriers of decisions best made by someone other than the teacher because of differences in expertise. This view was mentioned by several of the teachers participating in the TESL-L debate, who argued for the use of published materials on the grounds that these are better—and cheaper in terms of cost and effort (McDonough and Shaw, 1993)—that what teachers can produce consistently in the time available to them.

Crawford cited in Richards & Renandya (2002) discusses the advantages and disadvantages of the use of commercial textbooks in teaching. Among the principal advantages are the following:

- They provide structure and a syllabus for a program
- They help standardize instruction
- They maintain quality
- They provide a variety of learning resources
- They are efficient
- They can provide effective language model and input
- They can train teachers
- They are visually appealing

However, there are also potential negative effects of commercial textbooks, such as the following:

- They may contain inauthentic language
- They may distort content
- They may not meet students’ needs
- They can deskill teachers
- They are expensive

Whether one believes that textbooks are too inflexible and biased to be used directly as instructional material or that they actually help teaching and learning, there can be no denying the fact that textbooks still maintain enormous popularity and are most definitely here to stay. It is important to remember, however, that since the 1970's there has been a movement to make learners the center of language instruction and it is probably best to view textbooks as resources in achieving aims and objectives that have already been set in terms of learner needs. Moreover, they should not necessarily determine the aims themselves (components of teaching and learning) or become the aims but they should always be at the service of the teachers and learners (Brown, 1995). Consequently, we must make every effort to establish and apply a wide variety of relevant and contextually appropriate criteria for the evaluation of the textbooks that we use in our language classrooms. We should also ensure "that careful selection is made, and that the materials selected closely reflect [the needs of the learners and] the aims, methods, and values of the teaching
program." (Cunningsworth, 1995 p. 7).

Evaluation is a dynamic process which investigates the suitability and appropriateness of an existing practice (Rea-Dickens & Germaine, 1992). It is a useful device for both teachers and material writers as an underlying element in the development of innovations and modifications within the teaching/learning context. However, despite its important role in improving various aspects of teaching programs, evaluation is not still a well-articulated and supported part of a project (Hargreaves, 1989). Hence, the significance of the textbook as a universal component of English language teaching is undeniable (Hutchison & Torres, 1994).

Facing this fact that English is taught all over Iran in public schools and English language institutions and textbooks have an undeniable role in language learning, this study wants to investigate and evaluate one of these textbooks (Top Notch) which is taught in some of the English language institutions and to see to what extent it has met student needs.

2. Review of Literature

Cunningsworth (1995) and Ellis (1997) have suggested that there are three different types of material evaluation. They argue that the most common form is probably the 'predictive' or 'pre-use' evaluation that is designed to examine the future or potential performance of a textbook. The other types of textbook evaluation are the 'in-use' evaluation designed to examine material that is currently being used and the 'retrospective' or 'post-use' (reflective) evaluation of a textbook that has been used in any respective institution.

Despite the fact that textbooks are an important element in most of EFL classes, there has been little investigation done in terms of how and why materials are selected by teachers. The reason for this may lie in the fact that in the age of communicative teaching, experts who advise on the use of textbooks may seem out of step with current language teaching methodology. Yet, regardless of how great an emphasis is placed on the use of authentic materials, teachers frequently do not have the time and the administrative support to collect and adapt all the necessary materials for their classes. Therefore, it is disappointing that researchers have not provided more guidance to enable teachers and administrators to make wiser decisions. (Soori, et al., 2011)

To Prabhu (1987) Textbooks are fully specified and pre-constructed materials that provide a certain amount of uniformity in what occurs in many different classes with different teachers and students, which serves the interests of accountability.

Yasemin (2009) discusses an evaluation of the three English textbooks which have been prescribed for use in grade 4 classes by the Turkish Ministry of National Education in state primary schools. Teachers and students responded to a 37-item textbook evaluation scheme (Smiley Questionnaire) to express their perceptions concerning various aspects of the textbooks. Both groups of participants were also interviewed to gain further insights into the use of the textbooks. Findings revealed the extent of appropriateness of the three textbooks used by young learners of English. Suggestions are offered for the future revision and/or designing the textbooks for young learners of English.

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 managerial and teaching staff of a specific institution or organization to discriminate between all of the available textbooks on the market (David, 2001).

In Ruben (2010) research, a content analysis of the textbooks used in the Dutch early childhood teacher education shows clear inconsistencies with the intended curriculum. Neither the content standards found in the professional profile for teachers nor the content standards from the educational profile of their training courses are adequately covered in the books. While they pay considerable attention to the teacher’s educational duties, other tasks outside the primary work process are either dealt with in much less detail or ignored altogether, including the need for
According to Ansary and Babaii (2002) as teachers, many of us have had the responsibility of evaluating textbooks. Often, we have not been confident about what to base our judgments on, how to qualify our decisions, and how to report the results of our assessment. It seems to us that to date textbook selection has been made in haste and with a lack of systematically applied criteria. They say that Teachers, students, and administrates are all consumers of textbooks. All these groups, of course, may have conflicting views about what a good/standard textbook is. However, the question is where they can turn to for reliable advice on how to make an informed decision and select a suitable textbook. The literature on textbook selection and/or textbook evaluation procedure is vast. Various scholars have suggested different ways to help teachers become more systematic and objective in their approach (Chastain, 1971; Tucker, 1975; Candlin & Breen, 1979; Daoud & Celce-Murcia, 1979; Williams, 1983; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Sheldon, 1988; Skierso, 1991; Ur, 1996; Littlejohn, 1996; to name but a few). They have often offered checklists based on supposedly generalizable criteria. These sometimes detailed check-sheets use a variety of methods to assess how well a particular textbook under scrutiny measures up.

3. Method

3.1. Subjects

Textbook evaluation is usually done by those teachers who teach a particular book, but Chambers (1997) have pointed out that this activity is usually more beneficial if it is collectively undertaken by everyone involved in the teaching and learning process. He suggests that when teaching materials are to be used by a large group of teachers and students it seems sensible for these materials to be evaluated by all or most of those who will be involved in their use. For the purpose of this study, 32 teachers and 105 students who were teaching and studying Top Notch participated in this study. The teachers had taught this textbook for 2 years in average and the students were from intermediate and advance levels. The age of the students ranged from 13-17 and all of them were studying in secondary schools.

3.2. Instruments

For gathering data from the participants, two questionnaires were used. These questionnaires were prepared by Litz (2001) at Sung Kyun Kwan University in South Korea. The original questionnaires were semantic differential scales but in this study they were changed to the Likert scales and the participants were asked to choose among “highly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, highly agree” for items in the area of practical considerations, layout and design, activities, skills, language type, subject and content, and conclusions. The teacher questionnaire consisted of 40 items and the student questionnaire consisted of 25 items.

An additional component of the study consisted of a student “needs analysis” that was conducted at the same time as the textbook evaluation survey. It was felt in this instance that an accurate representation of the students’ aims, concerns, interests, expectations, and views regarding teaching methodology would assist in the overall textbook evaluation process by creating a clearer picture of the compatibility between actual students’ needs and the perceived goals and objectives of this particular textbook.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaires in English were administered to the chosen students and teachers. For collecting data from the students, the researchers distributed the instrument during class time preceded by a brief explanation of the purpose
and the nature of the study and if they had difficulty in the interpretation of any item, the researchers helped them to understand the item. For collecting data from the teachers, the researchers distributed the instrument to the teachers and explained the nature and purpose of the study to them.

After the collection of the instrument, it was collected for data analysis. The means of the teachers and students in each single item were calculated to summarize the teachers’ and students’ views about the textbook.

4. Findings

4.1. Practical considerations

For this part the teacher questionnaire consisted of five items and the student one consisted of two items. An important factor that relates to the choosing of a textbook is cost. Both the teachers and students found *Top Notch* expensive. Regarding the accessibility of the book, the means of the teachers and the students were 3.51 and 3.2 respectively. It is maybe because the teachers and the students cannot find the book on the market of their cities and it is available in large cities and it may also be a result of the fact the *Top Notch* may not be as readily available in bookstores as other better known textbooks like the *interchange* series.

The textbook is accompanied by a CD, a student workbook, and a teacher’s manual. The CD includes natural-sounding recordings of conversation, vocabulary items, pronunciation exercises, listening activities, and reading passages. The English employed in the book is American but the films on the CD are British. It meets the students’ needs because the results of the “needs analysis” demonstrated that 42% of the students were in favor of following American English, 20% British English, and 38% both. The final part of the practical considerations is the authors’ views to teaching methodology. Brown (1995) and Cunningworth (1995) suggest that it is absolutely essential in evaluating any textbook to determine whether or not its inherent methodology will reinforce the institutional aims as well as conform to the classroom context. The back cover of the book says that this book follows communicative competence with an emphasis on cultural fluency that enables students to navigate the social, travel, and business situations that they will encounter in their lives. An analysis of the evaluation survey showed that the majority of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the methodology employed by the authors of the book. Moreover, the results of the students “needs analysis” indicated that the students were in favor of the integration of skills and they also wanted a course which could prepare them for the outside world of the class. It seems that the authors’ views were comparable to the beliefs and opinions of the teachers and students.

4.2. Layout and design

The layout and design of a textbook refers to its organization and presentation of language items and activities and the results of the survey showed that the majority of the teachers and students were satisfied with the layout and design of this book. The learning objectives at the beginning of the book are concise and clear. Each unit is accompanied by a preview, four lessons which are based on a specific topic, and a review at the end of each unit. The topics of the units coincide to some extents with those that students mentioned in the “needs analysis”, and it seems that the book has covered a lot of topics which meet students’ needs. Additional useful components of the overall layout and design of *Top Notch* are grammar booster and writing booster. An interesting design of the book is that the workbook is attached to the book itself; this feature and the writing booster part have distinguished this book from the other series on the market.

While all in all the overall design was great, one shortcoming which was clear from the survey was that an adequate set of evaluation quizzes or testing suggestions was not included and it means that the students do not have enough opportunities to test and evaluate themselves.

4.3. Activities
A number of theorists such as Vygotsky (1978) and Long (1990) have advocated the cognitive value of student-student/social interaction for promoting learning. Jacobs and Ball (1996) suggest that the best type of activities are those that encourage the negotiation of meaning or those that promote positive interdependence and facilitate individual accountability through cooperative learning strategies.

The results of teacher questionnaire related to the activities part showed that the majority of the teachers put themselves in the neutral part but they agreed that the textbook’s activities could be modified and supplemented easily. On the other side the students thought that the textbook provided a sufficient balance of activities and the activities encouraged communicative and meaningful practice and they also believed that the activities promoted creative, original, and independent responses. One possible reason for this rate of agreement is the teaching methodology and the English textbooks which are taught in governmental schools in Iran. Most Iranian classrooms are teacher-centered and learning, if any occurs, is the result of drilling and memorization and the English textbooks follow audiolingual method. When the students compare the teaching methodology and textbooks of their institutions with those of schools they are certainly in favor of the activities and tasks of the textbooks which are taught in institutions.

A close inspection of the activities and tasks of the textbook shows that it follows P-P-P approach for teaching grammar and does not focus on consciousness-raising and discovery learning tasks. It contains a variety of pair work, group work, and discussion activities and tasks that allow students to personalize their responses, share information, and express their thoughts and experiences in English. The results of “needs analysis” showed that nearly fifty percent of the students preferred to learn individually, it is maybe because of the education system in Iran. As mentioned before the textbook has focused on pair and group work activities and has not focused on individual activities, but in this case the activities and tasks can be modified.

4.4. Skills

The results of “needs analysis” showed that the students wanted a textbook which focused on all language skills in an appropriate way (a multi-skills syllabus) and they found speaking and reading skills as the most important skills which be paid attention most in the classroom. Regarding this matter, this textbook has met students’ needs because it has a multi-skills syllabus and has covered both receptive and productive skills. Several scholars like Hammer (1996) advocate an integrated, multi skills syllabus because it considers and incorporates several categories of both meaning and form. The skills that are presented in the textbook include a wide range of cognitive listening and speaking skills that will be challenging to the learners. The skills integration and the development of discourse and fluency skills are given sufficient attention. Before listening and reading tasks, the authors have presented pre, during, and post tasks.

The results of the survey showed that the majority of the teachers and students agreed that the materials provided an appropriate balance of the language skills. The teachers were in agreement position that the textbook highlighted and practiced natural pronunciation. But most of the teachers and students were in neutral position regarding the attention of the textbook to sub-skills like listening for gist and note-taking.

4.5. Language type

In this part of the survey, the teachers and students were asked to consider whether the language included in the materials was realistic and authentic. They were also asked to examine if the progression of grammar points and vocabulary items was appropriate and whether the language was at the right level or of the right type for the students.

In terms of the authenticity of the language the mean of the teachers was 3.45 and the mean of the students was 3.66. It shows that the language of the textbook was semi-authentic (include both authentic and inauthentic language). It can be an advantage for the textbook since it is neither too difficult to demotivate students nor too easy and can familiarize students with the language which is used in a real life context.
For the other items of this part of the questionnaire, the majority of the respondents were in agreement position. For example, they agreed that the language used was at the right level for the students, the grammar points were presented with brief and easy examples, and the language functions exemplified English that the students would be likely to use.

The majority of the teachers and students thought that the textbook did not represent a diverse range of registers and accents. The mean of the teacher was 2.05 and the mean of the students was 2.87. It seems that both the teachers and the students just focus on the content of the book in the classroom and they do not pay attention to the other materials which are accompanied by the textbook such as films on the CD.

4.6. Subject and content

Many theorists believe that it is indisputable that language is culturally bound and since language teaching and culture cannot be distinctly separated from each other and it is probably inevitable that students will be exposed to some elements of the target language culture when using many ELT textbook (Kramsch, 1994; McDonough & Shaw, 1997).

In this part of the survey, the respondents were asked about the relevance of the subject and content of the textbook to the students’ needs. They were also asked about the reality and variety of the subject and content and they were asked to see whether the materials were not culturally biased and they did not portray any negative stereotype.

The majority of the respondents thought that the textbook had covered interesting, challenging, motivating, and various topics. This textbook can enrich the students’ overall awareness and experiences by exposing them to another culture’s attitudes, a claim which was supported by the survey respondents.

The majority of the teachers were in neutral position that the materials were not culturally biased and they did not portray any negative stereotype, but most of the students were in agreement position.

5. Conclusion

The present study investigated top notch series which are taught in some of the Iranian institutions. It investigated the positive and negative characteristics of the textbook and it was found that the positive attributes far outweighed the negative characteristics. Although the book had some shortcomings such as lack of vocabulary glossary and the way of presenting grammar (P-P-P approach), the teachers felt that the textbook was suitable for the language-learning aims and they would choose to use the textbook again and it also raised students’ interest in further English language study. One thing to add here is that as Ansary and babaii (2002) said however perfect a textbook is, it is just a simple tool in the hands of teachers. We should not, therefore, expect to work miracles with it. What is more important than a textbook is what we, as teachers, can do with it. As Brown and Yule (1983) put it: it is, in principle, not possible to find materials which would interest everyone. It follows that the emphasis should be moved from attempting to provide intrinsically interesting materials, which we have just claimed is generally impossible, to doing interesting things with materials ... these materials should be chosen, not so much on the basis of their own interest, but for what they can be used to do (p. 83).

It can be said that this textbook can be recommended in this particular teaching and learning situation and it can be an effective textbook in the hand of good teachers if it is accompanied by some adaptations.

Through this textbook analysis, it is hoped that language professionals will gain some knowledge on how to perform this procedure for themselves. Implications suggest that textbook developers, by using appropriate checklists and questionnaire can include more universal characteristics in their EFL/ESL textbooks which, at the same time, are tailored and adapted to the needs of the learners. Textbooks that appear sound on the surface often
lack many of the criteria of a truly superior book. Therefore, it is necessary for individuals who are making these choices to carefully examine all aspects of the text and compare it against an assessment tool. An evaluation checklist or questionnaire, whether adopted from another author or created by the researcher, serves to focus this examination and ensures that significant factors will not be missed. (Soori, et al., 2011).

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