

A Comparative Study of English Textbooks in Iranian Non-Profit Institutes and Schools

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Abstract

Textbooks have very profound influence in the process of language teaching and learning. This study investigates English text books taught in Iranian schools and Mehr Language institute from the teachers' views and perspectives. The study was carried out at high schools in Tonekabon, Mehr English Language School, Iran. The data were obtained from a total 40 teachers, both female and male. It was collected through questionnaire with 30 items which were related to the seven criteria, Level of textbook, Content, Teacher's guidebooks, Exercises and Activities, Clarity of instruction, Vocabulary, Grammar, supplementary of the textbook. The results showed that the teachers had negative attitudes towards the school textbooks in contrast with English Language Schools. The research findings elucidates that the current material or textbook cannot meet Iranian teachers' requirement and interests, and there should vital pioneering moments of English materials are prepared for high school students in Iran.

Keywords: Textbook Evaluation, Material development, Content, Policy making

Introduction

To many English instructors, textbooks are basic elements in ELT teaching and they are the most extensively used instructional materials in schools at present. Few teachers enter a class without a textbook which provides content and teaching learning activities that make up much of what is taught in that classroom.

Cuningsworth (1995) highlights the difficulty of choosing appropriate language teaching textbook and materials [1]. He states that since there are a great variety of published materials for English language teaching available on the market, it becomes a challenging task to make the right choice of the textbooks. In addition, learners are becoming worldly-wise due to the impact of high technology. Therefore, they expect better textbook that make learning easier and enjoyable and that appeal to their interests and needs all the way around.

Despite the vital role that textbooks play in teaching and learning English as a foreign language in Iran, there is limited research conducted to evaluate textbooks. The purpose of this study is to assess the effectiveness of English textbooks prepared by Ministry of Education of Iran as an instructional material for high school students from the teachers' perspectives currently teaching them.

Literature Review

Despite the impact of new technologies, textbooks will doubtless continue to play an important role in language

teaching and provide a useful resource for both teachers and learners. What is more it has significant impact on the learners' meeting their language learning objectives. The role of the textbook in the language classroom is undeniable. Both teachers and students need a framework on which to build and textbooks definitely provide this.

A textbook has always been the most preferred instructional material in ELT. They are best seen as a resource in achieving aims and objectives that have already been set concerning learner needs [1]. Textbooks play a prominent role in the teaching /learning process and they are the primary agents of conveying the knowledge to the learners. Besides, one of the basic functions of textbooks is to make the existence knowledge available and apparent to the learner in a selected, easy and organized way.

Hutchinson and Torres (1994) argue that the textbook has a very important and a positive part to play in teaching and learning English [2]. Allwright (1981) adds a further dimension to the role of the textbook by characterizing the lesson as an interaction between the three elements of teacher, learners and materials. This interaction enhances the opportunities to learn [3]. Cuningsworth (1995) also identifies a textbook as a resource in presenting the material, a source for learners to practice and do the activities [1].

Teachers, evaluators and other language-teaching professionals find asking such general questions crucial while evaluating the classroom instructional materials. Tomlinson (1998) defines materials evaluation as the systematic judgment of the value of materials in relation to the aims of the materials and the learners who are using them. What is more he points out that evaluation can be pre-use focusing on predictions of potential value. It can also be while-use focusing on awareness and description of what the learners are doing with the materials and it can be after-use so as to find out what happened as a result of using the instructional materials. Ellis (1997) distinguishes two types of materials evaluation, namely, predictive evaluation and retrospective evaluation [5]. A predictive evaluation is designed to make a decision regarding what materials to use. Teachers who are required to carry out a predictive evaluation determine which materials are best suited to their purposes. Once the materials have been used, further evaluation may be conducted to find out whether the materials have worked out for them, and this type of evaluation is called retrospective evaluation.

It is for the reason mentioned above that there is then a need to evaluate materials retrospectively because such an evaluation provides the teacher with feedback so as to determine whether it is worth using the material again. Thus, Ellis (1997) states that ‘a retrospective evaluation serves as a means of testing the validity of a predictive evaluation and what is more, it may point to ways in which the predictive instruments can be improved for future use [5] (p.37). As it can be understood from the above definitions, both predictive and retrospective evaluations aim at making the teaching/-learning environment more effective. They both help teachers to make appropriate judging concerning the effectiveness of their teaching including the materials they used.

Breen and Candlin's (1987) model for material evaluation was adapted in the current study. They suggest a guide which consists of two phases [6]. Phase one includes some initial evaluative questions as to the usefulness of materials whereas Phase II includes questions to evaluate those initial questions more closely and offers some criteria for the selection and use of materials taking into account at the particular group of learners and the actual classroom language learning situation. It can be stated that the model itself puts both the teacher and the learners forward on the evaluation of language teaching materials. This study is searching for addressing the following research question:

Research question: Do the Iranian high school teachers have a positive attitude towards English textbooks and institute ones?

Method and Materials

Design of the study

The research is a survey aimed at considering the teachers' attitudes towards currently taught English materials at Iran's high schools.

Participants

A total of 230 male learners participated in this study. The participants came from a range of different institutes and schools across Tonekabon. Indeed, the target population of the study was quite diverse in terms of the participants' places of origin, in that a number of different cities were involved. The required data were amassed through the administration of a questionnaire. The following table shows the number of the participants according to the specific textbooks they were studying:

Table 1 Number of Participants Based on the Specific Textbooks Used Number of the participants

Number of the participants	The textbook
85	School books
60	American cutting Edge 1
33	Top Notch
52	Family Friends

Instrument

Some of the questions of the Textbook Evaluation Tool (TET) were adopted from Cunningsworth (1995) checklist for this study. A 30 item questionnaire was used to obtain quantitative data regarding teachers' perspectives towards currently taught English materials at Iran's high schools. Items were related to the seven criteria, Content, Physical appearance, Exercises and Activities, teachers guidebooks, Level of textbook, Vocabulary, Grammar, supplementary of the textbook. The subjects responded using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). The time required to complete the questionnaire was approximately 25 minutes.

Procedures

In this study quantitative data were obtained through the teachers responses to the questionnaires. Data collection procedures were carried out for about two semesters. The questionnaires were given to the teachers by the researcher himself. Final score are not affected by the results of this study. The researcher stated that: All your data would be kept in secret and no one would have access to them except the researcher.

Data analysis

This study produced quantitative data through questionnaires. Means and standard deviations were calculated for each item to describe the overall trend of how the teachers rated the textbook in terms of seven criteria. Three levels of analysis for every item were devised to analyze the teachers' responses to items more easily namely, ranging from highly agreement (mean of 3.5 or higher), medium agreement (mean of 2.5–3.4), and low agreement (2.4 or lower).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Teachers' views on different items of the textbook evaluation questionnaire

	Statements	Mean	SD	Levels of Agreement
	A. Content (Overall)	2.22	.450	Low
1	The topics of the units are interesting for students.	2.90	.951	Medium
2	Reading passage and examples in the textbook are related to their daily lives.	2.80	.855	Medium
3	The reading passages in the textbook are quite long.	2.70	.743	Medium
4	The units in the textbook provide sufficient coverage of skills.	2.20	.821	Low
5	Multiple choice tests involved in the text would facilitate our English.	2.00	.798	Low
6	The units in the textbook include topics which are up to date.	2.10	.881	Low
7	There is sufficient variety in the subject and content of the textbook.	2.30	.912	Low
	B. Physical appearance (Overall)	2.37	.710	Medium
8	The cover of the textbook is attractive.	3	.978	Medium
9	The layout of a page is quite attractive.	2.80	.805	Medium
10	The weight of the textbook appropriate for students.	3.10	.875	Medium
11	Following the layout of a page is easy.	2.60	.945	Medium
12	The layout in the textbook encourages students to do the activities.	2.58	.713	Medium
13	The artwork (picture-illustrations-graphs-tables- etc.) in the textbook is helpful to students to understand.	2.40	.925	Low
14	The font type in the textbook helps students to follow up the units easily.	2.85	.987	Medium
15	The font size in the textbook helps students to follow up the texts easily.	3.15	.953	Medium
16	The colors in the textbook look attractive.	2.90	.890	Medium
17	The textbook is organized effectively	2.00	.905	Low
	C-Exercises & Activities (Overall)	1.42	.750	Low
18	The exercises and activities in the textbook are interesting.	2.10	.754	Low
19	The activities and exercises in the textbook are appropriate for students' levels.	2	.856	Low
20	The activities and exercises in the textbook increase their desire to learn English.	1.80	.711	Low
21	The activities in the textbook sufficiently encourage collaborative work.	1.50	.881	Low
22	The reading activities and exercises in the textbook help me improve my reading skills.	2.20	.762	Low
23	The activities in the textbook help me improve my writing skills.	1.40	.854	Low
24	The speaking activities in the textbook encourage students use English in the classroom.	1	.890	Low
25	The speaking activities in the textbook provide students use English outside the classroom in daily life.	1	.940	Low
	D. Clarity of instructions (Overall)	2.90	.910	High
26	Students understand the instructions in the textbook easily.	3.40	.945	High
	E. Level of the textbook (Overall)	2	.925	Medium
27	The textbook is above the level of high school students.	3.10	.887	Medium
28	The reading passages in the textbook are difficult for students.	3	.756	Medium
29	The writing activities in the textbook are difficult for students.	3	.945	Medium
30	The speaking activities in the textbook are difficult for students.	2.90	.981	Medium

Results and discussions

Findings

After data collection, the questionnaires were analyzed in terms of seven criteria included in the questionnaire namely, content, physical appearance, exercise and activities, teachers guidebooks, level, vocabulary, grammar, supplementary of the textbooks. Means,

standard deviations of each item were calculated to describe and summarize the teachers' responses to each item and their general perspectives on the textbooks. Results were illustrated in Table 1.

Research question: Do the Iranian high school teachers have a positive viewpoint towards the currently present English textbooks?

In terms of content criterion, the teachers' evaluation of the course books implies that they believe the high school textbooks' content need to be changed and modified in order to be more attractive, up to date, and facilitative. Regarding the face validity of the books and their appearances, the teachers agreed that they are acceptable overall ($M=2.22$). However, their physical appearances should definitely undergo some changes to be more helpful to the student. They should be revised in ways that improve students' motivation and learning.

The teachers showed a complete dissatisfaction towards exercises and activities included in the textbooks ($M=1.42$). They felt that materials in the textbooks leave little or no room for speaking and collaborative activities. These activities do not motivate students sufficiently to study and learn English.

The participant unanimously agreed that the books do not provide adequate contexts and practice for vocabulary learning. However, grammatical points were presented more clearly than vocabulary items did. Yet, such points were also needed to be much more organized again.

Finally, they thought that the textbooks do not take the students' learning styles into account adequately. More emphasis should be put on the textbooks' developers to take students' learning styles, preferences, and strategies into consideration. Altogether, the teachers believed that the quality of almost many parts of the textbooks is poor and they need to be reconsidered and modified to enhance high school students' learning opportunities.

Conclusions

The traditional way of learning English by sticking merely to the books as the only sources of learning has now been expired, and the learners like to have some kind of interaction in the form of writing, reading, listening and speaking by using their tablets, smart boards or laptops in their home or at work. Today's learners will be absorbed by kinds of materials which bring more fun and entertainment to them. Moreover, many features of computers can assist the learners in learning English: they can work at their own pace, repeat, listen, record their own voice, and have support in writing and reading, and so on. Students in such contexts are not motivated enough to learn the language to communicate and therefore should experience learning through textbooks which rightly address their needs, goals, and learning styles. Cunningsworth (1995) stated that the textbooks must include subject matter and topics of the area of interest as part of real life [1].

The difficulty level of reading passages appeared to be a negative factor that hinders the students from doing the related activities and exercises aiming to improve their reading skills. Thus, the available textbooks for high school grades might be more appropriate for students if they are harmonized with students' level of proficiency [1]. Also, textbooks should include some language learner strategies for teaching and learning language skills and more especially for vocabulary and grammar learning. Similarly, Cunningsworth (1995) points out that learners should meet vocabulary items on several occasions and rather in different context so that they can fix those items in memory, gain fluency in using them and come up with a full understanding [1].

Finding of this study may offer insights for those involved in educational administrations, syllabus design, curriculum planning and material development. Different sections of the textbooks can be modified by the committee of text book developers of the Iranian high schools in order to improve their quality. The books' task should be written in a way that the students can use them to learn language. And for the purpose of helping the teachers to teach effectively and successfully, there should be a teachers' book. In order to enhance the amount of learning, the application of language teaching tools such as film, DVDs and computer are suggested.

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