Evaluation of Iranian English Textbooks based on Teacher Textbook Evaluation Scale

Valeh Gholami
PhD Candidate at University of Tabriz, Iran

Abstract

The present study aimed at providing an evaluation of English course book of first grade used at secondary schools in Iran. Textbooks have an undeniable effect on education system. Textbooks may make learning enjoyable or boring for the learners. Course books are reliable reference sources on grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, etc. Therefore, course book evaluation is a useful strategy in teacher development and helps teachers to gain insight into the nature of the materials, and also helps teachers to develop awareness of their own learning/teaching process. This evaluation is based on a model suggested in "Teacher Textbook Evaluation Scale" that tries to evaluate textbooks in terms of layout and design, skills and activities, and subject content and language types.

Key Words: Textbook evaluation, English course book, Strategy, material.

1. Introduction

Recently, the majority of educational systems and teachers criticize the educational curriculum and textbook. According to their views, curriculum and textbooks of secondary school is not appropriate for learner's need, because there is no relationship between the content of textbook and educational curriculum with interest, ability or needs of learners.

Therefore, researchers suggest that educational curriculum and content of textbook of secondary school should be evaluated precisely, to specify the unrelated and unfit parts of the textbooks and to make necessary changes. This criticism makes changes in the content of textbook of elementary and high school (Brown, 2007).

Textbooks of secondary school content transmit the appropriate information for learners, because knowledge is developing so fast and the knowledge that exists in the textbooks was out dated and it is impossible for learners to receive useful and practical information (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999).

So the basic role of textbook is that students learn the way to solve the problems in an autonomous way (Ellis, 2008). Thus teaching English has a major component in curriculum and the class which learning happen is textbooks and materials. Also, the textbook is of paramount importance because it has an important role in learning (Ellis, 2008).

As Hutchinson and Torres (1994) mentioned, the textbook is an almost universal element of ELT teaching. Controversy over the roles EFL textbook play in teaching and learning a foreign language still apparently exists. Also, Ellis viewed textbooks as the visible heart of ELT programs. Textbooks merely grow from and imitate other textbook and do not admit the winds of change from research, methodological experimentation, or classroom feedback.

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Therefore, to make a decision about the content of English textbooks, we should consider the content of each lesson should base on linguistics knowledge and psychology and it must be acceptable by the teachers and learners.

Then the teachers get our views about the content of textbooks in secondary school; they mention that the textbook does not have variety in content, example, or pictures. For this age, the textbook should be designed in order to make students proficient. Follow these steps: answer the question, complete the drills, write story about the lessons, write simple sentences with correct spelling and use the techniques of written such as punctuation, diction, and capital words. But the context in the textbook of secondary school is more artificial and the conversation seems not natural and related to real life. They make students familiar with pronunciation, structure, grammar, idioms, rules, vocabulary, conversation, etc. Textbooks are not practical and useful in real life (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999).

This research accomplishes to represent the impression and the strengths and weaknesses of textbook of secondary school. In the teachers view, we hope that the results and findings in this research would help the designers of textbooks to select good teaching materials and adapt the unsatisfactory ones. The review of the literature showed the following features as the main factors which influence the quality of the books.

1.1. Developing student–faculty contact

Student-faculty relationships have been figured out as an important factor for motivating learners toward higher performance. Teachers' features such as friendliness, motivate in students' learning, enthusiasm, proper interaction skills, and accessibility to learners have been figured out as having a positive influence on the connections between students and faculty (Chickering & Erhmann, 1996; Marsh, 1982; Young & Shaw, 1999). These features develop a classroom environment where students feel comfortable interacting with the teacher for help when confronting problematic course assignments. Teachers' comments that are provided in a supportive and nonthreatening way give incentive to the students to accomplish tasks resulting in advanced levels of proficiency and achievement.

The email tool was used primarily to maintain personal communications with individuals, as well as with collaborative study groups. Email messages were used to distribute announcements, clarify assignments, supply in-depth explanation of statistical concepts, and respond to inquiries related general course information. Email communications were particularly helpful for conveying specific instructions about how to use various tools. For example, email was used to clarify directions for uploading assignment files through the assignment tool. The instructor also interacted with individual students and study groups through threaded discussions designed to stimulate dialog related to the application of various statistical concepts. Efforts to maintain productive interactions between learners and faculty were also supported through individual student–instructor meetings that were held during regularly scheduled instructor office hours.

Overall, students perceived that interactions with the instructor were encouraged and maintained throughout their on-line course experience. The majority of students felt that the instructor communicated effectively (92%), personalized interactions (96%), and was accessible (88%). In addition, most students felt that the instructor was concerned about student learning (96%), was respectful of student learning (100%), and enthusiastic about on-line teaching (90%). One student commented, He [the instructor] was very helpful and willing to meet any time. It helped with taking online courses. He was very enthusiastic and interested in the learning process. Another student noted, the instructor was amazing; he stayed in constant communication and encouraged understanding and not timelines.

1.2. Encourages cooperation among students

The constructivist model of instruction supports the notion that social interaction promotes student learning (Astin, 1993; Cooper & Mueck, 1990; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991). Improved thinking and deeper understanding occur when students have the opportunity to share and respond to each other's ideas (Chickering & Gamson, 1996). Students were divided into six study groups that were responsible for collaboratively solving and submitting weekly problems designed to illustrate applications of the statistical concepts. The discussion tool was used to create private discussion rooms where each study group could post their work, compare and discuss each other's solutions, and compose a final document with solved problems for submission to the instructor. Chat rooms were also created so that learners could synchronously discuss weekly problems with study group members or other members of the class. Two study groups reported meeting physically to complete weekly problems. However, the other study groups collaborated electronically because students within these groups lived far from campus or maintained schedules that did not permit meeting outside of the course room.

Results from items written to assess cooperation among students indicate that a high percentage of students perceived that the course was designed to promote cooperative learning activities (96%), encouraged students to interact with one another (96%), and allowed students to discuss assignments with their peers (92%). It is clear from student responses that cooperative learning activities were included as an instructional strategy. However, there were mixed perceptions of the effectiveness of these instructional activities. One student wrote, I enjoyed working in groups. The group work really facilitated a greater understanding of statistics. However, a frustrated response from another student expressed, the way the class is structured, and there is little [individual student] accountability. Someone can skate by while everyone else does the work.

1.3. Active learning

Current versions of course authoring tools support the creation of Internet-based courses that have greater availability and accessibility to various forms of media supported by World Wide Web. The capabilities for incorporating audio, video, and links to other virtual worlds allow instructors to create authentic, interactive problem-solving activities that augment student efforts to actively construct meaningful knowledge (Pahl, 2003). For example, the concept of chi-square was taught by requiring students to determine if there were significant increases in the percentage of fourth graders reaching proficiency on a statewide reading assessment. The context of this problem is current and realistic because the No Child Left Behind (2001) legislation requires school districts and states to perform a similar analysis for reporting Adequate Yearly Progress toward reading and mathematics goals.

The content modules contained links to web sites that learners could interact with to obtain visual representations of statistical concepts and gain experience using various analyses to solve applied problems. This applet allowed students to enter different combinations of means for two independent groups and visualize the changes in the overlap of the two sample distributions as the power of the statistical test changed.

Overall, student responses to items written to assess active learning suggest that the majority of students perceived that the course assignments were engaging and motivating. Students overwhelming felt that the use of the SPSS software increased their interest in educational statistics (92%) and that the threaded discussions were designed to provoke thoughtful discourse among students and the instructor (79%). Ninety-seven percent of students indicated that the course was designed to allow them to take responsibility for their own learning. Student responses suggest that the course assignments and activities were engaging and supported the constructivist learning principle of self-directed learning. One student

supported this conclusion by noting, Learning on your own really seemed to solidify the concepts on a daily basis. Having to keep up with assignments made learning a smoother transition.

1.4. Encourages prompt feedback

Decades of research support the effectiveness of specific and timely feedback for enhancing task performance. Ammon's 1956 review of published research conducted nearly 50 years ago found that instructor feedback is more effective when delivered in close proximity to the time a task is performed (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). The assignment tool was especially useful for supplying detailed evaluative and corrective feedback that students could use to revise and resubmit assignments.

1.5. Time on task

The asynchronous nature of Internet-based learning environments allows students to participate in courses at any time and any place, increasing the time available for completing tasks required to accomplish learning goals (Billings, 2000). The assignment link took students to a page that contained pathways to the content modules and the assignment postings for SPSS activities. The content modules communicated instructional objectives for each topic, weekly reading assignments, and group problem-solving activities and contained links to examples of worked problems and interpretative reports. The assignment tool was advantageous for promoting time on task because students were automatically reminded about assignment due dates and new assignment postings each time they accessed the course room. Students depended on these reminders and would contact the instructor immediately when assignments were created that failed to indicate a final date for submission.

Approximately 92% of students surveyed perceived that the course was well organized and facilitated by the instructor. In addition, most students (83%) indicated that the course was organized in a manner that allowed them to complete assignments across a variety of learning environments (e.g., home, work, vacation). Student responses to this question suggest that Internet based delivered courses similar to provide students with additional time for engaging in learning activities and for completing course assignments. The advantage of taking educational statistics was captured well by a student who remarked I think offering this course on-line was extremely helpful for us students who are not on campus and cannot be! I enjoyed being able to work on the problems in my own time and express my answers in written form. Another student wrote, I think most people learn better in a classroom setting, but this way forced me to learn, and so while I was frustrated in the beginning, I enjoy it now because I worked at my pace, and did homework when I had time, and didn't have to sit through a three hour stats class. The instructor was very well planned out in his delivery of the course. Overall, I learned a lot, and would do it again.

1.6. High expectations

The use of good examples is an effective practice for setting clear expectations for quality student performance. Examples that provide models of instructor expectations provide students with more precise guidelines about the type of work necessary for proficient assignment completion. The benefit of presenting examples that demonstrate solutions to authentic problems not only sets instructor expectations but also supports the development of cognitive schema that will help students evaluate future applications of their newly acquired knowledge and skills (Lim & Moore, 2002). It was designed to scaffold student learning with realistic examples, web-links, and simulations. The content modules housed links to examples of worked problems, representative SPSS outputs, model interpretative reports, APA style guides, and simulations designed to illustrate the applications of statistical concepts. Scoring rubrics designed to communicate instructor performance expectations for discussion postings, weekly problems, and SPSS reports were posted on the assignment page.

Results from questions pertaining to high expectations suggest that most students felt that the models used to illustrate problem solutions clearly communicated expectations for weekly group problems (96%). All students indicated that the example interpretative reports provided guidance for completing individual SPSS activities. In addition, students generally felt that the instructor used good examples to explain statistical concepts (92%). The use of authentic examples with detailed explanations may be the primary reason that most students (96%) indicated that the course used instructional materials that were understandable and that the assignments were of appropriate difficulty level. One student noted there were no examinations but the SPSS assignments were challenging yet not too difficult to do well on. Work seemed about the right difficulty. These results suggest that the use of good examples and models not only clearly communicated instructor expectations but also provided students with challenging assignments that could be successfully completed.

1.7. Diverse ways of learning

Learner-centered models of instruction advocate that prior knowledge, cognitive processing, personality styles, beliefs about learning, and demographics must be carefully considered when planning instruction (Svinicki, 1999). Creating an array of learning activities that allow multiple opportunities for demonstrating knowledge and skill proficiencies is one approach for planning instruction designed to address the diverse range of learning preferences and skills that learners bring to instructional environments. Weekly reading assignments, threaded discussions, and worked examples with detailed explanations were best suited for students with verbal processing strengths. Instructional activities incorporating rich graphics and visual imagery were a better match for learners with visual processing strengths. For example, the SPSS activities produced reports that presented results in the form of colorful charts and graphs. The interactive Java Applets designed to illustrate statistical concepts were effective leaning tools because they used both words and pictures to integrate verbal and visual thinking providing instructional benefits to most students (Menges, 1994). Conducting statistical analyses with computers was not only beneficial for visual learners but also provided an instructional activity for students preferring a more hands-on approach to learning.

Student responses indicated that only 67% of students felt that the instructor adapted to students' instructional needs. However, this result should be interpreted cautiously because 21% of students indicated that they did not know if the instructor made adaptations. The students who indicated that the instructor made adaptations for instructional needs most likely requested and experienced those accommodations at some time during the course. However, the majority of students (83%) felt that the instructor created instructional activities that allowed several different ways for students to demonstrate understanding of critical course concepts. Most learners (96%) perceived that the instructor was flexible regarding the completion of assignments. Every attempt was made to afford students reasonable amounts of flexibility when completing and submitting assignments. The Internet portals and computer equipment available to students studying from home often provide less accessibility than on-line instructors might expect. Online instructors, using the most current hardware connected to efficient campus-based networks must realize that accessibility issues affect certain students more adversely than others, causing difficulties when attempting to access courses.

This limitation mention that student–faculty communications cannot be limited to on-line course environments and that instructors must be available for telephone conversations and face-to-face meetings. Lack of access to courses can be a legitimate excuse for submitting late work and should be carefully considered when making grading decisions that penalize students.

2. Method

To analyze the textbooks, the following criteria were considered:

-Layout & Design

-Skills & Activities

-Subject content, and the language types represented in the textbook

The above mentioned criteria were elicited from TEFL textbook evaluation, Rahimpour's article (2013).

2.1. Layout and Design

One grade secondary textbook is involved into 10 lessons ending with a review exercise and activities, drills, for prior knowledge activation.

In this book, learners learn letters and numbers and they should write letters as a sample to improve their handwriting. By these letters learners will acquire new vocabulary in each lesson. There are other components in this book such as dialogue, patterns, oral drills, write it down, speak out, etc.

2.2. Layout and Design of Each Unit

The content is organized as follows:

1. Each unit has specific title that introduces main idea of a dialogue. These titles represent the structure of lessons that is placed at the end of each unit. So the content of dialogue is based on title.

2. Units initiate with a dialogue and pattern that is located after dialogues to prepare students for vocabulary and grammar by tapping learners to listen and repeat the sentences to understand better.

3. Dialogue is designed for students to engage in role-playing and monitored speaking practice with a partner. They are gradually expected to change the role of content by creativity. Finally, they should have the ability to add their own ideas and making new conversation that is related to the content. This section can develop the memorization and activation of students.

4. A grammar box is planed at the end of the each lesson that can be related to the topic of that lesson. This organization of each lesson in one grade of secondary textbooks can reinforce grammatical and vocabulary items to stay in language term memory. By practicing, some exercises are connected to grammatical structure. They can improve structural points.

So the contents are based on structures. One of the most important points in this textbook is that the contents are sequenced and it is designed from easy to difficult.

2.3. Skills and Activities

The materials of activities are designed according to grammatical points. By practicing skills learners have background knowledge of basic structure, doing activities and skills can affect student's mind to develop the cognitive value of learners.

By looking to the pictures, students are supposed to guess the words and the structures to complete the blanks. Therefore, some exercises exemplify communication situation that are oral drills, write it down, complete the sentences. Several researchers such as Harmer (1996) suggest that skills and activities are organized variously in one grade of secondary textbooks. A positive point of the textbook, grammar and vocabulary items are closely connected to the skills-base so the vocabulary base and skills work are more demanding (Rahimpour, 2013). In addition, grammar part is developed as a deductive form, first give an example and then provide the rule.

2.4. Language Type and Content

The content of the textbook is organized with regard to the level of the students, so the materials such as vocabulary and grammar are from easy level to difficult also the dialogues are based on an authentic situation. New vocabulary is not just mentioned in vocabulary box, but also these are used in other parts. Number of the new vocabulary that is located in the box is not a lot. For instance, in lesson 5, twenty four words are located in vocabulary chart.

3. Findings

This article tried to evaluate the secondary school English book of first grade used in Iran. According to the findings of this research, instructions to the exercises and activities are clear and appropriate to the age and ability of students. Directions are clear. For example, in every chapter, there are some activities that ask students just listen to the tape and repeat. Pay attention to this activity in chapter 5, page 17.

Patterns: Listen and repeat.

1. I am a student.

The presentation of vocabulary and structure move gradually from simple to the more complex. Moreover, the sentence length and syntax complexity seem reasonable for students of this level.

Another strong point is the existence of reference section for grammar in the end of every chapter that is suitable for individual study. For example, at the end of chapter 5, there is a chart which is given below.

Basic structure	
Subject+verb	Complement
I'm	a teacher.
You're	a student.
He's	a teacher.
She's	a student.
Its	a door.

Despite its strength points, secondary school textbook has some shortcoming. The language type of the text book is poor, because there is no emphasis on language use. The book is structurally based. As Nunan

(1991) believes, a foreign language learner should acquire the competence to use English in real-life situations for the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships.

But this book does not provide the skills and attitudes to listen to, read, and write English for creative and imaginative purpose. Therefore, learners cannot communicate in real life situation. Activities meet the behavioral objectives of the students. It just focuses on repetition of new structures. Really, grammar present and practice just by repetition as a product base- syllabus. While (Rutherford, 1987, p. 159) believes that language acquisition is not a linear progression, but a cyclic one, or even a metamorphic one.

Exercises and activities in this book do not promote internalization of learned material because they do not provide exercises which encourage students' activate participation. For example there is no pair work activity in the book. All of the activities could be done individually (repetition, substitution, and completion).

There are no tasks or activities that integrate all four language skills. The book lacked spoken and listening activities to equip learners for real life interactions, There are not also, writing activities such as controlled, guided and free paragraph writings. The focus is just on components, like grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation in isolation. Nunan (1991) believes that instruction should enable learners to:

 1- Listen to or read information, process it, and use it in some way.

 2- Give information in spoken or written form on the basis of personal experience …

In pronunciation part, there are exercises using the sounds in isolation not in sentences level. For example in chapter six, there is this pattern:

/s/	/z/
books	bags
shirts	boys
maps	doors

Elliot (1997) mentioned, teaching sounds in isolation is not useful for acquiring speaking skills. Celce-Marcia (1987) and Pennington (1996) believe that in speaking process, some linguistic phenomena take place that are more important than scope on phoneme separately. This research however is not without limitation. For this study to yield conclusive result, it is necessary to implement a group of learners as sample to have more objective evaluation.

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