

EFL Teachers' Perception of the Iranian Junior High School English Textbooks: Do the New Books Fill the Gaps?

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چکیده

کتاب‌های درسی نقش مهمی را در کلاس‌های درس ایفا می‌کنند. به همین جهت ارزیابی آن‌ها از لحاظ محتوا، درک بهتری از اهداف آموزشی فراهم می‌آورد. با توجه به این دلایل، در این تحقیق به ارزیابی نسخه جدید کتاب‌های انگلیسی متوسطه اول در مدارس ایران پرداخته شده است و همچنین مقایسه‌ای نیز بین این کتاب‌ها و نسخه‌های پیشین انجام گرفته است. به منظور انجام این کار، محققان از پرسشنامه (Litz, 2001) استفاده نموده و داده‌های تحقیق را از جمعیت آماری متشکل از ۵۵ معلم مرد و ۵۲ معلم زن در مقطع متوسطه اول گردآوری کردند. از ۲۰ معلم نیز مصاحبه به عمل آمد. در فرایند تحلیل داده‌ها، با استفاده از آمار توصیفی (میانگین و انحراف معیار) این نتیجه به دست آمد که دیدگاه معلمان بر موافقت و رضایت از کتاب‌های چاپ جدید تأکید دارد. در کتاب‌های جدید نسبت به نسخه قبلی بهبود قابل ملاحظه‌ای حاصل شده است و به نظر می‌رسد راه برای ایجاد محیطی مناسب برای آموزش به شیوه ارتباطی هموار شده است.

کلیدواژه‌ها: دوره متوسطه اول، ارزشیابی کتاب درسی، کتاب درسی

Abstract

Textbooks play a significant role in language learning classrooms. Therefore, evaluating them in terms of their contents will provide helpful insights into their educational purposes. To this end, this study evaluated Iranian newly designed junior high school textbook series (Prospect 1, 2 and 3) and also provided a comparison between this textbook series and the previous version. For doing so, the researchers employed Litz's (2001) questionnaire and gathered the data from a sample of 55 male and 52 female junior high school teachers. Interview with 20 of the participants was conducted as well. Through data analysis, using descriptive statistics (Mean and Standard Deviation), it was revealed that the participants' viewpoints were positive in the sense that they approved the changes made in the new curriculum. The newly designed textbooks showed improvements over the previous versions in that they seemed to have set the ground for a more communicative - based teaching and environment.

Key Words : textbook evaluation, EFL textbooks, Junior high school

Introduction

One of the crucial elements in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context is undeniably the textbook. The textbook is considered a global instrument in any English Language Teaching (ELT) context (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994). In fact, the textbooks not only do help to provide the students with awareness of what actually the path of learning would be, but also they can be looked upon as framework providers for the teachers. Through textbooks, the knowledge about the subject is transferred to the students and textbooks have been often considered as the only source of content (Rezaeian & Zamanian, 2014).

Considering the influential role of the textbooks in the classrooms and the important pedagogical role they play, both teachers and students should be aware of the value of their textbooks (Crawford, 2002). When a teacher selects a particular textbook as the primary framework of his/her teaching, there is actually economic, professional and educational aspects to be

concerned about (Sheldon, 1988). In order to make sure that the textbook values are in line with those we care for, we need to evaluate and test the textbook (Nunan, 1991).

According to Soori, Kafipur and Soury (2011) despite the influential pedagogical role the textbooks play, a meager amount of research has been dedicated to their evaluation. This could be mainly due to the fact that today's mostly emphasized teaching approach (Communicative Language Teaching), centers on using authentic and dynamic materials. Even if we agree with this principle, we have to acknowledge the fact that a teacher cannot allocate all his time to collecting materials each session. In other words, the teacher can hardly survive without having access to a textbook as a stable pedagogical framework.

This study attempted to investigate and evaluate Iran's junior high school English textbook series titled, "Prospect (1,2,3)" series which has recently replaced the previous ones. The researchers tried to



elicit junior high school teachers' viewpoints regarding the new series in order to provide insights into the books' pedagogical value and also provide a comparison with the former junior high school English textbooks.

Review of Literature

Textbook has been defined as a set of teaching materials constructed in advance and put together harmoniously with the purpose of having an organized and uniform syllabus in different classrooms (Prabhu, 1987). Textbooks are often made the focus of material evaluation.

Ellis (1997) identifies two different categories of material evaluation; One being predictive and the other, retrospective. In predictive evaluation, attempts are made to decide about the text to be taught in a classroom while retrospective evaluation examines the materials which have already been taught. The former type of evaluation has been the main focus of materials evaluation. Simply put, when the teachers have to decide which textbook or teaching materials will be the most appropriate for their classroom, they have to conduct a predictive textbook evaluation and once they have taught a particular textbook, they will have to conduct a retrospective evaluation to make sure their choice of textbook has been a wise and appropriate one.

Textbook evaluation, as a research genre has been prolific in publication since

a great number of papers focusing on this topic have been published over the last two decades. Fukkink (2010), through a content analysis of the Dutch textbooks used for early childhood education, found out inconsistencies between the textbook content and the educational curriculum. The results showed that the textbooks were lacking in their coverage of content standards consistent with the professional profile of the teachers and the educational profile of their training courses .

In a recent study, Chen (2016) argues that in the evaluation of textbook series little attention has been paid to the appropriateness of text difficulty and proposes quantitative measures for evaluating text difficulty. The first method included corpus-based frequency lists for calculating text difficulty; and the second one drew upon variability neighbor clustering in order to demonstrate the developmental stages in text difficulty. It was argued that regardless of the context of English Language Teaching (ELT), this approach is applicable to textbook evaluation and development .

Textbook evaluation has attracted the attention of Iranian researchers. An investigation of Top Notch English book series carried out by Azizifar and Baleghani (2014) made use of a previously developed questionnaire by Thein (2006). Twenty five male and female teachers filled out the questionnaire. The findings indicated that despite some issues that the teachers should be aware of, the books were highly satisfactory.

In a study, Alemi and Hesami (2013) utilized the questionnaire developed by Litz (2001) in order to evaluate three English language textbooks (Right Path to English) - Iran's junior high school textbook series. Thirty five Teachers completed

the aforementioned questionnaire. The findings reflected the teachers' low level of satisfaction with the textbook series.

Through Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of learning objectives, Riazi and Mosalanejad (2010) explored the types of learning objectives followed in Iranian senior high school and pre-university English textbooks. The results demonstrated that lower-order cognitive skills received more attention than higher order cognitive skills, in all grades. A significant difference was found in the levels of learning objectives taxonomy between the senior high school and the pre-university textbooks .

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Riazi and Aryashokouh (2007) made an effort to understand how lexical items were treated in Iranian high school textbook exercises. In their study, the consciousness-raising model proposed by Willis and Willis (1996) was chosen as the framework. The results of the study indicated that none of the exercises in the first three textbooks of high school which were investigated did raise the students' consciousness. Only 18 exercises in the pre-university textbook were found to be harmonious with the framework. Furthermore, it was also found out that the students normally learned the words out of

context in isolation .

Textbook evaluation, due to the importance of textbooks as indispensable instruments in classrooms, has gained momentum. Previous studies in Iran have focused on evaluation of a wide range of textbooks including those being taught at public schools and those used in private language institutes. Despite the vast number of researches done in this field, very few have focused on the newly designed junior high school textbooks (Prospect series). To this end, the present study aimed at evaluating the aforementioned textbooks in order to identify their values and also compare them with the previous textbooks.


The researchers in this study tried to find the answers to the following questions regarding the textbook series:

- 1) How are the different aspects of the new textbook series organized?
- 2) What are the strengths and weaknesses of the newly developed textbook series?
- 3) How different is the newly developed book series from the previous one?

Methodology

● Participants

One hundred and seven (55 males and 52 females) junior high school English teachers were randomly chosen to participate in this study. The teaching experience of the teachers ranged from 6 to 11 years. They were teaching the high school textbooks (i.e. the Prospect series) across different high schools in Kurdistan at the time of the study. The participants were



fully informed about the purpose of the study and they were also assured that their identities would remain confidential.

● Instrument

In this study, a questionnaire which had already been developed by Litz (2001) and used in South Korea was employed. This questionnaire consisted of 40 items on a Likert type scale. The applied questionnaire evaluates the textbooks in 7 areas including practical considerations, layout and design, activities, skills, language type, subject and content, and conclusion. It is worth mentioning that the original questionnaire had a 10-point scale but the researchers narrowed it down to 5 points (highly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree and highly disagree) in order not to confuse the participants by being fussy.

In addition, an interview was conducted with a number of participants (20) so as to provide a more insightful view of the teachers' opinion about the textbook series.

● Data collection and analysis

The questionnaire was given to 107 junior high school English teachers at different times as meeting all the participants in one place was not possible because of their job commitments. At each administration, at least one of the researchers was present to clarify the purpose of the study for the participants and to provide instructions if needed.

To process the information gathered from

the participants through the interview, the researchers transcribed the audiotapes of the interviews into Persian. Inductive analysis was employed in order to categorize the data units into information related to the participants' attitudes towards the textbook series. Subsequent comparison of the sorted transcriptions helped the researchers to identify the common themes.

For the purpose of data analysis, the researchers calculated the mean and the standard deviation for each of the items in the questionnaire.

Results

The mean and SD of the investigated categories are presented in the following table.

Mean & SD for the teacher's questionnaire

Feature	Mean	SD
Practical considerations	4.58	1.94
Layout and Design	4.08	2.33
Activities	3.60	2.01
Skills	4	1.85
Language Type	3.93	2.46
Subject and Content	4.14	1.99
Conclusion	4.05	2.21

As can be seen, the three categories of "activities", "skills" and "language type" have been rated less satisfactorily compared with the other categories. This might indicate that the teachers find the presentation of language skills, the type of activities and the language used in the textbooks less in line with their expectations compared with the topics included, layout and design of the textbooks and the practical considerations of the use of the textbooks in language classrooms. Below, the results of the

different sections of the questionnaire are reported.

A) Practical considerations

As can be seen in the table, the mean for practical considerations which included 5 items was 4.58. The textbooks' prices were found to be reasonable, which can be due to the fact that the public school textbooks in general are not published for commercial purposes and they are subsidized by the ministry.

Regarding the accessibility of the textbooks, the teachers agreed that they are easily accessible. As the series in question contains the officially approved textbooks to be taught in all high schools in Iran; a visit to major bookstores throughout the country will indicate the easy access to the textbooks. Furthermore, through an online search, one can easily find the PDF versions of the textbooks. The textbooks were published in 2015 for the first time, so in terms of being a new publication, it was unanimously agreed that the textbooks met the practical considerations.

An improvement over the previous high school textbooks is the accompanying audio CD. However, it is undeniable that the whole series fell short in terms of including teacher guide for each grade textbook which is considered as a drawback of the newly designed series.

In terms of comparability of the teachers' and author's views on language and methodology, a mean of 3.77 was calculated which confirms the comparability. However, this item in this section received the lowest rate among others and this could be attributed to the teachers' fairly out-of-date views on language and methodology and the fact that the new textbooks have been designed according to CLT principles.

B) Layout and design

This scale refers to the overall organization of the materials and the language elements as well as how the activities are presented in a textbook. The findings of this study indicated that the participants approved of the series' Layout and Design for which a mean of 4.08 was calculated. Each lesson starts with a conversation through which the students have a preview of the lesson's objectives. This is followed by inductive grammar practices, attractive exercises along with a photo dictionary provided at the end of the textbooks which can help the students remember the words associated with the relevant pictures. These are among the noticeable features of the textbooks. One of the shortcomings in the textbooks' layout and design is that they totally ignore reading comprehension except for the meager amount of reading exercise embedded in the dialogues.

C) Activities

The activities in an English as Foreign Language (EFL) classroom can benefit from the idea of using a mixture of both communicative and non-communicative activities (Rao, 2002). The findings inferred from the questionnaire data revealed that most of the participants chose to be in a neutral position regarding the activities in the textbooks.

There is an attempt to incorporate as many communicative activities as possible in each textbook (with respect to the limitations in the hours allocated to English classes). Although

there are a great number of activities in each textbook focusing on pair work, they still fail in providing enough individual and group work activities.

The teachers did not find the presentation of grammar and vocabulary satisfying. They had the same attitude about how the activities promote creative and independent responses elicited from the students. However, the teachers did approve of the activities in terms of the possibility of easily being modified or supplemented.

D) Skills

A mean of 4.00 shows that the majority of the participants had a relatively positive view toward the skills included in the textbooks. As the materials in these textbooks have focused more on CLT and meaningful learning, there also seems to have been an attempt to choose the topic of each lesson based on real-life needs. Therefore, in the light of meeting the students' needs, the presentation of materials seems to have achieved its purpose.

Even though there does not seem to be a fair balance of focus on all the skills, as the reading skill appears to have been almost totally ignored in Prospect 1 & 2 and the minimal attention paid to in Prospect 3 through providing an activity named "Find It", there is a good deal of practice and

a focus on suprasegmental features such as accent, intonation and so on.

E) Language type

The mean of 3.93 demonstrates that the majority of the teachers approved of the textbook's language type. This section of the questionnaire was partly concerned with the authenticity of the language used in the textbooks. Authenticity of materials has been defined "as those [materials] which have been produced for purposes other than to teach language" (Nunan, 1988, p. 99). The mean for the authenticity of the language in the textbooks was 1.97 which indicates that the participants did not find the language authentic. Although there has been a great effort to improve the textbooks, the materials presented still lack the criteria of authenticity. The participants strongly agreed that the materials were consistent with their students' level of English and they found the progression of grammar and vocabulary appropriate. Considering the range of dialects and accents involved, the textbooks failed to gain the teachers' approval.

F) Subject and content

This part of the study investigated the content and the subject of the textbooks in terms of their relevance to the students' needs, how realistic they are, how motivating, challenging and attractive they can be, the amount of variety involved and finally whether the subject and content of the textbooks are culturally biased or not.

The mean calculated for this part of the study was 4.14 which demonstrates the participants' approval and their agreement on this section. It was highly agreed that the subject and content in the textbooks are realistic and also free of any cultural bias. The textbooks are free of any

stereotypes and no race, nationality or culture has been given supremacy over the other. The textbooks' involvement of a wide range of exercises and activities such as puzzles and role plays has made the subject and content attractive. Furthermore, as each lesson deals with a specific topic which would indeed demand variety, an acceptable level of diversity in the subject and content is generated.

Ellis (1997) identifies two different categories of material evaluation; One being predictive and the other, retrospective. In predictive evaluation, attempts are made to decide about the text to be taught in a classroom while retrospective evaluation examines the materials which have already been taught

The data gathered through the interview were analyzed to find out about the general ideas of the teachers toward the new textbooks. The participants' general ideas about the changes made in the textbooks were optimistic and promising. Most of them believed that the activities are more communicative and close to the criteria of the communicative language teaching approaches. They also argued that the audio CDs accompanying the textbooks appear to be helpful and facilitate the teaching of the listening section. Some of the interviewees' opinions are presented in this part (the original interviews were conducted in

Persian which were then translated into English):

We can see a drastic change in the whole method of teaching. I mean it is not like before. In my opinion, one of the most important changes is adding audio CDs to the textbook. It has been made really easy for the students to understand the listening parts. (Teacher A)

Along with the merits ascribed to the new textbook, the participants mentioned some drawbacks as well. Analyzing the interviews, the researchers elicited some of the mostly noted weaknesses. First of all, it should be mentioned that almost all the participants agreed that the development of the new textbooks was an admirable step toward having a more communicative learning context. The problem as they argued, was somewhere else. They all believed that the amount of time allocated to teaching English in junior high school is not enough for achieving the aims set for of the textbooks. An average of two hours a week for learning English would not help fulfilling the learning goals.

There is not a lot the teacher can do in one and half hours each week. We have to consider the EFL situation of learning in our country and this small amount of time would not let the textbooks reach their full efficiency. (Teacher B)

Furthermore, the large number of students in each classroom was among the participants' worries which seem to be an obstacle that might neutralize the improvements made in the new textbook series. They argued that in a communicative context for learning English, every single student should have an equal chance of participation in classroom activities. As in some of the classes the number of the students is even beyond 30, this purpose would not be

achieved.

Finally, a major problem in the way of implementing the communicative principles of the newly developed textbooks was considered to be the diversity in the students' language proficiency.

Some students take private English courses, some others are far behind the schedule. In such heterogeneous classes, teachers are confused by the situation. (Teacher C).

G) Conclusion

This part of the questionnaire primarily makes an attempt to provide insights into whether the textbooks are appropriate for the language-learning aims in small, medium, homogeneous and co-ed classes, if the textbooks raise students' interest in further language learning and also whether the textbooks would be chosen again to be taught.

As it is indicated in table 1, the calculated mean for this part is 4.05. The textbooks cover a wide range of topics and they tap into daily life issues and are presented in a meaningful way which would be of great importance to both teachers and students as they meet the students' communicative language learning needs.

The textbooks have been published for a particular age range and specific proficiency level of the students (high school) and in this regard they would not fit university classes. They can, however, be employed as suitable textbooks for co-

ed classes as their educational goals both male and female students.

The diversity of the exercises in the textbooks along with their meaningful way of presentation of the language could be among the reasons why the participants confirmed that the textbooks would spur further learning.

The previous school textbooks were not pedagogically satisfying and did not measure up to the set criteria of a standard textbook and also fell short to expedite the communicative flow of learning (Rezaeian & Zamanian, 2014). More comprehensive research evidence over the past four decades confirms the fact that the previous version of the Iranian junior high school textbooks had certain shortcomings. Communicative drawbacks were found to be more tangible in content criteria and also in appropriateness of context and situation. Furthermore, new findings and improvements in syllabus design had not been taken into consideration in these textbooks (Azizifar, 2009).

The results of the present study support the idea that there has been a significant improvement in the Iranian junior high school textbooks. Some of the shortcomings have been dealt with and steps have been taken toward the elevation of the textbooks to create a more CLT based environment in the language classrooms.

Conclusion and Implications

In this study, there was an attempt to evaluate the Prospect series (1,2,3) which has recently replaced the previous series in junior high schools. For the purpose of evaluation, the researchers used Litz's (2001) questionnaire. This study made an attempt to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of the textbooks. Accessibility

of the textbooks, reasonable price, accompanying audio CDs, adequate exercises and communicative presentation of the language were among the textbooks' strengths; however, there were also some weaknesses to be considered such as the lack of teacher's guide for each grade textbook, uninteresting presentation of grammatical points and marginal attention to reading comprehension skill.

The findings of the current study has also pedagogical implications. Being aware of the shortcomings of the textbooks, teachers can employ supplementary materials in order to compensate for the deficiencies. The study has implications for material developers who can use these results to identify those parts of the textbooks which require revisions so they could improve the future versions of the textbooks.

Further studies could investigate a wider range of teachers' viewpoints about the newly developed textbook series in order to yield more comprehensive results. In this research, Litz's questionnaire was employed to carry out the investigation, future studies might use other available questionnaires so as to triangulate the findings of this research.

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