

Critical Analysis of a New English Textbook Used in Iranian Junior High Schools

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Abstract

Textbook evaluation would involve the careful selection of materials examining whether they reflect the needs of the students, the aims, methods and, values of a specific teaching program or not. The present study is an attempt to evaluate the seventh grade English language textbook for Iranian junior high schools named Prospect I which was introduced by the Iranian Ministry of Education in 2014. To achieve the main goal, three objectives have been introduced and two researcher-made questionnaires were used. Sample of this study consisted of 150 teachers teaching this book in cities of Isfahan province, Najafabad and Fooladshahr and 200 students studying in mentioned cities. The textbook was evaluated in terms of eight main factors including layout and physical appearance, content, objectives, language type, skills, activities and tasks, culture values, and teacher's needs. Quantitative data were collected through a five-point Likert scale questionnaire consisting of 47 items for both teachers and students. According to the results, the book is mostly in favor of teachers and students in terms of different parts of the book. The findings of the study also showed that there was no significant difference between the attitudes of high school teachers and students in Iran. Theoretically, the findings of the present study provide positive support for the significant role of textbooks in teaching and learning process. It seems to be an urgent need to include some aspects of cultural values that serve as a window into learning American or British language culture.

Keywords: Critical Analysis, Textbook evaluation, Prospect I

INTRODUCTION

Materials evaluation is an educational necessity because it shows how a textbook can be improved or justified. Teaching materials have a direct influence on the process of learning and teaching. Nunan (1988) states materials are, in fact, an essential element within the curriculum and do more than simply lubricate the wheels of learning. At their

best, they provide concrete models for desirable classroom practice. They act as models and, at their very best, they fulfill a teacher development role (Nunan, 1988).

Iranian schools, government-run or private, use materials produced according to the syllabuses and curricula designed and developed by the Ministry of Education and under the supervision of this organization. After near a quarter of a century, the Ministry of Education started to change the English textbooks of junior and senior high schools in Iran because the general impression, technical quality, and appropriateness of these textbooks have been always under fierce debate and criticism. Moreover, social, economic, political, and ideological changes that have happened in our country influenced the needs, attitudes, and interests of people (Nahrkhalaji, 2012). A commonly posed question is that why after 7 years of teaching English in our schools graduated students could not exchange the simplest meanings and the mostly heard answer is that they are not pedagogically effective and theoretically adequate. Some researchers (e.g., Ghorbanchian, Youhanaee, & Barati, 2014; Jahangard, 2007) tried to find solutions for these problems. Teachers over and over stated the problems. Families had to send their children to private institutes which needed spending a lot of money and time. The current conditions in Iranian secondary schools highlight the need for evaluating the ELT textbooks and revising the existing checklists and assess them from the teachers' standpoint. Hence, textbook selection and adaptation in EFL contexts in order to satisfy the needs and requirements of language programs is of paramount significance.

The researcher found it important to evaluate the English language textbook (prospect1). This book is to be used by a large population of Iranian students and will form the foundation of the student's learning. As an English language teacher, the researcher noticed that many English teachers who have taught this book for the first year complained about a lot of problems in teaching this textbook. Some of them stated that it is beyond the students' level and indeed it is not suitable for the students who for the first time start learning English. Furthermore, the researcher noticed that many students had problem in using the language properly and this may be due to the nature of the textbook. The list of advantages and disadvantages displayed above serves as an indicator why this textbook should be evaluated. Therefore, this study aims to identify the attitudes of Iranians high school teachers and students towards this book. Moreover, this study attempts to find any significant difference between the attitude of Iranian high school English teachers and students toward the content of the new book.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Evaluation

Evaluation is seen as "an activity of gathering information to be used in making educational decisions" (Genesee & Upshur, 1996) which consists of three major components in processing. The first of three that concerns with collection of information regards factors which deal with students' background, learning processes, and instructional factors. The second component is the interpretation of the information

and comparing it with some desired state of affairs, goals, or other information that you think is relevant to your decisions. And the last one is the decision-making process about instruction, students, textbooks, etc. (Becerra, 2006). Evaluation is a wide term, entailing assessment, but including other processes as well. These additional processes are designed to assist us in interpreting and acting on the results of our assessment. The basic purpose of evaluation in school is to bring about quality improvement in education by providing feedback regarding pupils learning, classroom teaching, appropriateness of curriculum, and course content.

Purposes of Evaluation

Evaluation gives information regarding the effectiveness of the course content. There may be certain curricular areas which may prove to be difficult for the students as their maturity level is not developed enough to cope up with them. This fact can be identified through evaluation and its feedback. If it is found out consistently by the feedback of the evaluation of different pupils that a particular curricular area is not suitable for them, it may be modified. Such information is useful in judging the appropriateness of the pre-determined objectives of the course as well. Hence, evaluation can provide a basis for textbooks revision. Schreens et al. (2003) states that “the main motives for creating or improving provisions for evaluation are three main concerns: to formally regulate desired levels of quality of educational outcomes and provisions; to hold educational service providers accountable and to support ongoing improvement in education”. Fredriksson and Olsson (2006) stated that “when a textbook is introduced, it should be carefully examined to ensure that the material is suitable for the school setting. In this examination, a number of different aspects should be taken into consideration, for example, the age and proficiency level of the students, what language factors that the students need to learn, and the course syllabus and so on”.

Materials are not simply the everyday tools of the language teacher; they are an embodiment of the aims, values, and methods of a particular teaching/learning situation. As such, the selection of materials probably represents the single most important decision that the language teacher has to make (Hutchinson, 1987). Low (1987) stated that “teachers generally need to screen materials in order to predict their suitability for particular classes”. The basic goal of most evaluations is to provide “useful feedback” to a variety of audiences including sponsors, donors, client-groups, administrators, staff, and other relevant constituencies. Therefore, materials evaluation plays such an important role in language teaching and it can and should be a process that enables teachers to develop their awareness of their own teaching/learning situation.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study sought to evaluate the first year English textbook through the survey. Based on the research objectives, the null hypothesis was formulated as “there is no significant

difference between the attitude of Iranians high school teachers and students towards the content of the new book". The descriptive survey, in which the phenomenon is described, is the appropriate approach by which the data are collected, analyzed, and interpreted. Through teachers' and students' questionnaires, the quantitative data were gathered. Using questionnaire to gather needed information is one of the advantages of applying this methodology. Questionnaires are the most useful and less expensive method for collecting data from selected sample in a short period.

Participants

This study was administered in high schools of Isfahan, Najafabad, and Fooladshahr. Two groups took part in this study: One hundred and fifty male and female teachers and 200 students from governmental schools of Isfahan province. They were chosen randomly. They were asked to fill in the questionnaires prepared by the researcher and express their opinions about the textbook. The students were mostly in grade eight. They had finished the seventh grade the last year. They were familiar with the book under survey so that they could give a more complete and exact idea about the book. About the teachers, it was assumed that they were aware of the English learning needs of high school books because they were completely familiar with the present status of their field of study and had some knowledge about their lacks and wants towards Iranian high school course book.

Instruments

The instrument for collecting data in this study was questionnaire. Two questionnaires, one for teachers and the other for students, collected the quantitative data. These questionnaires were adapted from some questionnaires which were related to the topic under study and, then, they were modified according to the needs and their usability by the researcher. Most of the items in the questionnaire were adapted and modified from the checklists and criteria used to evaluate English Language Teaching (ELT) materials by A Cunningsworth (1995), Peny (1996), Tomlinson (2003), Richards (2001), Tekir and Arikan (2007), and Abraha (2008). The researcher selected common features of these checklists. These questionnaires were prepared in English language at first.

The main purpose of designing teachers' questionnaire was to be acquainted with the teachers' perception on the evaluation of the new published English book for the first year of junior high school (Prospect 1). The teachers' questionnaire was in target language. It contained two main parts. The first part of the questionnaire named "demographic part" was designed to gather some information about teachers' personal characteristics. The second part named "textbook evaluation" made an attempt to extract the view of the teachers toward the first grade textbook (Prospect 1) general characteristics, teaching and learning content. This part included eight main categories, layout and physical appearance, content, objectives, language type, skills, activities and tasks, culture values, and teacher's needs. It should be added that, totally, these eight parts consisted of 47 items. All the items in these parts were designed on a five-point

Likert scale of frequency, where 1= strongly agree, 2= agree, 3= undecided, 4= disagree, and 5= strongly disagree.

The purpose of designing students' questionnaire was to gain the perspectives of grade seven of junior high school students in grade seven who for the first year were introduced to English language learning. Different aspects of their new English textbook such as its layout and physical appearance, content, objectives, language type, skills, activities and tasks, structures and vocabulary, and culture values were included in this questionnaire. It aimed to find out the attitudes of students regarding to this course of study and their new textbook. Students' questionnaire consisted of two main parts. The first part named "demographic part" was designed to get the demographic information about the participants. The second part titled "textbook evaluation" included statements to obtain some information about the general characteristics of Prospect 1(the new English textbook). This part consisted of seven main parts such as layout and physical appearance, content, objectives, language type, skills, activities and tasks, and culture values. These parts consisted of 47 items. All the items in this part were designed on a five-point Likert scales of frequency, where 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = undecided, 4 = disagree, and 5 = strongly disagree. Part one dealt with Layout and physical appearance of the new textbook and items 1-10 are included. Part two regarded the content of the new textbook and included 12 items. Part three required the students to express their opinions towards objectives of the published textbook and six items were provided in this part. Four items in part four were designed to obtain the students' perception of the language type provided in this book. The fifth part dealt with skills. It included four items which concentrate on four skills. Eight items were included in part six dealing with different activities and exercises. And the last part was about cultural values which included three items.

Data Collection Procedures

Teacher Questionnaire

The first draft of the questionnaire was constructed according to the research aims. The questionnaire with the content validation form and face validation form were sent to three experts with the intention of reviewing the questionnaire by them. The purpose of content validation form was to determine content validity and face validity of the questionnaire. According to the viewpoints of these experts, some changes were made on the first draft of teachers' questionnaire. The second draft was designed as the result. The teachers' questionnaire was originally designed in English. As the respondents were English teachers, no translation was done on it.

To calculate the questionnaire reliability, 10 English teachers were asked to fill in the questionnaire. Moreover, before starting the research, the questionnaire was piloted. For each theme, the amount of Chronbach' Alpha was calculated. Subsequently, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was applied on the results of the pilot study to determine the internal reliability of the items of the questionnaire. Reliability of 0.7 pointed to the matter that the internal reliability of the questionnaire' items was acceptable. Based on

the results, the questionnaire was finalized for the large-scale data collection. As it was mentioned before, this questionnaire had two main themes, namely demographic information and teachers' textbook evaluation. Separately, for each theme, the amount of Chronbach' Alpha was measured and, then, it was done for the entire questionnaire.

After calculating the reliability, 200 questionnaires were distributed among the English teachers teaching in cities of Isfahan, Fooladshahr, and Najafabad. The researcher took part in the meetings which were held for reviewing the new textbook. Out of those 200 questionnaires, 150 questionnaires were usable for data entry.

Student Questionnaire

Based on the research objectives, the first draft of the questionnaire was constructed. This draft and the content validation form and face validation form were sent to three experts with the intention of reviewing the questionnaire by them. The purpose of content validation form was to determine content validity and face validity of the questionnaire. In addition, it was required that the experts rate each item of the questionnaire based on two criteria of the appropriateness of the item and the clarity of the meaning of the item. According to the viewpoints of the experts, researcher made some changes on the first draft of students' questionnaire and the final draft was designed.

The students' questionnaire was translated into Persian, the native language of the participants of the study. For translating the questionnaire, back translation method was used. The aim for such a back translation technique was to ensure that the items were understandable and clear for all of the participants participating in the study. Initially, the first draft which was in English was translated into Persian language by one expert of English into Persian translator and, then, the translated questionnaire was given to another expert to translate it into English language again. Finally two other experts in the field of English-Persian translation were requested to compare these two forms of the questionnaire with each other to check if there is any mismatch. After that, for measuring its reliability, the questionnaire was piloted. It was piloted with 20 students who were representative of the actual participants of the study. Subsequently, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was applied on the results of the pilot study to determine the internal reliability of the items of the students' questionnaire. Based on the results, the questionnaire was finalized for the large scale data collection. The questionnaire had two main themes, namely demographic information and new English textbook evaluation. Separately, for each theme, the amount of Chronbach' Alpha was measured and, then, it was done for the entire questionnaire. The amount of it for the first theme was very low and the reason was that this part related to the demographic information but for the second part the reliability coefficient was high.

After calculating reliability, questionnaire was distributed among 250 students in different junior high schools of Isfahan, Najafabad and Fooladshahr cities but 200 questionnaires were collected.

Data Analysis

The initial required data were collected through questionnaires to find out the attitudes of students and teachers toward the new textbook. Then, the data were analyzed to see if there is any differences between their attitudes, what the students' needs were, and how this textbook was designed based on their needs. To this end, descriptive statistics determining the frequencies and percentages of the students' and teachers' answers indicating their needs and lacks were used.

In order to analyze the results of this study, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used. The researcher grouped the attitudinal agreement and disagreement points of the view of the teachers and students and, then, determined the frequencies and percentages of their attitudes comparing them with each other. Then, to see if there is a statistical significant difference between the attitudes of teachers and students toward the content of their textbook, the researcher used the independent t-test.

RESULTS

Teachers' Perception of the New English Book

In order to answer the first objective of the present study, i.e. teachers' perceptions of the new English text book, one sample t-test was applied. Three was set as the test value. The eight parts of teachers' questionnaire (layout and physical appearance, content, objectives, language type, skills, activities and tasks, teachers' needs, and cultural values) were investigated separately. The findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Teachers' Perceptions of the New English Textbook. (Prospect1)

Variable	Test Value = 3		
	t-value	Significance	Mean Difference
Layout and physical appearance	-7.609	0.000	-0.41
Content	-8.276	0.000	-0.45
Objectives	-5.025	0.000	-0.32
Language type	-5.964	0.000	-0.44
Skills	-4.338	0.000	-0.29
Activities and tasks	-2.936	0.004	-0.23
Cultural values	-1.885	0.061	-0.22

As shown in Table 1, teachers were in favor of the new English textbook in terms of layout and physical appearance ($P < 0.001$), content ($P < 0.001$), objectives ($P < 0.001$), language type ($P < 0.001$), skills ($P < 0.001$), and activities and tasks ($P < 0.005$). However, the results found no significant results for teachers' perceptions of the cultural values.

Students' Perceptions of the New English Textbook

To answer the second research objective, i.e. students' perceptions of the new English text book, one sample t-test was applied with setting 3 as the test value.

Table 2. Students' Perception of the New English Textbook

	Test Value = 3		
	t- value	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Layout and physical appearance	-4.169	0.000	-0.21
Content	-2.992	0.003	-0.15
Objectives	-1.301	0.195	-0.07
Language type	-0.328	0.743	-0.01
Skills	-1.092	0.276	-0.07
Activities and tasks	-2.412	0.017	-0.13
Cultural values	-1.777	0.077	-0.11

As shown in Table 2, while students were in favor of the new English textbook in terms of layout and physical appearance ($P < 0.001$), content ($P < 0.005$), and activities and tasks ($P < 0.01$); the analyses found no significant results for their perceptions of the cultural values, objectives, language type, and skills aspects of the new book.

Analyzing the Difference between the Attitude of Iranian High School English Teachers and Students toward the New English Textbook (Prospect 1)

In order to test the hypotheses of the research, the independent sample t-test was applied. As illustrated in Table 3, students are happier with the book in terms of layout and physical appearance ($P < 0.01$), content ($P < 0.001$), objectives ($P < 0.005$), language type ($P < 0.001$), and skills ($P < 0.05$). The results, however, have shown no significant difference between the perceptions of the both groups on cultural values and activities and tasks.

Table 3. Result of the Independent Sample t-Test

Variables	Respondents	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Layout and physical appearance	Student	2.79	0.73	2.70	0.007
	Teacher	2.58	0.67		
Content	Student	2.84	0.74	3.87	0.000
	Teacher	2.54	0.67		
Objectives	Student	2.93	0.80	2.88	0.004
	Teacher	2.68	0.78		
Language type	Student	2.98	0.81	4.61	0.000
	Teacher	2.56	0.91		
Skills	Student	2.93	0.94	2.26	0.024
	Teacher	2.71	0.82		
Activities and tasks	Student	2.86	0.81	1.00	0.318
	Teacher	2.77	0.97		
Cultural values	Student	2.89	0.91	0.89	0.377
	Teacher	2.77	1.49		

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research was an attempt to evaluate the first grade English language textbook for Iranian junior high schools that has been recently released for the first time. The book is entitled "Prospect1" written by Alavimoghadam et al. (2014). To evaluate this book from students and teachers' perspectives, 150 male and female teachers and 200 students were chosen randomly from governmental schools of Isfahan province to participate in this study. They were asked to fill in the questionnaires prepared by the researcher and express their opinions about the textbook. In this research, the researcher considered specific objectives. The following outcomes are achieved and discussed in comparison with the findings of other studies.

- How do Iranian high school English teachers perceive new English textbook used in Iranian high schools (prospect 1)?

To answer this question which is related to the first objective of the research, different aspects of the mentioned textbook were investigated. They included layout and physical appearance, content, objectives, language type, skills, activities and tasks, and cultural values. The first thing in a book or textbook that catches the attention of reader or students is its appearance. The teachers answered to this aspect of the textbook positively and their answers confirmed the ideas of Alan Cunningsworth and Tomlinson (1984) who emphasized a good balance between visual material and written text, Nunan (1991) who believed students' view of language is a combination of the way materials are organized and types of content and activities, and Sheldon (1988) who stressed the significance of mix of text and graphical material.

The teachers' answers about the second part of the questionnaire, content, were conducive. Most of them agreed with the familiarity of topics to the students and appropriateness of the book's table of contents. Most of the participants claimed that "the content promotes students' autonomy"; this fact is in line with the idea of A Cunningsworth (1995) who believed the textbooks must stimulate students to become more independent in their learning and in their use of English. Our findings about topical, functional, and logical organization of the textbook is in line with Sheldon's statement (1988) who believed that "the textbook should be organized in such a way that the units and exercises connect in terms of theme, situation, topic, pattern of skills development, or progression in grammar and lexis".

In the third part of the questionnaire, the participants stated that the objectives of the current textbook are realistic, clear, and precise and they correspond to the needs of the students. The fourth part of the questionnaire was about language type that the most noticeable thing in teachers' answers was the emphasis of textbook on language use. In general, 60% of the participants voted on the authenticity of the materials of the present book that is in line with Swan's idea (1985).

The fifth part of the questionnaire was about variety of skills applied in this book. Although most of the participants believed that the textbook contains listening

materials accompanied by activities which help comprehension and less attention to writing activities such as controlled, guided, and free paragraphs, they also believed that the materials for spoken English is sufficient. These results are not in line with the idea of scholars such as McDonough and Shaw (2012) who argued that materials should enable the students in four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). Altogether, they are satisfied with at least three skills applied in this textbook.

The sixth part of the questionnaire was about textbook's activities and tasks. Richards (2001) elaborated that textbook's tasks should be flexible and suit students with different learning styles. The participants' answers were not in line with this idea and about half of them (48%) believed that there are a variety of activities in the textbook. Therefore, they did mainly agree that there are sufficient instructions to explain how the exercise should be done.

The last part of the questionnaire was about textbook's cultural values. As the result showed, the teachers were not in favor of the new English textbook in terms of cultural values. They mainly disagreed on the opinion that claimed "the content serves as a window into learning about the target language culture American, British, etc." This finding is not in line with the ideas of scholars like Brown and Rodgers (2002) who believed a language is a part of a culture and these two cannot be separated, Gao (2006) who discussed the interdependence of language learning and cultural learning, and A Cunningsworth (1995) and Nation Ming-Tzu (1999) who believed foreign language teaching is foreign culture teaching.

- How do Iranian high school students perceive the new developed textbook?

With respect to the next question which is related to the second objective of the research, the same aspects of teachers' questionnaire were investigated for students. They included layout and physical appearance, content, objectives, language type, skills, activities and tasks, and cultural values.

About the layout and physical appearance of the textbook, the students perceived that the textbook contains enough pictures, diagrams, and tables helping the students understand the printed texts and illustrations, tables, figures, and graphs. They believed all of them are clear functional. This result approves Alan Cunningsworth and Tomlinson's idea (1984) that emphasized a good balance between visual material and written text.

The students' answers to the second part about "content" revealed that the students disagreed about one item of the questionnaire that claimed there is not sufficient variety in the subjects and contents of the textbook. This finding is not in line with the idea of Richards (2001) who emphasized the variety of activities that suit variety of learning styles. But the students mainly agreed with other items and they stated that the content does not conflict with students' social beliefs and there is sufficient variety in the subject and content of the textbook.

The third part of the questionnaire about textbook objectives showed that this part is not in favor of students as they believed the objectives in this textbook were not clear and precise for the students. This is against what Hyland (2003) believed, as he stated that the objectives need to be clear as they are important to ensure that appropriate learning is achieved. Another aspect in this part on which the students disagreed was about the objectives of the materials that did not suit the level of the students. It is clear that inappropriateness of textbook's level of difficulty with the students' level causes some disorders in the process of teaching and learning in the classroom that both teachers and students face some difficulties.

The fourth part of the questionnaire was about textbook's language type. There are no significant answers about the language used in the textbook in terms of authenticity because more than half of the student participants (56.5%) had no idea about this question.

The next part about textbook's skills reached no significant result as about the same number of the participants agreed and disagreed with items like: "The materials for spoken English (dialogues, role play, communication activities etc. are designed to equip students for real life interaction" and "The material provides the four language skills", and most of them had no idea about "The textbook pays attention to writing activities such as controlled, guided, and free paragraphs".

The sixth part of the questionnaire about textbook's activities and tasks indicated significant findings. Most of the participants agreed on the number of activities, clarity of instructions in the material, and existence of interactive activities that require students to use new vocabulary to communicate. These findings are in line with ideas of Jacobs and Ball (1996), Tomlinson (2003), and Richards (2001) about textbook's activities and tasks.

In the last part of the questionnaire which was about textbook's cultural values, most of them had no idea about the item "the content serves as a window into learning about the target language culture American, British, etc.)" and "the teaching of the target culture motivates the students to explore their own culture". Therefore, this part reached no significant finding.

- Is there any significant difference between the attitude of Iranian high school English teachers and students toward the content of the new book?

The findings for the third research objective showed that students were happier with the textbook in terms of layout and physical appearance ($P < 0.01$), content ($P < 0.001$), objectives ($P < 0.005$), language type ($P < 0.001$), and skills ($P < 0.05$). The results, however, have shown no significant difference between the perceptions of the both groups on cultural values and activities and tasks. As it is mentioned earlier, both teachers and students were in favor of the new English textbook in terms of activities and tasks. Both groups were not in favor of cultural values. So, there was no significant difference between their attitudes.

According to the mentioned result of this study, this research can be beneficial for all who communicate in a language and its understanding and usage are important for those who communicate in a second or foreign language and use new series of “Prospect” textbooks. So, in the light of the findings of the current study, hopefully fruitful guidelines can be provided for teachers, students, and those who are involved in materials preparation. Furthermore, the results of this study can be useful for the first year students of junior high school and all language students using new versions of “Prospects” series to be aware of the role of their textbooks in their learning process and to recognize the dim parts of their textbooks in order to cover them through studying further sources. So, it enables them to manage their learning process. Moreover, all ELT researchers are suggested to evaluate other textbooks, either prescribed by Iranian Ministry of Education or not, in order to improve the quality of English language teaching in Iran.

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