

An Evaluation of a Global ELT Textbook in Iran: A Two-phase Approach

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Abstract

This paper discusses the merits and demerits of EFL textbooks and describes two different types of textbooks used in Iran. It presents a two-phase scheme for evaluation which contains whilst-use and post-use evaluation. This framework can be used to draw up a checklist of items relevant to second language teaching. Every criterion in each phase of the evaluation was scrutinized at a time by using planned instruments to obtain greater reliability. In the first phase the mnemonic ASPECT represents some of the main features observed in the language classroom. In the second phase, the actual outcomes of the materials on the users were examined with a focus on long-term effects of the materials. The proposed scheme was applied to evaluate a common global textbook to determine the overall pedagogical value and suitability of the material. The results of the evaluation can help ELT teachers to make decisions about adaptation and adoption of the materials. The writer also proposes a number of recommendations in relation to the evaluation, development and application of materials for language learning.

Keywords: Textbook evaluation; checklist; ASPECT.

1. Introduction

1.1. TEFL materials

TEFL materials are aids to learning of a language. They may be linguistic, visual, auditory or kinesthetic presented in two different forms: printed like textbooks and non-print such as computer-based materials. According to Tomlinson (1998) materials can be instructional in that they can inform learner about the language; they can be experiential as they can offer experience of the use of language; they may be elicitive in that they can provoke language learner into using language; and they may be exploratory when they provide opportunities for learners that lead to discoveries about the language. Despite all these functions, materials are mostly instructional since they act as the main source of input for learners and the language practice that takes place in language classroom. A competent EFL/ESL teacher may or may not be a good materials developer (Dudley-Evan and St.John, 1998), but all language teachers should be able to evaluate, select and adapt materials so as to ensure a match between the learners' needs and goals and the materials objectives. However, language teachers who have gained some experience in language teaching should move on and develop their own materials to understand and apply theories of language learning (Tomlinson, 1998), to theorize their practice (schon, 1983) and to reflect their observations of real language classrooms.

1.2. Textbooks: Pros and cons

Textbooks as the printed form of instructional materials play a vital role in any English language teaching program. Some theorists such as Hutchinson and Torress (1994) know them as 'an almost universal element of teaching'. Some others perceive their importance as one of the main tools of the trade in the language classroom. Sheldon (1988) suggests that they represent 'the visible heart' of any ELT program. No one can deny the remarkable advantages that these textbooks can offer the teacher and the students when used in EFL/ESL settings. Obviously, most teachers use textbooks, especially those accompanied with workbooks, helpful teacher manuals and non-print instructional supplements such as audiotapes, CDs and computer-based materials, as their primary teaching resource in providing the context of the lessons and classroom practice. It rarely occurs that language teachers deprive themselves and their students of the merits of textbooks.

ELT textbooks tend to be at some advantages when adopted precisely and applied efficiently:

1. The first advantage of using textbooks is their psychological necessity for students. That is, since they serve as the basis for much of the language input they receive and the language they practice, they give the students psychological security. Indeed, learners have a road map of the course; they know what to expect and what is expected. They are like ‘security blankets’ for some learners.
2. The other advantage of the textbook, as Sheldon (1988) points out, is their credibility that makes them more reliable than teacher-generated or in-house materials. Well-developed textbooks are based on sound learning principles and are paced appropriately; therefore, learners treat them as reference sources on various aspects of language like grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, etc. They can be considered as effective sources and ready-to-serve aids for self-directed or independent learning and rich sources of ideas and activities.
3. The potential to occupy some additional roles in the ELT curriculum, as identified by Cunningsworth (1995), is another apparent benefit of textbook. They can provide a defined specification of the context presented gradually in a syllabus. As ELT textbooks cast the EFL/ESL teacher in certain roles for presentation purposes and some other roles for learner practice, classroom tasks and activities, they can exploit the pre-determined learning objectives. Nunan’s metaphor of ELT materials as ‘flesh on the bones of course content’ can drive the point home. According to Richards (2001), without a textbook a language program may lose its central core and students may lack a systematically developed syllabus.
4. O’Neil (1982) identifies cost-effectiveness as another advantage of textbooks. That is to say there should be a balance between what you give and what you gain. Textbooks are generally sensitive to students’ needs. Even if they are not designed specifically for them, they can allow for adaption and improvisation as the teacher and the students can optimize the efficient activities, minimize what is extra and irrelevant, and maximize what is relevant and satisfactory. Namely, they are efficient in terms of time and money. They yield a respectable return on investment.
5. Having different textbooks with high quality and reasonable prices ready to select from, the teachers do not have to generate their own materials. Thus, the occupational overload of material preparation is decreased and teachers can be engaged in their academic and pedagogic pursuit. In fact, EFL teachers should view textbooks as teaching tools that can be adapted to specific needs of particular groups of learners and taught in a certain context.
6. Textbooks help teachers be pedagogically innovative by mooted brilliant ideas (Hutchinson and Torress, 1994). They introduce novel educational practices and untried methodological approaches. They act as a scaffolding upon which teacher can construct their own methodology. They can train teachers with limited teaching experience and support non-native teachers who may not be able to generate authentic language input on their own. Inexperienced teachers can prepare their own lesson plans and create an instructional format based on the framework and content of a course book.

ELT textbooks can be motivating for the learners and can enhance the teacher’s effectiveness; nevertheless, they may have some disadvantages. ELT course book is not a panacea for all learning and teaching problems. Some teachers believe that if a book can meet half of the students’ needs, you can call it a very good one. The textbooks are not designed for a particular group of learners with specific needs. Blind adherence to a textbook is the very mistake that many teachers make. The most important one, I believe, is that they easily become the master of the teacher and the curriculum in the classroom and the teacher begins to use the textbook as a crutch. This especially occurs where the teachers have to follow the text’s sequence, methodology and pacing due to the will of the program administrators or the goals that managers of the language institutes strive for and in order to provide stability for learners. As a result, the needs of the learners are subjugated to the limitations and framework of the textbook. As Cunningsworth (1984) puts forth, course materials should be the teacher’s servant, not his master. Some argue that textbooks have a constraining effect on the freedom of the teacher because they have already determined the content and procedures of learning and teaching and have left no space for creativity and exploration on the part of teachers (Prabhu, 1987).

Textbooks often contain ideologically-oriented values, cultural biases and social stereotypes. As Richards (2001) asserts, “they may distort content”. Many studies have demonstrated that racist attitudes, linguistics biases, gender dominance and cultural prejudices constitute part of the unrealistic view of the textbooks (Clarke and Clarke, 1990; Carrell and Korwitz, 1994; Ansary and Babaii, 2003). Some authors castigate the textbooks for providing unnatural and inauthentic language which fails to contribute to communicative practice.

However, the fact that language which is taught in classrooms cannot be the same as actual language used in the real world should not go unnoticed. The classroom context is totally different from the context within which the language is used. Therefore, instead of injecting reality from the real world outside to the language classroom, it is better to consider it as 'a setting capable of creating a reality of its own' (Widdowson, 2007). In general, the language presented by the textbook should be teachable and learnable; a language that learners can appropriate and authenticate for themselves.

1.3. ELT textbooks in Iran

In countries where English is used as a foreign or second language, two main types of ELT materials are in common use in schools and colleges; global materials and institutional or in-house materials. The former is produced by some famous western publishers such as Longman, Oxford and Cambridge. Local educational institutions produce the latter. In Iran like many other countries located in the Middle East region, schools, government-run or private, use institutional materials produced according to the syllabuses and curriculum designed and developed by the Ministry of Education and under the supervision of this organization. Global materials such as Headway, Interchange, Cutting Edge and Top Notch are widely used in private language institutes or in colleges.

The general impression, technical quality and appropriateness of the in-house textbooks have been always under fierce debate and criticism in Iran. Though the EFL curriculum and the in-house materials have undergone drastic upward revisions in recent years, the materials cannot meet the expectations of most learners and teachers. However, to be fair, we should take much notice of tremendous diversity in the economical conditions, cultural values and geographical positions of their users in the country. The materials are considered to work for a nation so their designers should make decisions as to the content and framework of these textbooks regarding a wide scope of expectations and needs. Consequently, many students attend language classrooms in language institutes and study global materials besides the in-house textbooks taught at school. Moreover, they buy some supplementary textbooks designed by local writers and teachers to make up for the shortcomings of in-house textbooks. Still many of the students cannot use English effectively to communicate. Despite all defects of these textbooks, the ineffective performance of teaching methods and incompetent teachers can increase the mismatch between the demands and the results.

The current conditions highlight the need for evaluating the ELT textbooks and revising the existing checklists and criteria of assessment 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.

2. Models for textbook evaluation

ELT materials can be evaluated to measure various characteristics such as credibility, validity, flexibility, authenticity, practicality and many other features that teachers, learners and administrators look for. There is a list of checklists and some different approaches for textbook evaluation. Most of the evaluation models include a very detailed examination of the linguistic context, aims, design, methodology, skills and teacher's book. Breen and Candline's (1987) model is an extremely complex approach to conduct critical evaluation of materials' aims, appropriateness and utility. Sheldon's (1988) expensive checklist includes a variety of factors related to all aspects of content ranging from graphics to flexibility. Adapting the Bloom's Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain, Chall and Conard (1991) proposed an evaluation framework in which the affective processes and cognitive skills that textbook activities require the learners to apply are assessed through a special rating scale called "Question Complexity Rating Scale". McDonough and Shaw (1993) created a two-stage framework that included a brief external overview to adopt a textbook followed by a concise internal evaluation to adapt the textbook. Littlejohn and Windeat's (1989) approach looks beyond the goals of language learning itself. This model, as described by Nunan (1991), provides a preliminary way to materials evaluation and places language learning within the broader context of all learning with a focus on cognitive abilities.

3. The present model

Extensive use of widely distributed series of textbooks such as Interchange, Headway and recently Top Notch series (Salslow and Ascher, 2006) in Iran necessitates evaluating the effectiveness of such materials. Top notch series has recently become very popular in main cities of the country. Therefore, the researcher found it necessary to be aware of the values of the materials in process and its actual effects on the users.

After a number of checklists (Chastain, 1971; Rivers, 1981; Sheldon, 1988; Skierso, 1991; Cunningsworth, 1995) were examined, a two –phase evaluation framework which contains whilst-use and post-use evaluation was designed. For this particular project, every criterion in each phase of the evaluation was scrutinized at a time and by using planned instruments it was tried to obtain greater reliability.

Phase I: Whilst-use evaluation

This phase of evaluation involves measuring the value of the textbook whilst observing how it is used in two different classes taught by two experienced teachers. For convenience, I use the word ASPECT as an acronym for the various qualities I deem necessary and relevant to measure in whilst-use phase. To measure each feature, observations were carried out on behaviors, comments, responses and feedbacks of the students and the teachers. In one of the classes Top Notch 2B and in the other one Top Notch 3B was taught. Each class was observed in six sessions to cover a complete unit and the related pages in the workbook.

The different letters in the mnemonic ASPECT represent some of the main features that should be observed and examined by the language teachers in specific settings:

The Attractiveness and the Availability of the materials (A): the appealing illustrations and colorful pictures of the textbook create a motivational atmosphere for practice. The way the students look at the pictures and talk about them shows their interestedness. The illustrations are simple and free of unnecessary details. A combination of stunning cartoons and real photographs of people, places and things opens up suitable opportunities for oral participation of the students and for discussions. The teachers make effective use of the graphics to activate background knowledge of the students, to explain the meaning of words and to motivate them to talk. The design, graphic devices (e.g. boxes, shading, pictures, colors and arrows) and page layout that makes each page unique and different from each other increases the attractiveness of the materials. Pages are of proper size and uncluttered and the students conveniently write in the book. The CD is conveniently packaged into the textbook. The illustrated black-and-white workbook is tightly linked to the student’s book; the students seem totally satisfied with the decent package style.

The Suitability of the exercises and tasks (S): the students perform the tasks willingly and with tremendous enthusiasm. All students participate evenly in the tasks. It seems that they are highly appropriate to the age, level, background and interests of the students. For instance, the Top Notch Project that involves using the Internet or a bilingual dictionary or the library, making bulletins or lists or writing journals suits he needs and social situation and the interests of the language learners of today who display readiness for autonomous learning. The appropriateness of the task is partly obtained via a variety of tasks that can match the students’ different expectations and learning styles.

The Practicality of the textbook (P): Regarding the language content presented in the textbook and discussed through lessons, the students do not encounter topics or concepts that are highly culture-bound, biased or unacceptable for a group of learners; this makes the language highly practical. The language of conversations, reading passages, and topical vocabulary that presents cultural and linguistic interaction with native and non-native speakers of English increase the practicality. In terms of the subject and content, Top Notch includes a wide variety of contemporary topics such as holidays, traditions, travel and technology. The language portrays a considerable array of ethnic groups, universal issues, internationally known artists and famous cities around the world. In fact, in comparison to other popular commercial textbooks that highlight American and British culture such as illustrating life of Hollywood stars, introducing cities and customs of America and England, Top Notch tries to develop awareness across the cultures.

The Effectiveness in facilitating short-term learning (E): the students in the observed sessions actively participated in classroom discussions, singing songs and playing roles. The opportunity to practice and use what the learners have just been introduced to makes it more motivating. In Top Notch textbooks after grammatical presentation, for instance, the students have to complete an exercise and use it as a conversation in a pair work. The new words section is followed by listening comprehension. In the text of listening material the new words are used in an article or an everyday conversation or an interview or a radio program.

The Clarity of instructions and the Comprehensibility of the text (C): the students perform the activities and write the answer to the exercises without confusion and asking for clarifications. The instructions to the exercises and activities are perfectly clear and appropriate.

The text's level of readability also matches the proficiency level of the learners. The grammatical presentations and examples are clear and easy to understand. The table of content including topics, grammatical points, skills and vocabulary is detailed and complete. The student repeatedly use the table of irregular verbs, pronunciation table, social language list, a complete review of tenses and alphabetical word list all indexed between the workbook and student book. Some students express their satisfaction with the guide to the tracks of student's CD saving their time in finding the right track. The students can easily find the way around the textbook.

The Teachability of the textbook (T): this criterion is extremely affected by the professional skills and abilities of the teacher. The participation, comments and feedbacks of the students during the lessons contribute to the teachability of the materials as well. The trade-off between free and controlled communication activities, contextualization, meaning negotiation and input enhancement techniques all make the textbook teachable. Tasks promote critical thinking but they are not too analytical and complex. The students make interpretations, analysis and synthesis while using language communicatively in the classroom. Despite the high level of teachability observed in the classrooms, the teachers made some adaptation in teaching grammar using more explicit explanations. The materials involve high degree of peer interaction and feedback that reduces the tensions of teacher-fronted classroom and makes teaching and learning more enjoyable.

Phase II: Post-use evaluation

In this phase, the actual outcomes of the materials on the users were examined with a focus on long-term effects of the materials. The results of the evaluation can help ELT practitioners who want to make decisions about adaptation and adoption of the materials. To measure the post-use effects of this textbook, a test of what was taught by the materials was designed and administered. With respect to the goals of the materials, the test had written and oral parts. Twenty teachers who taught Top Notch completed a questionnaire (Appendix) that contains questions about the effects and the pros and the cons of using the material. The results of the test and the questionnaire are summarized in the following section.

The tests showed that the textbook helped the learners realize their goals to a great extent and it could increase the linguistic proficiency of the learners. According to the teachers' comments and ratings, it can be concluded that all skills are perfectly covered in this textbook despite the special focus on oral communication. The teachers considered the integration of four skills within a communicative, interactive framework a strong point for this material. Considering production and reception two side of the same coin, i.e. the coin of interaction, the textbook attends to what learners *can do* with language. As the teachers rated, the textbook's attention to subskills when performing a specific skill included in bottom-up, top-down and interactive exercises helps learners acquire effective language learning strategies and learn study skills. However, practice on natural pronunciation was not rated highly, which can be due to the use of non-native English. On average, the teachers rated listening material's motivating effect and comprehensibility as 'good' while they considered the writing material to a great extent effective in bolstering writing abilities and reinforcement of structures and vocabulary practiced orally but weak in demonstration of techniques for handling aspects of composition teaching. The reading passages were rated as 'excellent' regarding their sufficiency, appropriateness of length and difficulty and attractiveness while, interestingly, the effectiveness of the material for spoken English was rated 'good' on average. Personalization of conversations also boosts the social confidence of the learners.

The language used in the textbook was rated as highly authentic and accurate. However, this is the idea of most teachers in periphery communities where the commercial books are sold best. It seems that the presentation of vocabulary and grammatical items proceed gradually from the simple to the more difficult. Nevertheless, the textbook does not emphasize teaching vocabulary learning strategy. The rating confirms rich contextualization. The data supports suitable sequence of presentation of the vocabulary and structures and this fact that a large load of vocabulary is not packed into each unit. The teachers assessed the review system within lessons as a good recycling pattern. Explicit approach to grammar is also promoted through 'Grammar Booster' that supports learners by providing more examples and simple usage notes. Cultural concepts of American or British English are not highlighted; the textbook adopts a multicultural approach that has reduced cultural biases and stereotypes. The ability of the activities to promote internalization by encouraging students' active participation is rated highly due to the presentation of exercises such as role plays, Top Notch interactions, modeling conversations, problem solving activities, report writing and plenty of pair works and group works.

There is a variety of the activities and exercises that helps people with different kinds of intelligences and develops communicative abilities and critical thinking. The teachers can make adaptations in using textbooks so in their opinion it is highly flexible. The teachers evaluated the workbook as extremely useful, effective and worthwhile. Despite all the merits that the teachers discerned, the material's ease of use is problematic. As the non-native teachers use the textbook, the teachers should ready themselves for each lesson and prepare complete lesson plans. This textbook can be a heavy load for inexperienced teachers to bear. In fact, the teachability, effectiveness and success of the material depend heavily on the competence, knowledge and professional qualifications of the teacher.

The paper is of high quality and durable. The textbook and the student's audio CD are locally available and the price is reasonable and cost-effective in terms of saving money, labor and time. However, the accompanying materials (e.g. The Top Notch TV, the entertaining video of the series, and activity worksheets and a booklet of video scripts) are not easily available in the local market.

Evaluation of the ELT materials highlights the importance of developing the following qualifications in EFL/ESL teachers:

- awareness of the limitations of the textbook;
- acquiring knowledge and skill to adopt the appropriate book, not the best, regarding the learners' needs, availability and practicality of the materials, purpose of the program and his or her own abilities;
- developing expertise in adapting the textbook to match the needs of the students, to individualize it to a group of learners and to suit it to the interests and abilities of the learners;
- obtaining professional qualification in thorough and rigorous evaluation of the effects and outcomes of the ELT materials;
- designing their own materials when they think they have something different and new to offer;
- profound understanding of their own pedagogical practice (i.e. reflective practice) to articulate their theories and realize their predispositions in order to construct their criteria for evaluation. This avoids ad hoc and impressionistic assessments which are conducted based upon some ready-to-use evaluation checklists without examining their own means, ends and people; and
- utilizing the ELT materials as a means of re-skilling themselves. They should concentrate on using their creative skills and exploring innovative ideas hidden within the framework of the textbook heading off the textbooks to deskill them.

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Appendix

Teacher’s Textbook Evaluation Form

Answer the following questions using the scale below.

Rating:

1= weak

2: Adequate

3: Good

4: Excellent

Textbook:	Rating			
<p><i>Aims and achievements</i></p> <p>To what extent do the aims and objectives of the textbook correspond to the needs and goals of the students?</p> <p>To what extent have the materials increased the linguistic proficiency of the learners?</p> <p>To what extent have the materials helped the learners to become autonomous learners?</p> <p>To what extent have the materials increased the motivation and the confidence of the learners and the teachers?</p>				
<p><i>Skills</i></p> <p>To what extent is the practice of each skill is integrated to the practice of the other one?</p> <p>To what extent are all skills covered?</p> <p>To what extent does the textbook pay attention to subskills such as note-taking, skimming, scanning and paraphrasing?</p> <p>To what extent does the textbook include practice on natural pronunciation?</p> <p>To what extent is the listening material well recorded, motivating and comprehensive?</p> <p>To what extent is the writing material well organized, controlled and effective in enhancing writing abilities?</p> <p>To what extent is the written work related to structures and vocabulary practiced orally?</p> <p>To what extent does the writing material demonstrate techniques for handling aspects of composition teaching?</p> <p>To what extent are the reading passages enough, interesting and of appropriate length?</p> <p>To what extent does the textbook contain the passages within the vocabulary range of the learners?</p> <p>To what extent is material for spoken English well teachable in the classroom and effective in preparing learners for real life interactions?</p> <p>To what extent does the textbook include speech situations relevant to the learners’ background?</p>				

<p><i>Language type</i></p> <p>To what extent is the language used in the textbook authentic and accurate?</p> <p>To what extent is the progression of grammatical points appropriate?</p> <p>To what extent does the textbook provide a variety of registers and text types?</p> <p>To what extent are the linguistic items introduced in meaningful context to facilitate understanding?</p> <p>To what extent is the sequence of presentation of the vocabulary and structures suitable?</p> <p>To what extent is the vocabulary load suitable?</p> <p>To what extent does the textbook emphasize vocabulary learning strategy?</p> <p>To what extent are the grammatical structures and vocabulary reviewed in a systematic recycling for reinforcement?</p> <p>To what extent does the textbook highlight cultural concepts of American or British English?</p> <p>To what extent does the textbook contain cultural biases and stereotypes?</p> <p>To what extent does the textbook provide enhanced input on pragmatic components of language such as discourse markers or discourse markers?</p>				
<p><i>Activities</i></p> <p>To what extent do the exercises promote internalization by encouraging students' active participation?</p> <p>To what extent are the activities and exercises sufficiently various to help people with different kinds of intelligences?</p> <p>To what extent is the textbook flexible?</p> <p>To what extent is the textbook easy to use for teachers?</p> <p>To what extent does the textbook involve pair and group work?</p> <p>To what extent do the activities develop study skills?</p> <p>To what extent are communicative abilities developed?</p> <p>To what extent is critical thinking promoted?</p> <p>To what extent does the workbook enhance learning?</p>				
<p><i>Technical considerations</i></p> <p>To what extent is the paper made of durable and of high quality?</p> <p>To what extent is the textbook and audio CD available?</p> <p>To what extent are the accompanying materials (e.g. video program, activity worksheets, booklet of video scripts, etc.) available?</p> <p>To what extent does the price of the textbook seem reasonable?</p>				