Evaluation of English Textbooks in High School and Pre-university Based on Table of Content and Course Objectives

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Abstract: Teachers, learners, textbooks and contexts are the main four facets in educational context. Among these factors, textbooks act as the crucial one in English Language Teaching, particularly while English is considered as the Foreign Language. In Iran, EFL classes in school period are supposed to be the primary source of linguistic input for students. Taking these points into consideration, the present study carries out the evaluation of the last four English books the Iranian students study in high school and pre-university based on their table of content. The result showed the disparity that exists between high school English books and pre-university one. The former aims to make English known to the students with the great emphasis on grammar and vocabulary, while the latter focuses on reading comprehension.

Index Terms: English Language Teaching, English as a Foreign Language, Textbook, Textbook Evaluation

1. INTRODUCTION

Textbooks are supposed to be designed and published specifically to help language learners to improve their linguistic and communicative abilities (Sheldon, 1987). Moreover, they are also used as a supporting teaching instrument (Ur, 1996). Thus, the teacher must know not only how to use them, but also how useful they can be. Mostly, in Iran, high school textbooks serve as the basis for much of the language input learners receive and the language practice that occurs in the classroom. They may provide the basis for the content of the lessons, the balance of skills taught, and the kinds of language tasks students actively use. Iranian students study English for about seven years; that is, 3 years in secondary school, 3 years in high school and 1 year in Pre-university. Hence, it was supposed that the Iranian students are somehow competent enough after seven years of studying English, but different studies have been done, and came to a different result. The results revealed that the education they receive neither makes them fully competent in English language nor enable them to communicate with others in English.

According to Tomlinson (2001), textbook evaluation is an applied linguistic activity through which teachers, supervisors, administrators and materials developers can make judgments about the effect of the materials on the people using
them. McGrath (2002) believes that textbook evaluation is also of an important value for the development and administration of language learning program. In fact, textbooks occupy a mediating position between teachers and students and thus have to bear certain characteristics to make them an appropriate connector. Taking these points into account, one of the important measures facing EFL educators is the selection of the textbook (Hamidi et al., 2015). Before a textbook is selected, comprehensive evaluation should be done. Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) believe that to evaluate ELT materials—or more precisely textbooks—the value or potential value of a set of learning materials (textbooks) have to be measured by making judgments about the effectiveness of the materials on the learners using them.

In Iran several projects have been carried out to evaluate textbooks, among which Ansary and Babaii (2002), Yarmohammadi (2002), and Amalsaleh (2004) are typical examples. A good example of these studies, somehow related to this paper, is the study done by Riazi and Aryashokouh in 2007. Focusing on the consciousness-raising aspect of vocabulary exercises, they studied the four last English books (three of high school, and one of pre-university) Iranian students study during their school period. They found that of all the exercises in the four books, only one percent of them could be categorized as consciousness-raising. They also drew a conclusion that the exercises mainly concentrated on individual words (about 26%) with no emphasis on fixed expressions, lexical collocations (about 15%) and grammatical collocations (about 2%). They concluded that students are mainly dealing with meanings of individual words and not with how words are used with other words or in what combinations.

Having quick glance to the four books, we come to the point that the first three books studied by students in high school might be different from Pre-university book. It needs to be explained that all these textbooks are designed by the ministry of education and no alternatives are available. These course books are taught in all schools and all of the teachers follow the same syllabus. As a result, in this paper, the writer aims to evaluate four EFL textbooks, structurally, which have been prescribed to be taught in Iranian high schools by the ministry of education.

2. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Sheldon (1988) believes in textbook evaluation for different reasons. He states that the selection of an ELT textbook can result in considerable professional, financial, or even political investment which demonstrates important administrative and educational decision. There are different evaluation checklists based on generalizable criteria that can be trustable by both teachers and learners in various situations. However, Sheldon (1988) claims that these checklists cannot be applied to all teaching and learning contexts without modification. Although evaluating ELT textbooks is fairly young in Iran, there is rich literature on ELT textbook evaluation regarding a great number of studies concerning the issue from different points of view by the use of various criteria and standards to configure new insights and horizons. Following paragraphs report several investigations done in the related topic based on variety of projects on ELT textbook evaluation.

The studies worked on Iranian English textbook evaluation can be classified into three groups. The first group has examined the textbooks to find their strength and weakness in order to describe their pros and cons, for instance, Kheibari (1999), Shahedi (2001), Yarmohammadi (2002), Jahangard (2007), Riazi and Aryashokouh (2007). The second group like Ansary and Babaii (2002), has attempted to improve some principles to contribute to more effective textbook evaluation studies. And the third group has studied discoursal features and the depiction of cultural elements in the textbooks, for example, Amalsaleh (2004) and Darali (2007).

In a study done by Yarmohammadi (2002), the pre-university English book presented in Iranian schools was evaluated following a revised version of Tucker’s model. He reported shortcomings of the textbook in three aspects: 1. English and Persian names are used interchangeably; 2. The content lacks authenticity; 3. Oral skills are ignored.

Besides, Amalsaleh (2004) assessed the representation of social features in the first three Iranian high school English textbooks based on Van Leeuwen's model. His study reveals that the books verified a deferential representation of social elements that tended to treat gender in an unfair and imbalanced fashion with great bias toward males. They illustrate female as housewives referring to a home context and having limited job opportunities in the society. Generally, he believed
that the books do not follow the principles of CLT Approaches, and unfortunately they seemed to be presented to form normative views of gender and class relations in which a middle-class urban male was considered the norm. The books generally lack the principles of CLT Approach.

Razmjoo (2010) states that in Iranian educational system, unlike some other systems, the teachers are not responsible for choosing textbooks which they want to teach, and they are forced to teach the course book introduced to them; thus, it is strongly essential to evaluate the textbooks so that shortcomings and weaknesses would be uncovered.

Investigating Iranian ELT textbooks, Abdollahi-Guilani et al. (2011) find out that there isn’t any correspondence between actual needs of students and the presented textbooks. They state that there isn’t any link between outside world and the world onside the readers in ELT textbooks in Iran, for the textbooks are unchanged for years.

Zohrabi et al. (2012) worked on pre-university English textbook in Iran to evaluate the merits and demerits from the teachers’ and students’ viewpoint. They focused on seven sections of layout, vocabulary, topics and content, exercises, skills, pronunciation, function, and social and cultural activities. They found out that the book was grammar-oriented and there is insufficient practice for pronunciation; moreover, there are no social and cultural activities; and the layout of the book was believed to be not interesting and motivated.

Nearly all of the above-mentioned studies have been conducted working on the content of the English books taught in Iranian schools using predetermined checklists, and few, or almost no studies, take the structure of the books into consideration. Thus, the writer attempts to investigate the difference in the high school and pre-university books’ structure. Although the dominance of the Ministry of Education is an inevitable issue, and it is obvious that all major educational policies such as the curriculum standards, the compilation of textbooks, the examination system are designed by the Ministry of Education, the result of this study, like the other studies, can shed light for teachers how to fulfill the Ministry’s standards beside making the students content enough with the course they pass.

3. METHODOLOGY

The materials evaluated in the present study were the English textbooks published by Iranian Ministry of Education, and authored by Birjandi, Noruzi, and Mahmudi (2010) for high school students, and the one authored by Birjandi, Anani, and Samimi (2010) for pre-university students. It is worth mentioning that each educational year in Iran is divided into two semesters. So, the EFL teachers are supposed to cover each book during two semesters with equal portions.

Taking the books’ Table of Contents into consideration, the researcher reports that the number of lessons is different in each book. Book1 includes nine lessons, book 2 has seven lessons, and book 3 consists of six lessons. To go through the aim of this paper, the researcher will continue by presenting what each lesson includes separately in the mentioned books in order to compare and contrast different parts in the series taught in high school and the one in pre-university. The comparison and evaluation would be done based on observing the books’ Table of Contents, and type of tasks and activities designed by the expert authors of Ministry of Education.

4. RESULT

3.1. Evaluation of English books (1), (2) and (3)

At the beginning of Book 1, there is an Introduction which attempts to clarify the intended teaching objectives. However, the final objectives of the curriculum are not specified in vivid words so that the students know what they are expected to have learnt at the end of the program. This section is totally omitted from Books 2 and 3. Maybe it has been assumed that if a teacher teaches Book 2 or 3, he/she must definitely be aware of the contents of Book 1.

“Review Exercises (1)” is the first part of all three English books of high school, which consists of different parts, like completion form, blank form, tag questions, etc. These exercises are a kind of review of previous books studied by the
students to prepare them for getting the new points in recent educational year.

Talking about the lessons and evaluating them based on Table of Contents, first, we should concern the number of lessons, which was pointed in the Methodology section. It should be mentioned that each lesson in books 1, 2, 3 is composed of nine main parts:

- New Words,
- Reading,
- Speak Out,
- Write it Down,
- To the Teacher,
- Language Functions,
- Pronunciation Practice,
- Vocabulary Review,
- Vocabulary List

Each part will be discussed briefly.

**New Words**

This section includes between 6 and 8 parts. In each part one or two sentences are presented. Each sentence introduces one or two new vocabularies. These are followed by one or two questions about the sentences. The questions are also followed by an illustration which is about the subject of the presented sentences.

**Reading**

Basically, in each lesson a text which is about a historical event or an invention is presented. This is titled as ‘Reading’. The reading is followed by ‘Comprehension’ section which includes ‘True or False’, ‘Multiple Choice’ and ‘Short Answer Questions’ which are questions about the text. This part also includes a section which asks the students to answer some questions about the text orally. It mainly tries to find out students’ understanding of the text. The new words presented in previous section are also repeated in the reading section.

**Speak out**

This section has some subsections called “speaking 1, 2, 3, etc.” and explains about the grammar and grammatical points of the lessons. Some examples are presented, and then students should answer some questions based on those examples, orally.

**Write It Down**

There are some more exercises based on the grammar taught in the previous section, but this time students should answer them in a written form.

**To the Teacher**

This part has some additional information and notes for teachers. It reminds the teacher some important grammatical points to mention for the students.

It is noticeable that it is presented in all lessons of book (2) and (3) while it is presented only in 5 lessons of book (1).

**Language Function**

Sentence elements in this part are not discussed from grammatical point of view. There are some points in some sentences that the students have not been taught yet. The students are not asked to memorize the sentences parrot like but they should learn them naturally by practicing and role playing. Finally, the students are supposed to talk and interact with each other based on their roles in different situations. In this part some dialogues about different topics are presented which the students are supposed to practice them in pairs as a role play.

**Pronunciation Practice**
Each lesson presents one or two phonetic symbols. First of all, the sound is presented in the square brackets and then it follows by some words which have the same sound in themselves. In the second part the students should distinguish between other sounds and the one which is presented in the lesson. Here the teacher has the main role because he/she should teach correct pronunciation of the word and the students should imitate him/her.

**Vocabulary Review/ Drill**

In this part, new vocabularies of the lesson are examined in different kinds of sentences. It can be a useful part to practice the new words.

**Vocabulary**

Here a list of the new vocabulary that has been introduced to the students in the lesson is presented. At the end of the three books, there is another kind of exercises called “Review Exercises (2)” which reviews all the points of the lessons presented in the recent book. These exercises are presented in different forms. In English Book(1), a section called “Key to Phonetic Symbols” is presented, while it is absent in book (2) and (3). “Irregular Verbs” is the next part which is present in all books. It becomes more complex from book (1) to book (3). Finally, the last section of all books is “Word List” in which all vocabularies of each book has been presented with the number of the lesson.

### 3.2. Evaluation of Pre-university English book

Taking a quick glance on this book, we come to big changes comparing to previous books. Based on the name of the book, learning to read English for pre-university students, it seems that, the main objective of the course should be reading comprehension. This book starts with a GUIDLINE for students, which was absented in the last 3 books. Similar to the previous books, the review section, called “A Review of English Book” is presented, as a warm up.

This book has eight lessons, and each lesson consists of:

- Before you Read,
- Reading,
- After You read,
  - Comprehension Check
  - Sentence Function
  - Reading Skills
  - Vocabulary Review
- Focus on Grammar,
- Grammar Digest.

Each part will be discussed briefly.

#### Before You Read

This part is a warm up for students to make them ready to read the text. It includes some questions related to the topic of the text.

#### Reading

Comparing to the texts presented in the last 3 books, these texts are longer, and each paragraph is followed by the new vocabularies.

#### After You Read

This part consists of “Comprehension Check”, “Sentence Functions”, “Reading Skills” and “Vocabulary Review”. It is the same for all lessons.

- **Comprehension Check** consists of T/F, MC questions and open-ended questions.
Sentence Function is like “Language Function” in high school books. It explains functions of a sentence. But, it is more complex.

Reading Skills: There is no such thing in the previous books. It gives students the key factors and helps them to be more successful with their reading.

Vocabulary Review is like “Vocabulary Drill” in high school books. In this book, most of these exercises are in MC form, while they are more in blank forms in high school books.

Focus On Grammar

It has some examples and questions about the grammar in different forms.

Grammar Digest

In this part, more details and explanations of mentioned grammar with their functions are presented.

5. CONCLUSION

This research is a preliminary work investigating how the Iranian high school's English language textbooks are designed. Having considered the collected data from Textbooks, it has been concluded that, there is a great similarity in the framework of books 1, 2, and 3 while about book 4 the story changed completely. In the first three books, the aim is to make English known to the students with the great emphasis on grammar and vocabulary, but in Pre-university book, the main objective is Reading Comprehension. So, the grammar and vocabulary presented in this book are originated from the purpose of reading comprehension.

Besides, the findings revealed that the high school students are not expected to be able to produce language by themselves. Rather they are taught to memorize the formula of the grammar points, apply words in the sentences based on some cliché rules, and presenting some phonetic symbols without paying much attention to the correct pronunciation of the words by the students.

To sum up, it seems that the students are just expected to get ready succeed in University Entrance Exam by answering the questions in a way they are familiar with; that is, the Ministry of Education has not aimed to design a book to prepare the students for more communicative purposes. The books’ exercises are not going to make the students passive in learning and producing language; the students are passive in the process of learning and doing the exercises.

REFERENCES