

Exploring Iranian EFL Teachers' Perspective Towards the Junior High School Textbook: Prospect III

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Abstract.

In countries where the textbooks are designed and developed by the Ministry of Education and not selected by the EFL teachers, textbook evaluation seems to be inevitable and necessary. With the advent of communicative language teaching textbook evaluation has received a considerable attention over the last two decades, only a few studies have been conducted on the evaluation of newly- developed textbooks for Junior high schools in Iran. Since a new English book has been developed for the 9th grade students in Iran, this study aimed at evaluating the newly developed textbook from perspective of the teachers who has been incorporating in their classroom. To do so, sixty- seven male and female English Junior high school teachers ranging from 9 to 30 years of teaching experience took part in this study. A questionnaire was developed to evaluate the book based on six domains, namely, structure and vocabulary, general theme, appearance and illustrations, dialogues, exercises and activities, and supplementary materials. The findings revealed that the most EFL teachers were satisfied with the general theme, appearance and illustrations, and supplementary materials, while nearly half of them were not satisfied with the dialogues, vocabulary, structure, exercises and activities. It can be concluded that, despite advantages, some modifications seem obligatory from teachers' perspectives. The suggestions and presented in detail.

Keywords: Textbook evaluation, EFL teachers' attitude, Prospect3, Iran

1. Introduction.

Textbooks are one of the crucial components of the language teaching programs, furthermore they are one of the factors that may encourage learners developing on their materials. They are a kind of support for both teachers and learners. Textbooks give students a kind of consistency. By using textbooks, learners can go forward step by step and find their ways, and on the other hand, they are a kind of plan for teachers and help them manage their time in order to enhance learning in the classroom. There has been considerable controversy about the role of EFL textbooks in teaching and learning foreign languages all over the world. There is a strong relation on textbooks in on ELT classroom because "materials and textbooks are not simply the everyday tools of the language teacher, they are an embodiment of the aims, values, and methods of the particular teaching / learning situation "(Hutchinson, 1987: p, 37). Similarly, Ur (1996) asserts that textbooks are a supportive teaching instrument. In other words, textbooks are" designed to give cohesion to the language teaching and learning process by providing direction , support and specific language- based activities aimed at offering classroom practice for students" (Mares, 2003: P, 131) and foster effective language learning (Cunnigsworth, 1995) . For example, in a study, Richards, Tung, and Ng (1992) found that textbooks were one of the main sources of the teaching materials. In another study carried out by McGrath (2006) it was revealed that English teachers of Secondary schools considered the use of the textbooks as important.

Studies have shown that textbooks are very common in ELT contexts and ELT professionals use textbooks for daily teaching purposes and the fact is that very few of them would not use the published materials at some stage of their profession (Byrd, 2001; Litz, 2005; McDonough & Show, 1993). Since they are the most essential component of an EFL classroom, the evaluation of the textbooks is of great importance. Textbooks are revised and republished and sometimes new books are written to meet the changing focuses of instruction as well as changing language needs of the learners. A number of researchers have emphasized the importance of post-use evaluation of a textbook, since it can provide data concerning the actual effect of the textbook on the users (Tomlinson, 2003; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2004). Actually, when a book is nearly developed for an ELT context, its evaluation is even of more importance because its pedagogical value need to be determined before long-term use.

In Iran many researchers have conducted studies on textbook evaluation in the contexts of high schools and guidance schools to find out why teachers and students are not satisfied with their EFL textbook. Where is

the problem? It depends on many factors, one is textbook. It seems that Iranian EFL textbooks are not designed according to the learners' needs or interests.

However, many studies had focused on the previous high school and Junior high school textbooks in Iran which were based on the traditional teaching methods for many years (Azizifar, 2009; Jahangard, 2007; Rahimpour and Hashemi, 2011; Riazi, 2003; Riazi and Aryashokouh, 2007, and only a few studies have focused on the evaluation of the newly developed book in Junior high schools.

Alavi, B. M (2013 a) stated that the textbook "Prospect 1" was designed to help students to learn English for communicative purpose using all the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing and based on communicative language teaching approach. Alternatively it was believed that the last previous textbooks suffered from lack of communicative skills, and the students were unable to use the language in real situation, so we were interested to find the teachers' perceptions in this regard.

Alavi and Hesami (2013) indicated that the previous Junior high school textbooks were not acceptable from the teachers' point of view and did not meet their expectations. In the same time, Shabani and Mansoori Nejad (2013) analyzed the Junior high school textbooks and support this claim that there have not been slight changes in the textbooks for many years even in the pictures. Moreover, some of the students use communicative textbooks to learn English in the foreign language institutes.

Prospect 3 developed for 9th grade students is a new textbook in Iran. Hence, there is a great need to collect empirical data to evaluate the book from different angles. The present study was conducted to collect data eliciting the attitudes of the EFL teachers teaching in several parts in Amol as to evaluate the extent to which the expectation of the material developers are fulfilled. This study serves as a guide to help teachers have a better and deeper understanding of textbooks and to overcome the problems by careful planning and time management. It will also be of benefit to the educationalists and textbook developers and help them have a better view about revising and republishing the textbook "Prospect 3".

2. Research questions.

In accordance with what has already been argued, the following research question is proposed:

What are teachers' perspective on Prospect 3 in terms of the structure and vocabulary, general theme, appearance, illustrations, dialogues, exercises and activities, and supplementary materials?

3. Methods.

3.1. Participants.

A total of the 67 English teachers teaching English in the 9th grade (36 males and 31 females) took part in this research. They were from Mazandaran Province, Amol, with the mean age of 37.5 years. Their teaching experience ranged from 3 to 29 years. Among them 11.9% had associate Art (AA), 67.5% hold a BA degree, and 20.9% were MA holders. Eighty-eight percent of the teachers were involved in teaching in urban areas and 11.0% in rural areas.

Table 1: Demographic information of the participants

| | Gender | | Age | Teaching Experience | | | Workplace | | Degree | | |
|---------------|--------|--------|--------|---------------------|-------|---------|-----------|---------|--------|----|----|
| | Male | Female | 20 -39 | Up to 9 | 10-19 | 20-over | City | Village | AA | BA | MA |
| Number | 36 | 31 | 41 | 10 | 28 | 29 | 59 | 8 | 8 | 45 | 14 |

3.2. Procedure.

In this study an English book, Prospect 3, was received according to 67 teachers' Prospect teaching it, to do so the participants were required to fill out the 43 statements from various evaluation checklists in Byrd (2001), Skierso (1991), and Ur (1996) ranging from " Strongly Agree", " Agree", "Disagree", to "Strongly Disagree" for the textbook "Prospect 3" regarding their teaching experience they had in teaching the textbook, so data collection were exploratory involving qualitative data which were analyzed interpretively. Before conducting the study, various checklists by different researchers mentioned above were collected and analyzed to determine the specific criteria relevant to the study. After all, the completed questionnaire was analyzed in accordance with the objectives of the textbook using SPSS version 18, to find the answer to the research question, descriptive statistics such as Frequency, and Percentage were employed. Finally the results of the evaluation Junior high school textbook Prospect 3 according to the teachers' perspective revealed that the newly published textbook in contrance with previous book contained privileges but to some extent in urgent needs of revision and modification.

3.3. Materials.

The material for this study is on locally produced English language textbook used in Iranian Junior high school. The researchers selected book, that is one of the Prospect series "Prospect 3". Alavi et al (2015) in order to attain the aim of the study.

3.4. Questionnaire.

To achieve the purpose of the study, a questionnaire was developed based on the different checklists of Byrd (2001), Skierso (1991), and Ur (1996) utilized. I contained two main parts. One was about their

Demographic information, and another was used to investigate EFL teachers' point of view toward "Prospect 3" while teaching based on the types of objectives which are presented aforementioned for the textbook. Among of these three checklists by consulting researchers and teachers one checklist was selected by combination of mentioned checklists. It contained two main parts. One for gathering demographic information of the participants (gender, age, teaching experience, workplace, and degree), and the second about the textbook Prospect 3 evaluation scheme consists of four main factors containing 43 items measured on a Four-point Linker Scale which includes "Strongly Disagree" (1 point), "Disagree" (2 points), "Agree" (3 points), and "Strongly Agree" (4 points). The checklist including six criteria is as follows:

- 1) Language components including structures and vocabulary
- 2) General Theme
- 3) Pictures and Appearance
- 4) Dialogue
- 5) Exercises and Activities
- 6) Supplementary Materials.

4. Results.

To find the answer to the research question, descriptive statistics such as Frequency and Percentage were applied to the data obtained from a questionnaire was developed based on the different checklists were aimed to collect the teachers' perspective towards the textbook (Prospect 3) in the case of six domains, namely, structure and vocabulary, general theme, appearance and illustrations, dialogues, exercises and activities, and supplementary materials.

The results of the study are presented below in Table 2.

Table 2. The Frequency and Percentage of the EFL Teachers' Perspective towards the 9th Grade English Book, "Prospect 3".

| Variables | | Structu res & Vocab ulary | General Theme | Pictures & Appearance | Dialogue | Exercises & Activities | Suppl. Materials |
|-------------------|-------|---------------------------|---------------|-----------------------|----------|------------------------|------------------|
| Strongly Disagree | Freq. | 6 | 2 | 3 | 7 | 2 | 0 |
| | Perc. | 9 | 3 | 4.5 | 10.4 | 3 | 0 |
| Disagree | Freq. | 32 | 18 | 14 | 23 | 28 | 22 |
| | Perc. | 47.7 | 26.9 | 20.9 | 34.3 | 41.8 | 32.8 |
| Agree | Freq. | 25 | 28 | 36 | 30 | 33 | 38 |
| | Perc. | 37.3 | 41.8 | 53.7 | 44.8 | 49.3 | 56.8 |
| Strongly Agree | Freq. | 4 | 19 | 14 | 7 | 4 | 7 |
| | Perc. | 6 | 28.3 | 20.9 | 10.4 | 6 | 10.4 |

As can be seen from table 2, overall 43.3% of the participants agree that the new words and structures are introduced appropriately and in meaningful situations to facilitate understanding, the number of introduced words in each lesson is appropriate, and they reappear in the subsequent lessons for the sake of reinforcement. Moreover, they agree that new structures are introduced based on the student's need in a logical order and real daily situations.

The results also reveal that overall 70.1% of the participants are in agreement with the general theme of the book. In other words, they agree that the culture and religious issues are adequately included in the textbook. With regard to the theme of pictures and appearance, the result shows that 74.6% of the teachers, taking part in the study, accept that illustrations used in the book are relevant, clear, and simple.

The font used in the book is also found to be suitable for the students at this age; moreover, they agree that the book has an eye-catching cover. The table 2 shows that 55.2% of the participants believe that the dialogues used in the book are attractive, up-to-date, and appropriate for the students' language knowledge, and there is a broad variety of dialogues, in addition, the dialogues are arranged reasonably, rationally, that is, from simple to hard and are fit for the student's needs. Overall, it can be concluded that the newly published textbook, although teachers have just been teaching, is much more efficient than the previous one, so some revisions and modifications are required to improve it. The EFL teachers' attitude towards the exercises and activities included in the book, the results show that 55.3% of them approve of the appropriateness and attractiveness of the exercises. They also believe that exercises create a meaningful situation for enhancing learning and that they are developed based on CLT. They also agree that the exercises can promote group work in the classroom. Finally, concerning the supplementary materials provided for this book 67.2% of the participants agree that the listening CD is related to the content of the book, and it can help students to promote their listening ability and pronunciation. Moreover, they think that the workbook contains exercises that are appropriately developed according to the students, book. They also believe that the teaching aids are available and the teachers' guide provides them with the information they require for teaching.

5. Discussion.

Sheldon (1988) asserts that "textbook are physical artifact, and the author needs to recognize that lay out, format, typography, and graphics are also essential for a successful course book" (p8). According to the results of the present study, it can be inferred that Junior high school EFL teachers have a rather positive attitude

towards the general theme, illustrations and appearance as well as the supplementary materials of the newly developed book, the developers of the newly developed textbook have emphasized that while developing the textbook, they considered the Islamic Iranian cultural values. The attitudes of the teachers approve this claim (83.6% for culture and 61.2% for religious). It has been argued that since English is used as an international language, the cultural content of ELT materials should not be limited to native English speaking cultures and that when teaching English is viewed as teaching an international language, the culture should become the world itself (Alptekin 2002: 62; McKay 2003: 139-40).

The findings of this study showed that about half of the participants agreed that the vocabulary and structure, dialogues, and exercises that activities are presented appropriately. Such findings suggest that the book needs some revisions and modifications in these parts in order to be appropriate for the students and promote learning.

Regarding the suitability of the exercises for the four language skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing. McDonough and Show (2003) maintain that any materials should enable the students to see effective use of the four skills in an appropriate context because in this way we can involve the learners in authentic tasks and increase their motivation.

In Iran several projects have been carried out to evaluate textbooks (e.g. Ansary & Babaii, 2002; Jahangard, 2008; Hashemi & Rahimpour, 2011). For example, Jahangard (2008) evaluated four EFL textbooks which had been prescribed to be used in Iranian high schools by retrospective or post-use procedure. He elaborated merits and demerits of the textbooks according to a checklist. In the results sections of this study, he mentioned that the ultimate goals of the curriculum were not clarified and final objectives were not clearly specified. Another example is Hashemi and Rahimpour's (2011) study, which is the evaluation of three English language textbooks of Iranian high schools. At the end she declared that English language textbooks that are taught at Iranian high schools do not meet teachers' expectations.

However, evaluating the previously taught book, Ghorbani (2011), Golpour (2012), Mahdizadeh (2005), and found that the activities included in the book were not conducive to improving these skills.

Fortunately in the introduction of the newly developed English textbook, it has been claimed that the textbook developers have paid attention to all four language skills and none of them has been ignored. Although teachers taking part in this study implicitly accept that all these skills are included (58.2% for listening, 58.2% for speaking, 47.7% for reading, and 43.3% for writing skills).

They do not approve of the adequacy of the activities, as the percentages reveal, it seems that the majority disapprove of the adequacy of the activities which have been designed for the two important skills of reading and writing, with regard to the importance of communicative exercises and activities, Nunan (1991) emphasized that "the way materials are organized and presented, as well as types of content and activities will help to share the learner's view of language" (p210).

It is important to note that, in spite of the disagreement of the majority of the teachers with the adequacy of the activities, they agreed that the exercises were based on CLT and integrated different skills.

Sheldon (1988) asserts that "textbooks are physically artifacts, and the author needs to recognize that layout, format, typography, and graphics are also essential for a successful course book" (p8).

6. Conclusion.

Today where international communication is essential and English is used as the dominant international language, developing appropriate and efficient textbook for EFL students is very important, efficient and improve their language skills. They will enable them to apply the language correctly. Overall, it can be concluded that the published textbook is much more efficient than the previous one, though some revisions and modifications are required to improve, since the textbook has localized in Iran. It is important for teachers to continuously evaluate the textbook from different angles to meet the learning needs of the students, this way they can maximize its learning potential and enhance the status of English teaching in Iran. The present study has also some limitations that should be taken into account. The first limitation is that, the present study compared only one of the Iranian Junior English textbook with one of the books of Prospect series. The second limitation of the study is that it was not accompanied by an interview and the students' opinions were not considered. The findings of this study have implications for curriculum designers and textbook developers to modify the textbook to improve its efficiency.

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