

Textbook Evaluation: An Investigation into “American English File” Series

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Abstract

ELT materials (textbooks) play a really crucial role in many language classrooms, but in recent years there has been a lot of debate throughout the ELT profession on the actual role of materials in teaching English as a Second/Foreign Language (TESL/TEFL). Some issues that have been discussed in recent years include textbook design and practicality, methodological validity, the role of textbooks in innovation, the authenticity of materials in terms of their representation of language, and the appropriateness of gender representation, subject matter, and cultural components. This study aims at an investigation into ‘American English File’ series in Iran EFL context. To this end, twenty-three experienced teachers holding degree from B.A. to Ph.D. and age range 24-37 were called for cooperation. A forty item questionnaire adapted from David R.A. Litz (2000) was used to elicit information needed for the study. The data obtained through the questionnaire were then subject to descriptive and inferential statistics. Results indicated that ‘American English File’ series was a suitable and appropriate device for language teachers to obtain their aims as well as the aims of the language institutes.

Keywords: Evaluation, ELT Materials, TESL, Practicality, Methodological Validity, Authenticity, Independent Sample T-test

INTRODUCTION

A very important professional activity for all EFL teachers is the ability to evaluate teaching materials effectively. Today there is a wealth of EFL materials available, with hundreds of new, commercially available titles appearing every year. Teachers or course organizers are often under considerable professional and financial pressure to select a course book for an ELT program that will then become the textbook for years to come. Moreover, materials are usually seen as being the core of a particular program and are the most visible representation of what happens in the classroom. O’Neill (1982) states that “No other medium is as easy to use as a book” (p.107).

The evaluation of current materials, therefore, deserves serious consideration since an inappropriate choice may waste funds and time and has a demotivating effect on students and possibly teachers. Another reason for textbook evaluation is the fact that it can be very useful in teacher development and professional growth. Cunningsworth (1995) and Ellis (1997) believe that textbook evaluation helps teachers move beyond impressionistic assessments and helps them to get useful, accurate, systematic, and contextual insights into the overall nature of textbook material. Textbook evaluation can also be a valuable part of teacher training programs since it serves the purpose of making teachers aware of important features to look for in textbooks while familiarizing them with a wide range of published language instruction materials.

No textbook or set of materials is likely to be perfect. What is more, according to Sheldon (1988) “coursebook assessment is fundamentally a subjective, rule-of-thumb activity” and there exists no neat formula or system to provide a definite yardstick (p.245). Nevertheless, there is a need for a model that’s brief, practical to use and comprehensive in its coverage of criteria. As Cunningsworth (1995) notes, “it is important to limit the number of criteria used and the number of questions asked to manageable proportions” (p.5). Otherwise, we risk being swamped in a sea of detail. Tomlinson (1999) also suggests that “the obvious but important point is that

there can be no one model framework for the evaluation of materials; the framework used must be determined by the reasons, objectives, and circumstances of the evaluation” (p.11).

A. The Role of Textbooks in EFL / ESL Classrooms

Textbooks play a very crucial role in language teaching and learning and are considered to be the second important factor in the second / foreign language classroom compared to the teacher. As Hutchinson and Torres (1994) suggest:

The textbook is an almost universal element of [English language] teaching. Millions of copies are sold every year, and numerous aid projects have been set up to produce them in [various] countries...No teaching-learning situation, it seems, is complete until it has its relevant textbook (p.315).

Haycroft (1998) suggests that one of the primary advantages of using textbooks is that they are psychologically essential for students since their progress and achievement can be measured concretely when we use them. Sheldon (1988) has stated, students often have expectations about using a textbook in their particular language classroom and program and believe that published materials have more credibility than teacher-generated or “in-house” materials. O’Neill (1982) has indicated, textbooks are sensitive to students’ needs, even if they are not made specifically for them, they are efficient in terms of time and money, and they should allow for adaptation and improvisation. Another advantage identified by Cunningsworth (1995) is the potential which textbooks have for serving several additional roles in the ELT curriculum. He argues that they are an effective source for self-directed learning, an effective resource for presentation material, a source of ideas and activities, a reference source for students, a syllabus where they reflect pre-determined learning objectives, and support for less experienced teachers who have yet to gain in confidence. Hutchinson and Torres (1994) have pointed out that textbooks play a central role in innovation. They suggest that textbooks can support teachers by potentially disturbing and threatening change processes; moreover, they demonstrate new and/or untried methodologies, introduce change gradually, and create scaffolding upon which teachers can build a more creative methodology of their own.

Textbooks take on a very important role in language classes, and it’s important to select a good textbook. This study seeks to evaluate new ‘American English File’series from the teacher’s viewpoint and to see how appropriate and useful they are in order to meet the needs of students and to get a good feedback in terms of their instructional philosophy, approach, method, and technique which suits the students and their needs.

B. Review of Literature

Textbooks in ELT are of crucial importance. They must be of a suitable level of quality, usefulness, and appropriateness for the context and people with whom they are being used. While the literature on textbook evaluation is not particularly extensive, various writers have presented evaluation ‘checklists’ based on supposedly generalizable criteria that can be used by both teachers and students in many different situations. Although Sheldon (1988) states that no general list of criteria can really be applied to all teaching and learning contexts without considerable modification, many of these standardized evaluation checklists contain same components that can be used as helpful starting points for ELT practitioners in different situations. In the field of ELT textbook design and analysis theorists like Williams (1983), Sheldon (1988), Brown (1995), Cunningsworth (1995) and Harmer (1996) all agree that evaluation checklists should have some criteria related to the physical characteristics of textbooks such as layout, organizational, and logistical characteristics. Other important criteria should also be incorporated; those that assess a textbook’s methodology, aims, and approaches, and the degree to which a set of materials

is not only teachable but also fits the needs of the individual teacher’s approach as well as the organization’s overall curriculum.

What’s more, criteria should investigate the specific language, functions, grammar, and skills content that are covered by a particular textbook as well as the relevance of linguistic items to the prevailing socio-cultural environment. Finally, textbook evaluations should contain criteria that pertain to representation of cultural and gender components in addition to the extent to which the linguistic items, subjects, content, and topics match up to students’ personalities, backgrounds, needs, and interests as well as those of the teacher and/or institution. Following is a list of some pre-eminent textbook evaluation schemes:

- Davison’s (1975) scheme
- Tucker’s (1975) scheme
- Dauod&Cele-Murcia’s (1979) scheme
- William’s (1983) scheme
- Sheldon’s (1988) scheme
- Skierso’s (1991) scheme
- Cunningsworth’s (1995) scheme
- Ur’s (1996) scheme
- Littlejohn’s (1998) scheme

Only a few studies have recently been conducted on textbook evaluation. With regard to the inclusion of pragmatic issues a study has been conducted by Darali (2007). She made a careful analysis of Spectrum series and reported that the series have provided a variety of language functions, but some important language functions that are used in everyday conversation more frequently, e.g. promising, and threatening, not only were in the form of unintended functions, but also they were not as frequent as others.

Iraji (2007) conducted a study and made a careful analysis on the New Interchange series based on the principles of communicative and task-based approaches to investigate to what extent the principles of CLT and TBLT approaches have been included in the series. To do this, she has employed Ellis’s (2003) task model and found that the New Interchange series do not follow the principles of communicative and task-based approaches as the author has claimed.

Toolabi (2002) has used Tsui’s model (1995) of Initiation, Follow-up and Response (IRF) to analyze the “Language Functions” of the three English textbooks taught in the Iranian high schools to see whether these dialogues utilize different possible and available models of structures in conveying different functions or not. His findings indicated that, first, the dialogs in the textbooks do not cover all the classes and sub-classifications of Tsui’s framework (1995), and second, the distribution of moves in the three books has enjoyed an irregularity.

Another study was by Rastegar (1992) who analyzed and evaluated the dialogs in English textbooks taught in Guidance and High schools in Iran based on Levinson’s (1983) model. According to Rastegar (1992) only two of the five models proposed by Levinson (1983) are used.

Some comparative studies in the area of textbook evaluation have been conducted as well. One of the most recent ones belongs to Vellenga (2004) who makes a comparison between EFL and ESL textbooks. She believes that textbooks rarely provide enough information for learners to successfully acquire pragmatic competence. She reported that regarding speech acts in each of

the books, there is a focus on explicit mention and metapragmatic description of speech acts such as requests, apologies, complaints, etc.

C. Significance of the Study

It's only recently that textbooks are being systematically evaluated in Iran. The results of this study would be significant to all who are in the process of second or foreign language learning or teaching (SLL, FLL, SLT, or FLT).

The outcomes of this study can help teachers decide what to do in their classes in terms of presentation, procedure and evaluation of students' learning. The results of the study would be helpful not only to teachers and administrators, but also to material developers and syllabus planners.

D. Objectives of the Study

The present study aimed at evaluating 'American English File' series in terms of its appropriateness for Iranian students. It endeavored to find out whether or not the series can satisfy the students' needs and to see if the teachers are satisfied with the series and its feedback. Specifically, the study sought answers to following questions:

1. What do EFL teachers think of 'American English File' series in terms of its suitability in Iran EFL educational setting known to them?
2. How do teachers rank practical considerations, layout and design, activities, skills, language type, and subject and content of the series?

METHOD

A. Judges

Twenty-three teachers were called for cooperation. These teachers had been teaching 'American English File' books for several years, hence experienced enough to be able to evaluate the books and identify their strengths and weaknesses. They were both males and females between 24-37 years of age and ranged from B.A. to Ph.D. holders. The questionnaires were given to all the judges one by one, and they were asked to fill them out attentively. There was no time limit to complete the questionnaire.

B. Instrument

We must make every effort to establish and apply a wide variety of relevant and contextually appropriate criteria for the evaluation of the textbooks that we use in our language classrooms. We should also ensure "that careful selection is made, and that the materials selected closely reflect [the needs of the learners and] the aims, methods, and values of the teaching program" (Cunningsworth, 1995, p.7).

The instrument used in this study was a textbook evaluation questionnaire developed by David R. A. Litz (2000). The questionnaire, which comprises 40 items, is divided into several categories, each of which explores a certain aspect of the textbook. This questionnaire was applied to 'American English File' series authored by Clive Oxenden and Christina Latham-Koenig (2008).

C. Procedure of Data Analysis

After gathering the required data, to carry out the statistical analysis, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 21.0 was used. The data of the study were subjected to descriptive and

inferential statistics upon which the results and conclusions were made. In descriptive statistics mean and standard deviation were utilized to analyze the data which were then grouped as high, medium, and low.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To answer the first question of the study, descriptive statistics was used as presented in the following table.

		PC	LD	A	S	LTYPE	SC	C
N	Valid	23	23	23	23	23	23	23
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		25.3913	19.1739	25.3913	21.0435	23.6522	19.7826	15.6957
Std. Deviation		1.46905	2.01477	2.40717	2.34479	2.70704	2.08799	1.94082
Minimum		6.00	8.00	7.00	7.00	11.00	8.00	5.00
Maximum		23.00	15.00	21.00	18.00	19.00	16.00	13.00
		29.00	23.00	28.00	25.00	30.00	24.00	18.00

PC: Practical Considerations

LD: Layout and Design

A: Activities

S: Skills

LTYPE: Language Type

SC: Subject and Content

C: Conclusion

The table shows the mean, range, and standard deviation obtained for each category. With regard to most categories- practical considerations of the books, activities, skills, language type, and conclusion- of the series the teachers were highly satisfied and considered the books an appropriate device. As table 1 reveals, regarding their layout and design, and the subject and content of the series, the results of the study showed an average level of satisfaction among teachers.

The first category in the questionnaire was practical considerations of the series. Most teachers agreed that the price of the textbook is reasonable, they are easily accessible, recently published, and accompanied by a teacher’s guide, workbook, and audio CDs. They also believed that the authors’ view on methodology was comparable to theirs. Table 2 provides evidence for the significance of the results ($\text{sig.} = .9 > \alpha = .05$).

Table 2: One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 25.39					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
PC	.004	22	.997	.00130	-.6340	.6366

The second category was layout and design of the series. Nearly most teachers were of the belief that the textbooks include a detailed overview of the functions, structures, and vocabulary to be taught in each unit. However, they believed that the layout and design of the book is

not appropriate and clear, they are not organized effectively, and do not include an adequate vocabulary list, review sections and exercises, and an adequate set of evaluation quizzes and testing suggestions. Table 3 provides evidence for the significance of the results (sig. = .9 > α = .05).

Table 3: One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 19.17					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
LD	.009	22	.993	.00391	-.8673	.8752

The third category utilized in the questionnaire regarded activities. This category is the one that is most favored and most agreed on by many of the teachers. As can be concluded from the results, most teachers were of the opinion that the textbooks provide a balance of activities—there is an even distribution of free versus controlled exercises and tasks that focus on both fluent and accurate production. They believed that the activities encourage sufficient communicative meaningful practice, incorporate individual, pair, and group work, promote creative, original, and independent responses, and can be modified or supplemented easily. They also agreed that the grammar points and vocabulary items are introduced in motivating and realistic contexts, and that the tasks are conducive to the internalization of newly introduced language. Table 4 provides evidence for the significance of the results (sig. = .9 > α = .05).

Table 4: One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 25.39					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
A	.003	22	.998	.00130	-1.0396	1.0422

The fourth category of the questionnaire discussed skills. The results of the study demonstrated that in teachers' opinion, the books include and focus on the skills that the students need to practice, and that they provide an appropriate balance of the four language skills. Teachers seemed to agree that the textbooks paid attention to sub-skills, such as listening for gist, note-taking, skimming for information, and highlights and practices natural pronunciation (i.e., stress and intonation). Moreover, the practice of individual skills was integrated into the practice of other skills. Table 5 provides evidence for the significance of the results (sig. = .9 > α = .05).

Table 5: One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 21.04					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
S	.007	22	.994	.00348	-1.0105	1.0174

The fifth category concerned the type of language used in the series. Most teachers, as shown by the outcomes of the study, were of the same belief that the language used in the textbooks is authentic, i.e., like real-life English, and is at the right level of students' English ability. To most teachers the progression of grammar points and vocabulary items is appropriate, and the language functions exemplify English that the students will be likely to use. Table 6 provides evidence for the significance of the results (sig. = .9 > α = .05).

Table 6: One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 23.65					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
LTYPE	.004	22	.997	.00217	-1.1684	1.1728

The sixth category discussed the subject and content of the series. This category was moderately favored by teachers. Subjects were of the opinion that the subject and content of the textbook is not completely relevant to students' needs as English language learners. The reason may be the fact that in every class there are different students with different needs, and it seems very improbable, if not impossible, for a teacher to be able to satisfy all his/her students' needs. In addition they contended that the subject and content of the textbooks can be more realistic, interesting, challenging, and motivating. They also believed that to some extent the series suffer from cultural bias and negative stereotypes. Table 7 provides evidence for the significance of the results (sig. = .9 > α = .05).

Table 7: One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 19.78					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
SC	.006	22	.995	.00261	-.9003	.9055

The last item of the questionnaire was the conclusion of the questionnaire. Most teachers in general believed that the series is appropriate for the language learning aims of their institutions. Table 8 provides evidence for the significance of the results (sig. = .9 > α = .05).

Table 8: One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 15.69					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
C	.014	22	.989	.00565	-.8336	.8449

To answer the second question of the study, the subcategories of the questionnaire were ranked based on the percentage of satisfaction. The purpose was to figure out which category the teachers were more satisfied with. The results are shown below (Table 9).

Table 9: Percentage of Satisfaction

Category	Percentage of Satisfaction	Rank
Practical Considerations	84.63	1
Layout and Design	63.90	6
Activities	84.63	1
Skills	70.13	4
Language Type	78.83	2
Subject and Content	65.93	5
Conclusion	78.45	3

As table 2 clarifies the categories which the teachers were the happiest with are the activities and practical considerations. Language type takes the second place which shows the appropriateness of the language used in the textbooks, i.e., like real-life English, and at the right level of students' English ability. To most teachers the progression of grammar points and vocabulary items is appropriate, and the language functions exemplify English that the students will be likely to use. Conclusion and skills, subject and content are ranked 3-5 respectively. A potential problem with the textbook's subject matter and social content relates to the presentation of the target language culture. In this regard Alptekin (1993) suggests that the inclusion of foreign subject matter and social constructs in ELT textbooks has the potential to create comprehension problems or other serious cultural misunderstanding due to the fact that the students might lack proper schemata to interpret these foreign concepts correctly. Nevertheless, a simple explanation given by the teacher can prevent miscomprehension of the subject matter and content. Moreover if activities seem redundant, de-motivating, and uninteresting the experienced teacher should quickly modify and adopt it to suit the needs of their particular students; this should not be considered as a serious problem. The category which the teachers were the least satisfied with is the layout and design of the series.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that 'American English File' series appears to be an effective device for language teachers to obtain their aims as well as the language institutes' aims. Furthermore, the textbooks seem suitable for different classes with different number of students and sexes. In other words, they fit small, medium, homogeneous, and coeducational classes.

A strong point of the book is that they seem to increase the students' interest and motivation to continue their English language study. This can be considered as a great advantage of 'American English File' series, since there is no doubt that students' motivation is one of the most important factors which encourage them to learn any kind of material.

It is apparent that there are cultural differences among different people from different nations. These cultural differences are brought into language learning classes and may hinder language learning. Any kind of textbook may portray points and materials which may be acceptable to some cultures but contradict some others. 'American English File' series is not an exception in this respect. It does portray some points and materials which are not in harmony with Iranian students' culture, customs, and traditions.

Results suggest that most of the teachers were of the same belief in their desire to teach the series again. In general, they could be considered satisfied with the series and had a positive attitude towards the series. To conclude the books seem to be a multi-purpose source which can be safely used in different classes, and can be considered as a motivating source for students to aid them achieve their learning goals.

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