TEFL TEXTBOOK EVALUATION

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ABSTRACT

ELT textbooks play a major 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. Arguments have encompassed both the potential and the limitations of materials for guiding students through the learning process and curriculum as well as the needs and preferences of teachers who are using textbooks. Other issues that have arisen 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 subject matter, and cultural components. Whether or not one accepts the value of textbooks, it must surely be with the qualification that they are of an acceptable standard or level of quality and appropriate to the learners for whom they are being used. It is, therefore, essential that we apply a wide variety of relevant and contextually appropriate criteria for the evaluation of the textbooks that we use in our language classrooms. This study, therefore, aims to examine the advantages and disadvantages of one type of TEFL materials, English language textbook “Top Notch”, used in universities and institutes in Iran. In this analysis, the course book was evaluated in term of ‘layout and design, activities and tasks, language type, subject, content and skills and whole aspect’. The purpose of this research project was to determine the overall pedagogical value and suitability of the book.

Keywords: EFL, course books/textbooks, material, evaluation of a course book

Introduction

Instructional materials take two forms: Printed ones, such as textbook, workbook, teacher’s guide, etc., and non-print ones, such as audiotapes, videotapes, audiobooks and other computer-based materials. They are considered as key components in most TEFL programs. In fact, textbooks, which are the primary agents of conveying knowledge to the learners, are the mostly used teaching and learning materials for both teachers and the learners. They do not only provide a framework for teachers and help them in achieving the goals of the course, but also would serve as a guide to the teacher when conducting lessons (Tok, 2010). A textbook, therefore, influences learners’ and performance throughout the course. We cannot deny the fact that when learners like their textbooks, they like the course as well and become active participants to the lesson. The textbook is an important source of input and a great opportunity for EFL learners to communicate in the
target language. Since most of the English teachers in Iran use textbooks in their classrooms, it is important to evaluate those textbooks to see their relevance to their specific learner groups.

**The Role of Textbooks in EFL Classrooms**

English language instruction has many important components but the essential components of many EFL classrooms and programs are the textbooks and instruction materials that are often used by language instructors. Selecting textbooks involves matching the material to the context where it is going to be used, and many specialists argue that no textbook that is designed for a general market will be completely appropriate and suitable for a particular group of learners. As Grant (1987, cited in Tok, 2010) claims no perfect book exists, yet the goal in this regard would be to find the best possible one that fits to a particular learner group. Sheldon (1988) suggests that textbooks do not only represent the visible heart of any ELT program, but also offer considerable advantages for both students and the teachers when they are being used in ESL/EFL classrooms. He believes that textbooks are an effective resource for self-directed learning, an effective source for presentational material, a source of ideas and activities, and a syllabus where they reflect pre-determined learning objectives, and support for less experienced teachers who are yet to gain confidence. In addition to that, Hycroft (1998 cited in Tok, 2010) states that one of the primary advantage of using textbooks is that they are psychologically essential for students since their progress and achievement can be measured concretely when we use them. Hutchinson and Torres (1994) argue that the textbook has a very important and a positive part to play in teaching and learning of English. They state that textbooks provide the necessary input into classroom lessons through different activities, readings and explanations. Thus, they will always survive on the grounds that they meet certain needs.

Richards (2001, cited in Inal, 2006) argues that without textbooks, a program may have no impact; therefore, these materials provide structure and a syllabus for the course. Besides, the use of a textbook in a program can guarantee that students in different classes will receive a similar content and thus, can be evaluated in the same way. In other words, textbooks provide the standards in instruction. Moreover, they include a variety of learning resources such as workbooks, CDs, etc., which makes the learning environment interesting and enjoyable for the learners.

**Why Textbook Evaluation?**

While many researchers, as mentioned above, state the extensive benefits of using ESL/EFL textbooks, there are many other practitioners who do not necessarily accept this view. Allwright (1982, cited in Inal, 2006), for instance, suggests that textbooks are too inflexible and they reflect the pedagogic, psychological, and linguistic preferences and biases of their authors.
Some proponents of authentic classroom language models have argued that the problems with many textbooks are not necessarily the fact that they are culturally or socially biased, but that they are artificial in their presentation of the target language (Levis, 1999; Cathcart, 1989, cited in Tok, 2010). They, therefore, argue that the major characteristics of authentic real-life examples of both spoken and written discourse must be introduced to the learners. They further contend that the scripted unauthentic language found in many textbooks does not lead to communicative practice, but instead can lead to an oversimplification of language and unrealistic views of real-life situations. One point which should be mentioned here is that whether one believes that textbooks are too inflexible and biased to be used directly as instructional material or that they actually help teaching and learning, one cannot deny the fact that textbooks still maintain enormous popularity.

In order to use the textbooks effectively, it is essential for the practitioners to evaluate the materials since evaluation plays a key role in education and can provide valuable information. In other words, if we accept the value of textbooks in ELT, then we must be sure of usefulness of the textbooks, and their appropriateness for the context and people with whom they are being used. Sheldon (1988) has offered several reasons for textbook evaluation. He suggests that the selection of an ELT textbook often signals an important administrative and educational decision in which there is considerable professional, financial, or even political investment. A thorough evaluation, therefore, would enable the teaching staff of a specific institution to discriminate between all of the available textbooks on the market. Moreover, it would provide for a sense of familiarity with a book’s content thus assisting educators in identifying the particular strengths and shortcomings in textbooks already in use.

The Textbook Evaluation Design

Scholars in textbook evaluation, such as Sheldon (1988), state that evaluation checklists should cover some criteria related to characteristics of textbooks such as layout, organization, methodology, aims, and the degree to which a set of materials is not only teachable, but also fits to the needs of the teachers’ approaches as well as the organization’s general curriculum. Besides, textbook evaluations should include criteria related to gender and cultural components and 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.

Ellis (1997) distinguishes three types of materials evaluation, namely, predictive or pre-use evaluation, in-use evaluation, and retrospective evaluation. A predictive evaluation is designed to examine the future or potential performance of a textbook and to make a decision regarding what materials to use. Teachers who are required to carry out a predictive evaluation determine which materials are best suited to their purposes. The other type of textbook evaluation is the in-use evaluation designed to examine material that is currently being used. Once the materials have been used, further evaluation may be conducted to find out whether the materials have worked out for them, and this type of
evaluation is called *retrospective* or *post-use* evaluation. All of these types of evaluation help teachers make appropriate judgment concerning the effectiveness of their teaching including the materials they used.

This paper reports on an analysis of a textbook titled “Top Notch” that is being used by many English classes in the universities and institutes EFL programs. The purpose of this study is to assess the overall effectiveness of this intermediate-level textbook.

**Method**

To analyze two units (6 & 7) of Top Notch 2B in detail, and the whole book in general the following criteria were considered:

- layout and design,
- range and balance of activities,
- skills appropriateness and integration,
- social and cultural considerations, and
- subject content, and language types represented in the textbook.

The above-mentioned criteria were elicited from “Teacher Textbook Evaluation Scale” (TTES) which was designed by Sung Kyun Kwan University in 2000 (cited in Tok, 2010). This scale consists of 30 items, covering 6 dimensions.

**Findings**

1. **The Textbook Value, Content, and Methodology**

One important factor that relates to the choosing of a textbook is cost. While some might feel that price is not necessarily an important factor in textbook evaluation the fact that most EFL textbooks are published in wealthy English-speaking nations such as the United States but used in many less-developed nations suggests that price should play a pertinent role in textbook selection. This is particularly the case in countries such as Iran in which the economic conditions are somewhat less than desirable and/or in cases such as this in which many students with limited incomes are required to purchase the books for a mandatory foreign language course. It is important to note that in this case Top Notch is not too costly.

Another factor would be availability. In order for a textbook to be purchasable, for instance, it must be currently in print and readily available. It seems that Top Notch doesn’t meet this requirement for it is a new book that has been published in Iran since 2007 but students can hardly find it on the market. The reason is that it is available for institutes only.
A final criterion in this part is the author’s approach to teaching methodology. Brown (1995) cited in Tok (2010) suggest that it is absolutely essential in evaluating any textbook to determine whether or not its methodology will reinforce the institutional aims as well as conform to the classroom context. The simplest and quickest route for initially discovering a textbook’s theoretical premises and methodological underpinnings is to examine its back cover. A closer examination of Top Notch 2B reveals that the writers (Joan Saslow, and Allen Ascher) claim to adhere to the 'Communicative Approach' and the textbook features a multi-skills curriculum and follows a topical/functional format. The book also tends to focus on both accurate and fluent communication, the promotion of integrated language-skills practice, and the inclusion of topical themes, learner-supportive grammar, as well as high-impact vocabulary syllabus. Also particular emphasis is placed on natural and authentic communication, both receptively and productively, with the goal of establishing communicative competence. Moreover, many of the activities such as information-gap tasks and role-playing activities are intended to facilitate learning through genuine interaction and the language skills and sub-skills are presented and practiced through the use of both top-down and bottom-up processing strategies. It can, therefore, be concluded that the methodology employed by the authors of Top Notch is appropriate for the learners and teachers.

2. Layout and Design
2.1. Overall Organization of Textbook

The layout and design of a textbook can be considered as its organization and presentation of language items and activities (Inal, 2006). This course book is divided into ten units, and each unit is divided into four lessons ending with a 'Checkpoint and Wrap-up' section. Unit goals and clear learning objectives are given at the beginning of each unit, and a detailed preview of topics, functions, and skills is presented, followed by a discussion section for brain storming and prior knowledge activation. The course components are also effectively and clearly organized around specific topics such as culture, travel, customs around the world, jobs, telephone messages, etc.

Additional useful components of the overall layout and design of Top Notch 2 are individual words, phrases and expressions. The vocabulary lists, glossaries, and references are all very helpful supplementary aides for students while the activities at the end of the book provide them with further opportunities to use the language points from each particular unit in a meaningful manner.

2.2. Layout and Design of Each Unit

With respect to each individual unit, units 6 and 7, the content is organized as follows:

1. A two-page introduction which contains topic preview that introduces the unit topic and prepares learners for the four lessons in the unit, and a warm up listening task. These two sections activate learners’ schemata of content, grammar, and vocabulary.
2. Each of the four, two-page lessons begins with a conversation model based on the same background that is designed to cover a range of skills such as listening for specific information and making inferences followed by vocabulary section.

3. A pair work conversation which should be completed by the learners through an attached vocabulary box designed for the students to engage in role-playing and controlled speaking practice with a partner. Students begin by practicing the dialogue just as it is presented in the text and on the accompanying CD. During the next phase they are gradually expected to become more creative with the dialog by making substitutions from the provided choices, adding their own ideas, and then finally by closing the book and having a similar conversation of their own.

4. A grammar box which describes some grammatical points related to the topic of the unit.

This organization and sequencing of each unit in Top Notch 2 is intended to recycle or reinforce specific grammatical structures and vocabulary items as well as various functions in an effort to assist learners to store them in long-term memory. The most common form of recycling is for specific items to be encountered in a structured way on several occasions in different contexts. In this way learners are encouraged to learn various items through progressive exposure, and by meeting them in a number of contexts they can develop an increasing understanding of their meaning. It should be mentioned that in Top Notch, students conclude each class session with a controlled or free practice activity that demonstrates their ability to use new vocabulary, grammar, and social language. One of the apparent strong points of this book is that the design and organization of every unit is not identical to the next. This tends to make the book interesting and not redundant even after recycling.

2.3. Activities and Tasks

A number of theorists have advocated the cognitive value of student-student/social interaction for promoting learning. Levis (1999), for example, cites five benefits of interactive group activities in comparison with teacher-fronted whole class instruction. These include increased quantities of students' language use; enhanced quality of the language students use; more opportunities to individualize instruction; a less threatening environment in which to use the language; and greater motivation for learning. In addition, peer interaction gives students the opportunity to encounter ideas and perceptions that differ from their own as well as the opportunity to clarify, elaborate, reorganize, and re-conceptualize information, express ideas, get feedback, and justify their claims (Bruning, Schraw, and Ronning, 1995, cited in Ellis, 2008).

As mentioned in the ‘design and layout’ section, every unit in Top Notch 2 is based on task-based learning, consciousness-raising, and discovery learning activities that are not only intended to introduce language forms in authentic data but also engage them in truly meaningful and effective communication such as negotiation of meaning. Also Top Notch 2 contains a wide variety of role-play and information-gap tasks that focus on fluency production as well as several open-ended discussion questions that allow students to personalize their responses, share information, and express their thoughts and experiences.
in English. Alternately, some exercises exemplify non-communicative situations that demand controlled responses, such as drilling, listing, comparing, matching and filling-in-the-blanks. Several researchers such as and Harmer (1996) suggest that a variation in activity types, tasks and interaction patterns such as these may not be particularly genuine or authentic but they are still effective in the sense that they play an important role in ultimately securing a balance of activities approach to language teaching and learning.

The activities contained in Top Notch2 were both motivating and interesting, and they generally promote meaningful exchanges and genuine communication in realistic contexts.

2.4. Skills

Top Notch2 is a multi-skills syllabus and therefore covers and integrates both productive (speaking and writing) and receptive skills (listening and reading). It can be stated that Top Notch2 provides an integrated balance of the four language skills. A more positive characteristic of the integrated syllabus within Top Notch2 is the fact that the linguistic elements of the textbook such as grammar and vocabulary items are closely connected to the skills-base. So, as the grammar elements in the textbook or course progresses and the vocabulary base becomes more demanding, the skills work will also become more demanding. A close examination of each unit, for instance, reveals that dialogues become more complex as the units progress. Similarly, reading texts become slightly longer while the discourse structure becomes more complex. In addition, comprehension questions check the students understanding of simple facts in early stages, but as the textbook progresses the questions start to require students to undertake more difficult tasks such as inferring meaning or extracting certain relevant information from a mass of less relevant information.

An analysis of receptive and productive skills in Top Notch2 reveals that receptive skills are taught by using top-down and bottom-up processing. They are used in this book for making predictions, extracting specific items (scanning), acquiring general information (skimming), extracting detailed information, recognizing function and discourse markers, and for inferring meaning from context.

Speaking skills are certainly a central focus of Top Notch2. Many elements in the syllabus focus on conversational fluency and the textbook contains plenty of opportunities for oral communication. Speaking practice takes place through the oral presentation and practice of new language items, in dialogue work, role plays, group work, and class activities. The more mechanical aspects of speaking are also occasionally covered in pronunciation practice. Much of the speaking practice can be found in the "Sound Bites", which are role-play exercises designed to introduce new structures and present functional and conversational expressions. Further speaking practice is found in the "Conversation Model" sections. These pair exercises and role-play activities build on the teaching points and increase the opportunities for individual practice. With respect to pronunciation, the results of this analysis demonstrate that this is one of the book’s major strong points. Each unit contains one exercise devoted to the teaching of word stress, sentence stress, and intonation.
Writing activities in Top Notch2 typically ask students to perform tasks of various kinds such as descriptions, narratives, postcards, etc.

2.5. Language Type and Content

This analysis also examined the content and it can be stated that the textbook encouraged students to use language that they had learned in order to engage in purposeful and genuine situations and to talk about themselves and their lives in a meaningful manner. In terms of vocabulary and pronunciation it is important to mention that although ‘Vocabulary’ and ‘Pronunciation’ sub-headings are separately presented in each unit, the former even often more than once, uses the introduced vocabulary in the same unit. Also in the following units, when the topic covered is appropriate for using the recently learned words and phrases, the previous vocabulary is recycled. New vocabulary is not only introduced in the ‘Vocabulary’ sub-headings, but also enriched by addition of new words and reinforced by repetition in all other areas of language skills, namely Conversation, Listening, Grammar, Reading, and Writing. A wide variety of practice opportunities are provided in the Interaction, Discussion, and Pair-Work sub-headings with an array of exercises such as using the new vocabulary, role-playing, filling-in the blanks, making sentences, and responding to questions. Extra words and phrases are introduced also in ‘Topic Preview’ sub-headings through explanatory pictures and graphic designs. For example, in Unit 7, forty four colors are introduced through a color chart in the preview sections. Vocabulary is reviewed in the ‘Checkpoint’ sections of each unit integrated with other skills.

Conclusion

Top Notch2 is a new addition to the vast array of ELT materials that are currently available on the market. While perhaps not as well-known as other prominent series of textbooks, Top Notch2 has many notable and worthwhile characteristics. For example, the entire textbook package is well conceived and it contains a wide variety of useful supplementary materials. The book is also very attractive and organized in a clear, logical, and coherent manner. This organization is designed with the goal of facilitating communicative competence. In addition, Top Notch2 reflects a multi-skills syllabus, and it manages to integrate the four language skills without neglecting other important aspects of ELT such as vocabulary development. In particular, receptive and productive skills are covered through a wide variety of beneficial teaching and learning strategies that are consistent with many fundamental principles of TEFL such as top-down and bottom-up listening and reading exercises. Vocabulary skills, on the other hand, are attended to through a variety of reliable techniques such as those devices that help students assign meaning and store words and phrases in their long-term memories. Despite its strengths, Top Notch2 has some shortcomings. Some of the activities, for instance, are repetitive, fail to encourage truly meaningful practice, promote realistic discourse. It is suggested that the inclusion of more consciousness-raising activities, genuine negotiation of meaning tasks,
and effective cooperative learning strategies would have improved this particular aspect of the book.

References


