

Authenticity of Iranian English Textbooks for Schools

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Abstract

Learning a new language depends on so many factors such as learners, teachers, environment, purpose of learning or teaching, and more importantly textbooks. Textbooks are a key component in most language programs. For most teachers, textbooks provide the foundation for the content of lessons, the balance of the skills taught, as well as the kinds of language practice the students engage in during class activities. This paper aims to evaluate the authenticity of the Iranian English textbooks at high school level. It is based on Dougills' textbook evaluation checklist. According to the feedback received from the teachers' and the students' responses, the home-made textbooks lack the authenticity of natural English in terms of content and presentation. They are short in the variety and attractiveness in the passages. The materials are not generally presented from the easy to hard order and they are mainly void of cultural and communicative points.

Keywords: CLT, Communicative skills, Evaluation, Iran, School English textbooks

1. Introduction

Before the mid-nineteenth century, it was common in Iran for education to be associated with religious institutions. The clergy assumed responsibility for instructing the youth in basic literacy and the fundamentals of religion. Knowledge of reading and writing was not considered necessary for the whole population, and thus education generally was restricted to the sons of the economic and political elite.

During the Pahlavi era (1925-79) the government implemented a number of policies aimed at modernizing the country and so expanded the education system. The entire public system was secular and for many years was based upon the French model. Its objective was to train Iranians for modern occupations in administration, management, science, and teaching languages (Iran-Society Index).

Learning a new language depends on so many factors such as the learners, the teachers, the environment in which the learning event is taking place, the purpose of learning, and more importantly the textbooks. There is no doubt that textbooks are an important resource for teachers in helping students learn a language. They are the foundation of school instruction and the primary source of information for students and teachers. Materials and textbooks serve as one of the main instruments for shaping knowledge, attitudes, and principles of the students (Nooreen & Arshad, 2010).

In Iran, textbooks serve as the basis for much of the language input learners receive and the language practice that takes place in the classroom. For most teachers, textbooks provide the foundation for the content of lessons, the

balance of the skills taught, as well as the kinds of language practice the students engage in during class activities. For the EFL learners, the textbook becomes the major source of contact they have with the language apart from the input provided by the teacher.

Iranian students study English for nearly seven years (3 years in secondary school, 3 years in high school and 1 year in Pre-university), yet the education they receive neither enables the students to attain full competence in using the English language nor helps them to interact with confidence. This research is focused on the three English textbooks which are used in three levels of the Iranian high schools. The framework of each book includes eight main parts (New Words, Reading, Write It Down, Speak Out, Language Functions, Pronunciation Practice, Vocabulary Review, and Vocabulary List). This study aims to see how far the prescribed textbooks can prepare learners to go with the language skills needed for a learner of English as a foreign language (EFL).

2. Literature Review

The relation between textbooks and language teaching is not something which has only recently been commented on. It has a long history because the quality of teaching and learning has always been of interest to all people in general. Keeping this source up-to-date requires educational materials receive evaluation and revision time and again. Sheldon (1988) has offered several reasons for textbook evaluation. He suggests that the selection of a language textbook often signals an important administrative and educational decision. A thorough evaluation, therefore, would enable the managerial and teaching staff of an institution to discriminate between all of the available textbooks on the market. Moreover, it could aid in identifying the particular strengths and weaknesses in textbooks already in use.

Hutchinson and Torres (1994, pp. 232) identify three ways in which textbooks can help in times of educational change: first as a vehicle for teacher and learner training; second, they provide support and relief from the burden of looking for materials; and third they give a complete image of what the change will look like. Evaluation of textbooks is also considered to function as a kind of educational judgment. Hutchinson and Waters (1987, pp. 96) believe evaluation is a matter of judging the fitness of something for a particular purpose.

Cunningsworth (1984) proposes a checklist of questions which summarizes the criteria for evaluation. Some questions in the checklist can be answered in polar terms or on a five point scale. Others require an evaluative or descriptive comment. Breen and Candlin (1987) provide a set of questions which they term the Guide. It is divided into two phases; the first poses some initial questions about the usefulness of the teaching materials in question and the second offers specific questions leading to a more searching analysis of the materials with particular learners and the actual classroom in mind.

The authenticity of textbooks is a significant issue. By authentic texts, it means that they are genuine instances of language use as opposed to exemplars devised especially for language teaching purposes. The question of authenticity emerged as an important issue within communicative language teaching (CLT) and in relation to notional/functional syllabuses, where emphasis was placed on ensuring that the classroom contained natural language behavior, with content identified as relevant to the learner through the process of needs analysis. Furthermore, a text should present the learners with language exposure similar to that enjoyed by native speakers (Johnson & Johnson, 1999, pp. 24).

Amalsaleh (2004) examined the representation of social factors in the three Iranian high school English textbooks following Van Leeuwen's model (1996). According to the results, the books demonstrated a deferential representation of social factors that tended to portray female as performers belonging to a home context and having limited job opportunities in the society. In particular, the Iranian English textbooks tended to shape 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. Finally, according to Yarmohammadi's (2002) evaluation based on a revised version of Tucker's model, the Iranian high school textbooks are not authentic; English and Persian names are used interchangeably and oral skills are ignored.

3. Objectives

This article aims to investigate the authenticity of the Iranian high school English textbooks (Birjandi *et al.*, 2009a; 2009b; 2009c) which are used at three levels of state high schools. They will be approached in terms of content and presentation following the framework, units, subject-matter and form based on Dougill's (1987) model (cited in Sheldon, 1987, pp. 29-36). In addition, they will be reviewed based on certain principles of CLT approach which try

to make real communication the focus of language learning

to create opportunities for communication, interaction and negotiation of meaning

to provide opportunities for learners to experiment and try out what they know

to provide opportunities for learners to develop both accuracy and fluency
to link the different skills of speaking, reading, listening, and writing
to link the learning of grammar to communicative tasks
to choose content that relates to students' lives and interests
to encourage students to personalize learning by applying what they have learned to their own lives (Razmjoo, 2007)

4. Method

The evaluation of a textbook is not simply browsing through the texts and then coming up with a judgment; it is a matter of teaching and re-teaching the very text several times and getting feedbacks from various teachers and learners. For the present research, Dougills' textbook evaluation checklist was used. It was distributed among 30 experienced English teachers who have already taught the three books. They were asked to give their opinions about the books based on the checklist and their own personal comments and suggestions. In addition, some of the items from the checklist were selected and given to 200 students at three grades of high school. Then the data were collected, compared with each other, and finally classified into two main groups: content, and presentation.

5. Findings

5.1 Content

One aspect of the present evaluation is in terms of the content which refers to all of the materials used to present new vocabulary items, grammar, and passages. In his evaluation, Dougill expresses concern regarding the use of subject matter that may be uninteresting. As to the readings in these three textbooks, a majority of the passages are generally short of adequate attraction and do not appeal to the students to give them the motive to "want" to discover things. Considering the age of the learners between 14 and 17, they prefer their readings to be full of fun and amazing topics. According to the findings, about 85 % of the girl students liked to have stories dealing with music and film stars, and other celebrities. About 90% of the boy students liked to have passages dealing with football players, internet games, and action movies.

One of the major tools of presenting knowledge lies in the appropriate context in which the characters are introducing new information. The Iranian learners are just reading the texts without actually diving in them. This diving-within requires interaction between the addressees and the addressers. They should identify themselves with certain elements of the content in order to clearly grasp the message of the texts. However, in these textbooks, there is no real interaction between people. And those that are given in the text are limited to very short dialogs. The Language Function section which is supposed to be the conversation part is so mechanical that it cannot lead the students into producing natural talk. There is no boy and girl interaction as part of a natural daily communication. The names used for the mini-role dialogs are mostly Iranian names, which prevents the learners from developing the sense of a foreign environment essential for language production. There are no cultural points, professional careers, or authentic events whether domestic or international to help the learners identify themselves with so that they can boost the confidence of language learning.

5.2 Presentation

A clear presentation of materials is an important aspect to allow the reader to accompany the book. Dougill's (1987) framework for evaluating English language teaching materials emphasizes the clarity of what students are expected to do at the end of each lesson. The framework also elaborates on how easy it is for the students to carry out what they are supposed to do in each lesson. In the textbooks reviewed, the purpose of the each lesson has not been predetermined and neither the students nor the teachers know where they are going to reach at the end of the book.

According to Griffiths (1995), the language used in the material should make it easy to divide the class into groups or pairs, to have role-play or dialogue activities, and to allow students to interact with each other. Well designed warm-up activities, pre-listening and pre-reading sections assist in the management of the textbook. These very important features are generally lacking in the Iranian high school English textbooks. If the focus of the language skill is on reading, activities should be prompted from authentic materials (magazines, newspaper articles, journals) accompanied by colorful visuals and well-illustrated materials.

Since these quality features are not found in the textbooks, it can be concluded that the presentation gave the impression that the material was not reader-friendly. According to Ansary and Babaii (2002), simple sentence patterns should be taught first, followed by the introduction of new structures based on the already-mastered simpler patterns. However, these books mostly seem to present harder grammatical topics before the easier ones. For example, according to the survey, the students could grasp the concept of past participle in present perfect tense much more easily than that in the passive voice, but they are taught the harder points earlier. Or embedded structures

which seem a bit hard to the students are introduced in the first grade of high school when the students are not very much familiar with English.

The visual appeal of materials is an important element in attracting student attention and maintaining interest. However, what is not very important in the preparation of English textbooks is giving due attention to the quality of paper, the design of pages and the variety of colors. Normally students are easily attracted to colorful pictures and glossy paper, but in the case of the Iranian English textbooks, there is nothing but pages with faded gray and clumsy drawings on the recycle-quality paper.

5.2.1 Audio-visual Aids

Nowadays, teachers alone cannot be very efficient. They should be equipped with some audio visual aids. Unfortunately, the textbooks are not accompanied by officially approved cassettes or CDs and the very few freelance materials available mostly skip the normality of natural English. The reader reads too slowly rather than giving a natural tone to the message in the format of a unified text. Furthermore, almost all of the audio-visual aids start with the explanation of vocabulary items with insufficient illustration. They deal with only one aspect of the words and that is the meaning. They fail to give a good share to the other components related to the phonological, semantic, syntactic, pragmatic, and collocational properties of the words.

5.2.2 Balance of the material

Although the reading skill, among others, seems to be the first priority in the design of the books, a big share of the lessons is devoted to grammar drills throughout these three books. About 60% of the content of each lesson is occupied with grammatical drills. This allocation seems to be unjustified as far as the findings of research on second language learning is concerned. Researchers have noticed the need for extensive vocabulary for reading, and grammatical knowledge is called upon in advanced levels of reading proficiency for complex and embedded structures as the last resort. As Lewis (1993: 17) said, "Vocabulary carries more of the meaning of a text than the grammar does."

According to Pollock (1997, pp. 5) "Grammar rules do not tell you what to say. Grammar rules tell you how to say something correctly". It is the word which is the heart of language and makes events sensible. "Without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (Wilkins, 1972, pp. 111). The choice of proper words in the appropriate situation demands a good knowledge of vocabulary domain so as to make speech natural and sensible and this is one of the most crucial shortcomings of the English book series where the learners can find no words related to daily communication to express love, friendship, eating and drinking, politics, sports, and even "polite" swear language which are part and parcel of natural speech.

According to Garinger (2002), the amount of practice provided in a textbook ought to be sufficient, balanced in their format, and should contain both controlled and free practice. Students' involvement in doing the exercises must be more than just a mechanical one. It should ensure that students will be able to generate language on their own outside the classroom as well. Considering these points, in the Iranian English textbooks, the amount of practice given to grammar not only lacks uniformity, but it also supersedes the focus on vocabulary which is the heart of language.

Generally, the activities in the textbooks are merely mechanical exercises that do not go beyond the classroom context. The content of the textbook is mostly dominated by such exercises as fill in the blanks, true or false statements, yes / no questions and simple comprehension exercises, leaving no room for producing language outside the classroom.

Since the advent of the Lexical Approach by Michael Lewis in 1993, the importance of integrating collocations in the syllabi of language learning has globally gained momentum, and many textbooks in the world received repeated revisions to cope with the new approach, while there is nothing changed in the Iranian English textbooks because they were produced in 1991 and year in year out they were just re-published without any substantial revision.

6. Discussion

Krashen (2004) introduced the term Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) as the foundation for reading proficiency. He has suggested that it is very important to encourage the learners to read as much as possible, but at the same time, it should be taken into consideration that the learners must be free to choose their own texts and at the same time, interesting books should be provided by the teachers. Generally, based on Dougill's checklist, and the data collected from the survey, it was found that the ultimate goals of the curriculum are not clearly set in the three English textbooks. The authors of the books do not explicitly specify the short term and long term objectives. The teachers actually disagree about what teaching methodology to employ, which skills and psycholinguistic abilities to emphasize, and what items they should include in their exams (Jahangard, 2007). The framework does not define what the students are supposed to do in each lesson, and what destination they are going to reach in the long run. The students do not feel at home with the books because the passages do not appeal to them either in terms of the content or with respect to the

appearance. The texts are monotonous and free from modern genres. The students do not know why they are reading a certain text, especially when the classroom activities do not correspond with the ideas in the passages. Some of the grammatical points which are discussed in the grammar part have not already been introduced in the passages and so the students have to learn them in isolation or the teacher has to improvise an appropriate situation to teach those points. The conversation section is so mechanical that both the teacher and the students wish to skip it.

One of the fundamental principles in teaching English especially that of CLT is keeping a balance in presenting a variety of language skills and the integration, and presentation of all the four language skills (Gower et al., 2005), because language learning is not learning the language skills solely and separately from each other (Littlewood 1981). On the contrary, it is a combination of all of them. These books are, however, short of offering some of the skills. There is no sign of presenting the listening and writing practice. Furthermore, mere drills cannot equip the learners to communicate and the students should be provided with opportunities to use the language creatively (Nunan, 1999). Besides, according to Harmer (1991, pp. 59), a more effective – and less frightening – way of presenting form is to let the students see/or hear the new language, and drawing their attention in a number of different ways to the grammatical elements of which it is made.

Very few of the vocabulary items that are introduced in the passages are practiced in the exercises, so generally there is no reinforcement to let the students learn the new words. Advocates of CLT suggest that introducing new words needs to be practiced within a known context. By embedding new words in a plausible context, they are more likely to be recognized, more likely to be related to existing knowledge and are more easily accessed in memory. The best way of teaching vocabulary is by presenting them within a context along with appropriate illustrations. This can make the process of learning more authentic (Dahmardeh, 2004).

There is a lot of discussion among scholars e.g. Chastain (1988), McGrath (2002) and many others who strongly support the idea of teaching the culture of a foreign language that is taught. However, the textbooks do not include anything about the culture of English speaking countries. For instance, all the names or situations that are presented in the textbooks are Iranian. Whatever the reason, it is a major barrier to CLT.

7. Conclusion

Language teaching is something more complicated than just dealing with tasks and activities to prepare the learners to overcome the problems they encounter in real life. In order to achieve a degree of communicative ability, it is, therefore, necessary to expose learners to conditions in which the integration of language skills and the development of cognitive style occur. Based on the findings, the main objectives of the three high school English textbook for Iranian schools is to concentrate on reading comprehension, teaching the students how to apply words in sentences correctly, and presenting some phonetic symbols and pronunciation. As a whole there are, however, many inconsistencies between the learners' needs, and the materials of the textbooks.

When books remain unchanged for years and years, the students do not feel it necessary to look for answers because they can just copy and paste from the old books. This kills the sense of innovation and creativity in the teachers in two aspects. On the one hand, the teachers do not need to make new genuine questions for the test, because they have already exhausted all the questions in the past twenty years. On the other hand, the teachers do not feel it necessary to stay updated. They have memorized every corner of the teaching material and their knowledge is at stake of decline now, because there is no challenge for discovery and learning new things. The arrangement of the learning materials, even the degree of use of the vocabulary and grammatical points, and the appearance of the book are in need of grave attention.

Since the time when these books were compiled, the learners' needs and tastes have undergone dramatic changes. Therefore, it is better to include texts based on needs analysis of the young learners. When the learners are mentally attracted to the content, they can learn other things related to it much more easily because the content is appealing to them and they can learn language less stressfully. Furthermore, it is necessary for anybody to know what is happening in other cultures, how people behave, react, use gestures to convey messages and what complications may happen if they use a wrong system of communication with others. I strongly believe a suitable textbook is one that can establish a link between the world outside and the world inside the mind of the reader. And this is what the Iranian English textbooks fail to fulfill at present.

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