

An Evaluation of Merits and Demerits of Iranian First Year High School English Textbook

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Abstract

Despite the effects of new technologies, textbooks will certainly continue to play an important role in the process of language teaching and learning. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the English textbook which is taught in Iranian first grade high schools. For this purpose, the weaknesses and strengths of the English textbook are explained using 13 criteria which have been drawn on various checklists. The study was carried out at four schools of Tabriz, Iran. The data were obtained from a total of 126 language students, both female and male. It was collected through a questionnaire with 34 close-ended questions which were related to the seven sections of the book including the layout or physical make-up, vocabulary, topics and content, grammar points and exercises, language skills, pronunciation practice, language function, and social and cultural activities. Quantitative data were analyzed via SPSS. Meanwhile, qualitative data which were obtained through interviews with teachers and students were analyzed interpretatively. The results show that this book cannot meet the Iranian students' and teachers' needs and wants. It can be concluded that the English book 1 is grammar-based. So, the writers of the book had better modify it by employing more communicative tasks in order to motivation both teachers and students.

Keywords: textbook, criteria, evaluation, form, content

1. Introduction

Today, most of the people in the world use English as a foreign or a second language. Many of them acquire English language with the intention of being successful in education, improving their knowledge, and developing their skills, for their progress in this field depends on their ability to communicate in English. To this end, one of the abilities which has been emphasized is the ability to read and comprehend the foreign language. For this reason, in Iran, the main focus has been on the development of the reading comprehension ability. Furthermore, careful examination of Iran and other developing countries' educational system shows the great value of books and other written materials. In order to make the educational programs more successful, teachers must make judgment regarding the suitability of textbooks for their students' needs and wants. Therefore, making assessment is an individual way of obtaining the necessary information. This assessment should demonstrate the quality of a textbook and aid learners to acquire particular thoughts and skills and succeed in the required objectives. As Rea-Dickens and Germaine (1992) state, evaluation is a new idea which is continuously changing in order to try to find out the effectiveness of the available activities. This study gives students and teachers some hints about language teaching and learning. And the result of the current study might be worthwhile for students, teachers, and those who are, directly or indirectly, involved in the process of material development.

2. Review of Literature

Textbooks are helpful and useful means to students in the classroom. Students can use textbooks as organized resources to review and reinforce their learning. The structure of a textbook, which can generally include table of contents, chapter headings and subheadings, illustrations, and definitions help students become actively engaged in the learning process. High quality photographs and other visuals encourage students to spend time reading a textbook. If teachers do not use a textbook, they often rely on outside materials which may not be appropriate for certain ages or grade levels and which may contain complicated phrases or words.

In Iranian context, as an EFL teaching situation, sometimes it is stressed that a textbook is a reference with complete series of materials and activities from which the most suitable or useful issues can be selected. Regarding this aspect of a textbook, as a reference, McGrath (2006, p. 174) believes that “A textbook is like oil in cooking – a useful base ingredient. Textbooks are like ladies’ handbags. Because we can take what we need from them and ladies tend to take handbags wherever they go”. Richards (1993, p. 49) also considers “textbooks as resource books rather than coursebooks”. Regarding the role of textbooks, Cortazzi and Jin (1999) believe that ELT textbooks carry out different functions. In their opinion, a textbook is indeed a teacher, a map, a resource, a trainer, an authority, a restrictor, and an ideology. In addition, McGrath (2006, p. 174) divides a textbook into four topics: “Guidance, Support, Resource, and Constraint”. A textbook is a teacher in a way that it includes materials which directly teach English to students. The relationship between a textbook and a teacher is that both of them attempt to seek students’ needs. Harper (2011, p. 7) contends that “Good textbooks are the result of many years of experience and ... much research and discussion with teachers, consultants and publishers”. It can also be seen as a map through the provision of a revision of cultural components and as a structured program of linguistics, by giving information to teachers and learners and making it possible for them to see the grounds to be included and to briefly describe the route taken in earlier lessons. McGrath (2006, p. 175) states that “A coursebook is a map and as such can be deceptive in its apparent simplicity of direction and explanation”. He adds that “A textbook is like a pair of shoes. It takes time to choose one that you feel comfortable to wear for a long time. A bad pair will kill you.... A good one will give you confidence to run, to jump...”.

2.1 The Development of English Textbooks

The publication of the first English textbooks for Iranian high school students goes back to 1937. For two decades, textbooks such as *Essential English* (Eckersley, 1953), *Oxford Series* (Hornby, 1954), *Speak English* (Dorry, 1959), and *Modern English* (Dorry, 1961) were commonly used. Two new series of locally produced English language textbooks have been used in Iranian high schools since 1970; *Graded English* books published by the Ministry of Education in 1970 and *Right Path to English* books by Birjandi, Nowrouzi, and Mahmoudi in 2002. They include three textbooks for the first three grades of high school and one for pre-university grade.

2.2 Textbook Selection

Any judgment about textbook selection will influence the general classroom activities, teachers, and students. It is certainly one of the most important judgments which needs attention of EFL educators. Cunningsworth (1995, p. 7) believes that “we should be confident that careful selection is made and that the selected materials closely reflect the needs of the learners, the aims, methods, and values of the teaching program”. Selecting suitable resources are more important. Researchers have supported different processes to textbook selection (Skierso, 1991; Ur, 1996), but actually, the process may be influenced by irrelevant factors such as personal favorites. There is a strong connection between the evaluation of textbooks and the selection of textbooks. Evaluation makes the selection possible and deals with decision-making procedure. In this regard, Sheldon (1988, p. 237) contends that:

The selection of a particular core volume signals an executive educational decision in which there is considerable professional, financial and even political investment. This high profile means that the definition and application of systematic criteria for assessing course books are vital.

According to Garinger (2002, p. 1), in the selection of ESL textbooks, one possible method is evaluating the choices on the basis of “program issues, going from broad (e.g., goals and curriculum) to specific (e.g., exercises and activities)”. Actually, a little more consideration and use of an evaluation checklist can lead to a more regular and systematic textbooks. So, textbook selection checklist can be used as an instrument to help ESL teachers who are making decision and judging which textbooks can be appropriate for their classrooms.

2.3 Textbook Evaluation

It is required that textbooks to be evaluated at every stage of the usage in order to find their deficiencies and improve them. Textbook evaluation consists of many closely related parts and complex issues, and many factors are involved in the failure or success of a textbook. Meanwhile, these factors influence the evaluation criteria. In ELT classes, teachers mostly use a textbook. So, before and after publishing a high school book, a number of teachers should study and provide their comments on it, as it is possible that the author has neglected or does not know some points and after a period of time and being taught in the class, textbooks’ merits and demerits appear. In this way, the writer will be able to improve the book’s shortages and create more effective textbook before instruction. According to Richards (2007, p. 256), “the main criterion for textbook evaluation is that they should be suitable and ideal in a particular situation and with some particular students”. Therefore, teachers should select supplementary materials on the basis of their own certain needs and of their own specific instructional

situation. So, in order to reveal a textbook's drawbacks and revise it, each textbook should be evaluated from time to time. As Zohrabi (2011, p. 214) emphasizes "material evaluation should be the top priority of any curriculum." In evaluating a textbook, we examine it to get an overview of its possibilities, and seek its virtues, weaknesses, and significant points.

2.4 Evaluation Checklists

A checklist is the use of skills or behaviors in evaluating or measuring behavior that an observer checks. The evaluator can develop a list of universal criteria to conduct an assessment. Universal criteria can be used by everyone in everywhere for any language learning materials. In order to evaluate Iranian senior high school textbooks, a new checklist might be produced. Before making a decision to create this checklist, numerous factors should be taken into account. First, one should think about the created lists, further their remarkable features, and use the common parts in the new list. The second factor is that, in selecting the criteria, one should be able to balance both the theoretical and practical concerns. A checklist might be flexible enough to allow different evaluators to use it in various situations. All checklists should be coherent, systematic (e.g. categories and subcategories), and useful to help the evaluator to do a specific evaluation.

3. Design of the Study

The use of mixed method approach, a combination of both quantitative and qualitative dimension of data collection, is the major strength of this research design. The use of multiple data collection methods helped to eliminate biases that might result from relying exclusively on one data collection method. The quantitative data were collected through close-ended questionnaires and the qualitative data were collected through interviews.

3.1 Context of the Study

The study was conducted in Tabriz, Iran. The participants were selected from four schools, namely Ehsan, Fatemeh Zahra, Tohid, and Farzaneghan High schools. It should be mentioned that three of these schools were for girls and one school was for boys.

3.2 The Textbook

The material used for the present study is one of the four locally produced series of English language textbooks which are used in Iranian high schools and which have been published under the supervision of the Ministry of Education in Iran. In order to be more specific, the researchers selected and focused on the English book which is taught in the first grade of Iranian high school and which has been written by Birjandi, Soheili, Noruzi, and Mahmodi in 2006. This book has been designed to meet the Iranian EFL students' needs at this level of education.

3.3 Participants of the Study

Cunningsworth (1995) believes that the most successful and effective procedures for the evaluation of the textbooks is to discuss their users' views. Since the main users of the textbooks are the students and teachers, therefore, their opinions toward textbooks were collected. The participants of this study were second grade high school English language students and high school experienced English language teachers. Table 1 presents the characteristics of participants on the basis of gender.

Table 1. The frequency distribution and frequency percentage of boy and girl students

	No.	Percentage	Reliable percentage	Accumulation percentage
Boys	25	19.8	19.8	19.8
Girls	101	80.2	180.2	100.0
Total	126	100.0	100.0	

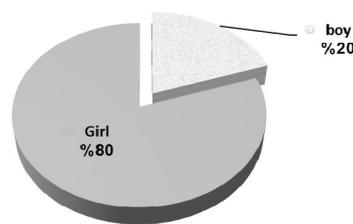


Figure 1. Individual frequency on the basis of gender

As it is illustrated in this figure, among the total of 126 participants, about 20% of them were males and 80% were females.

3.4 Students

The number of students who participated in the study was 126. This number of high school students was selected from four high schools. The age range of all the students who took part in this research was between 14 and 15.

3.5 Teachers

The teachers (n=5) were both male and female from four high schools and all of them had over five years of teaching experience. These five teachers were between 38 – 50 years old. Two of these teachers had nineteen years of teaching experience. Also, the other three teachers had taught English for at least five years. Figure 3.2 illustrates the individual frequency on the basis of their position. The majority of the participants (97%) in this study were students and only 3% were teachers.

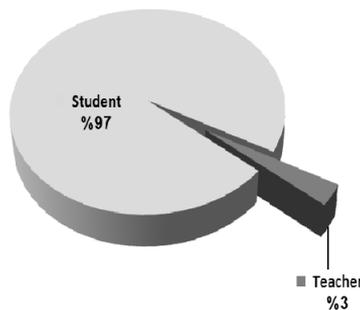


Figure 2. Individual frequency on the basis of their position

3.6 Instruments

The data collection tools used in this research included a questionnaire and an interview. For this purpose, a questionnaire was designed based on the objectives of the study. The questionnaires were used in order to gain insights into the students' perceived needs, the experienced teachers' expectations of the book, and other relevant details. The second instrument was the interview. The interviews were conducted with the teachers and students.

3.7 Evaluation Criteria

The present study was based on 13 criteria which are as follows:

- 1- Explicit statement of the objectives in the introduction and their implementation in the material.
- 2- Good vocabulary explanation and practice.
- 3- Approaches educationally and socially acceptable to target community.
- 4- Periodic review and test sections.
- 5- Appropriate visual materials available.
- 6- Interesting topics and tasks.
- 7- Clear instructions.
- 8- Clear attractive layout, print easy to read.
- 9- Content clearly organized and graded.
- 10- Plenty of authentic language.
- 11- Good grammar presentation and practice.
- 12- Fluency practice in all four skills.
- 13- Encouraging learners to develop own learning strategies and to become independent in their learning.

3.8 Analysis of the Questionnaires

In order to analyze the students' responses to the questionnaires, all of the responses were quantified. To make the analysis easier, there was a need to group the items according to the related topics. These topics were expressed in a simple and direct way and they gave a clear picture of the answers given to the 34 items of the questionnaire. The items were grouped into eight sections including physical make-up, vocabulary items, topics and contents, grammar points and exercises, language skills, pronunciation practice, language functions, and social and cultural activities. Then, the information which was collected with the questionnaire was analyzed through SPSS. First, the collected data was entered in the Excel software. After that, the data was entered into SPSS and the frequencies, means, standard deviations of the individual items were calculated and analyzed with this program to find realized needs of students and expectations of the teachers.

3.9 Analysis of the Interviews

After collecting the interview data, they were analyzed manually. The interviewees' answers and their suggestions for the improvement of the textbook were translated into English for further analysis. Then, the collected information was arranged on the basis of relevant topics and subjects. Finally, the summary of the findings of the interviewees' responses were categorized in ten short statements. The following statements illustrate the major views of the students and teachers. The major findings of the interviewees' responses led us to conclude that the English book 1 is not desirable and effective for the learners needs:

- 1- What are your aims and final goals which you would like to achieve at the end of educational year? All the participants expected to achieve proficiency in the communication at the end of their education.
- 2- Are there any supplementary materials, like cassettes, books, etc., available to you? No, there are no instructional aids.
- 3- After teaching the current textbook, if you think that the students cannot speak up to an intermediate level, how will you change the textbook to make it suitable for such purposes? I can enhance communication through devoting part of the class time for communication, pair work, group work, use of short story, and speaking.
- 4- In your opinion, what is the main purpose of the first English textbook? Almost all of the interviewed participants believed that the main purpose of the English book 1 is to focus on the reading skill. Almost 80% of them believed that the focus was on writing skill.
- 5- What is/are the main problem(s) with this textbook (If there is any)? In this study, 60% of the participants believed that the English book 1 is not attractive enough. About 30% of them stated that this book is not age-appropriate. Approximately 80% of the participants stated that the book is not communicative enough. And finally, about 80% of them believed that only a small part of the book is dedicated to the listening and speaking skills.
- 6- How can we enhance the learning process? The majority of the participants believed that the authors of the textbook can enhance the learning process through the creation of variety and attractiveness in the book and use of supplementary materials and visual aids.
- 7- In teaching the textbook what aspect(s) of language (listening, writing, reading, and speaking) have/has been more emphasized? All of the participants (100%) believed that the textbook gives special attention to reading skill. About 80% of them also contended that the emphasis of the textbook 1 is on the writing skill.
- 8- If you were to grade the current English language textbook from 1 to 5 [awful (1), poor (2), not bad (3), good (4), excellent (5)] what mark will you give it? In sum, 35% of the participants gave poor score (2), 55% of them devoted not bad score (3), and only 10% gave the score of good (3).
- 9- What constraints did (do) you have in teaching the textbook? According to the answers given to this part, 35% of the participants stated the lack of instructional and visual aids; more than the average of them (70%) stated the lack of adequate time devoted for instruction of this book in the week; and 60% stated the lack of interesting and attractive pictures in the textbook.
- 10- How can we make the lessons more student-friendly? On the whole, 80% of the participants suggested the inclusion of interesting and pleasant topics related to the young learners. About 30% of them referred to the use of beautiful pictures, and 50% of them emphasized the use of attractive content in the textbook.

4. Summary of the Results

Considering the mean values, the mean value of the layout of the book was 3.02; vocabulary 3.31; grammar exercises 3.26; language skills 3.10 which includes reading skill ($m=3.17$), listening skill ($m=2.96$), writing skill

($m=3.22$), and speaking skill ($m=3.11$); pronunciation practice 3.20; language function, social and cultural activities 2.67. These values are to some extent median or are equaled with unsure in the intended spectrum. It is clear that, in spite of the little difference (significant or nonsignificant), none of these cases can be considered as a strength point of this book. Other issues such as listening skill, social activities, and culture can be counted as weak points of the book 1. This is because the target language culture is completely different from the Iranian culture and most writers such as McGrath (2002) and Chastain (1988) support the idea of teaching the culture of the target language.

As a whole, the results of this study revealed that in English book 1 the practice of the linguistic forms and reading skill are emphasized. The results of the survey indicate the insufficiency of listening and speaking exercises and students' limited chance to practice speaking in the class. This book also does not provide students with appropriate and useful expressions of target culture so that they can use them effectively and correctly to communicate with other people. To sum up, this textbook cannot meet the students' and the teachers' needs within the Iranian educational system. It is structure-based and ignores the communicative role of the language.

Regarding the listening skill, since only 13.82% of the students strongly agreed with the listening skill of the book 1, it can be reinforced through different techniques. According to the Iranian teachers' access to existing means, they can combine the two skills of reading and listening. In order to do this, nine passages of book could be read and recorded by native speakers of English. So, in every session of the class and before reading the text, the tape recorder can play the passage and the teacher can ask students to listen and answer some questions or discuss the topic. Therefore, they will progress in both skills. As Gower et al. (2005) believe, there should be a balance between varieties of language skills.

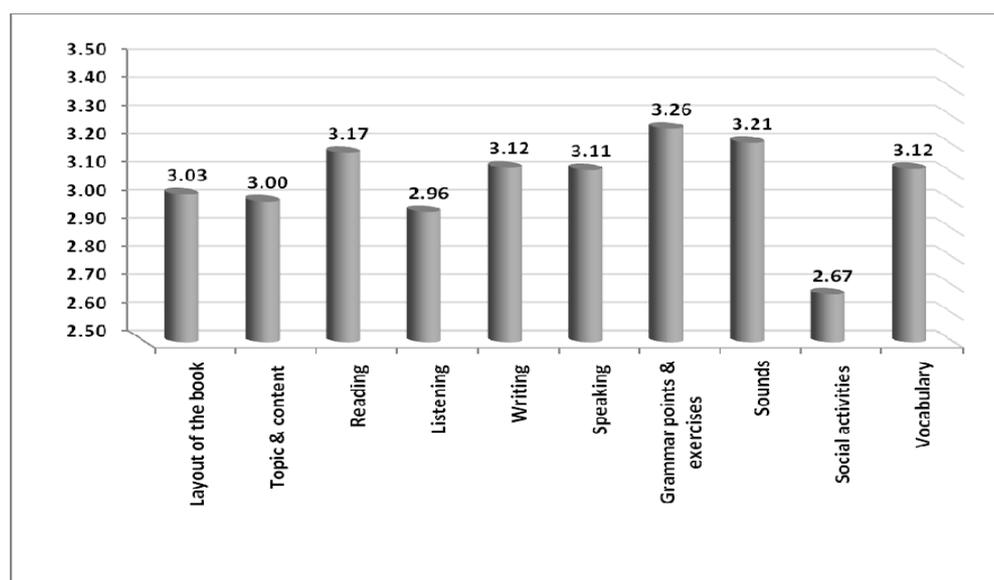


Figure 3. A comparison of the mean scores of various items of English book (1)

5. Findings

The results of students and teachers' responses to the questionnaire and interview items revealed that there were significant differences between the students and teachers' views. In some cases, their opinions were similar; however, their views were different. The main findings of these analyses are given in the following paragraphs:

The first section of questionnaire was related to the "Physical make-up" of the English book (1). The findings of data analysis in the previous section revealed that the "physical make-up or layout" of the book (1) with respect to the attractiveness and size was not desirable. There are not any visual aids, such as pictures, especially ones that help students to understand it and motivate them for better learning.

The second categorized section of questionnaire was related to the "Topics and content" section of the English book (1). According to the findings presented in the previous sections, the teachers and students had the same idea about the content of the textbook believing that its topics and content were undesirable. The results showed

that the content of the book should assist students to achieve the needed objectives.

The third categorized section of questionnaire was related to “Vocabulary” section of the English book (1). The results demonstrated that the teachers’ opinions toward the suitability of the vocabulary section were stronger than those of the students. The findings pointed out that vocabulary can be taught better within the context which can enable students to guess the meaning of the words.

The fourth section of the questionnaire was related to the “grammar points and exercises”. The results of data analysis revealed that the teachers’ opinions toward the suitability of the grammar points and exercises were stronger than those of the students. Furthermore, the drill model of grammar practice raises students’ motivation and helps them overcome their problems.

The results demonstrated that reading and writing activities were more than listening and speaking activities in English book (1) and that the listening skill was weaker than the three other skills. So, English book (1) was found to focus on reading skill more than the three other skills because each lesson of the textbook has a reading passage and different kinds of reading comprehension practices.

The sixth section of the questionnaire was related to the “Pronunciation practice”. The results of data analysis demonstrated that the teachers’ opinions toward the suitability of the pronunciation practice section were stronger than those of the students. The findings indicated that the amount of pronunciation practice in this book was not sufficient.

Finally, the last section of the questionnaire was related to the “language function and social and cultural activities”. The results of data analysis revealed that there is no mention of the culture of English speaking countries.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

An EFL textbook can play a major function in making students to enjoy learning English and to become successful in learning. The findings of the study clarified the textbooks’ weaknesses and strengths. Cunningsworth (1995) emphasizes that textbooks are useful devices for providing the learners with the means to learn on their own and to organize their own works rather than to get instructions from other people. A textbook is an excellent tool for the performance of the material, an effective reference for learners, a tool or piece of equipment made for a particular purpose, a security device for opinions and activities, a useful manual for novice teachers, and an effective source for displaying the goals of language leaning predicted before.

The findings of the study clarified the textbook’s (1) weaknesses and strengths. Considering the findings, the English textbook’s (1) physical appearance and its related features such as the thickness, good binding and fastening, fair size, and its font size and type are attractive. There are no complementary means such as visual aids, CDs, and workbook. It is believed that this textbook should be supported by pronunciation and listening activities. Generally, the arrangement of the Iranian high school English book makes it seem uninteresting. There are no real pictures and explanations, especially ones that help students to understand it. As Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 8) point out, “Textbooks are physical artefacts, and the author needs to recognise that layout, format, typography, and graphics are essential for a successful textbook”. This textbook has a glossary which prevents students from using other strategies such as using dictionary or guessing from context. Furthermore, the definitions of the words are presented in Persian. One way of overcoming this problem and helping students to use English to learn English is through the provision of the English definitions.

According to McCarthy (1990, p. viii), “No matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way”. As we have seen, to teach the words efficiently, teachers can provide a text which is desirable for students and use these words in the context. Thus, learning words in context is more effective than studying them out of context. For instance, the word ‘doctor’ can be taught inside a passage which is related to patient, pain, disease, or medicine. It is essential to note that learners can remember words by seeing and using them in different contexts and with respect to the surrounding words. So, when learning a new word, it is helpful for students to consider the surrounding words in the text and understand its meaning from its context.

In addition, the presented words in the lessons of the textbook (1) are not repeated in other lessons. So, students forget these words very quickly. According to Elgort (2007), the intentional teaching of vocabularies can happen in both explicit and implicit ways. Thus, in order to teach vocabulary, teachers can choose various procedures including applying synonyms and antonyms, showing the picture of the word, bringing a real object to the class, and displaying the process of doing something. Another problem is related to the inequality of the attention to the

four language skills. As Littlewood (1981) emphasizes, one of the major components of communication is instructing the skills in an integrated procedure because for successful language learning to occur these skills cannot be considered in isolation from each other.

The responses of the students to the questionnaire indicated that there were more reading skill practices in the book compared to practices on the other three skills. The reason for this kind of focus on the reading skill was to develop students' translation abilities so that they could read and translate English subjects. As Cunningsworth (1984, p. 20) states, "we should ask not only what emphasis the material places on each of the four skills but also the extent to which it provides practice in integrating the skills in models of real communication". So, if a teacher teach the skills separately and does not instruct them as an integrated unit, the students can hardly reach the interactive goal. Some of the activities presented in the book such as matching two parts in column A with column B, filling in the blanks, and reading activities are highly interesting for learners. Most speaking practices are on the basis of pair work and question – answer form of exercises.

As mentioned previously, in Iran, all of the school books are written by the Ministry of Education and teachers are not asked about the design and content of the books. The teachers' major role is using the books written by other authors and they should make sure that the book is covered by the end of the semester. There are, generally, five elements in language teaching system which includes teachers, learners, materials, teaching methods, and evaluation. Learners might be in the center of teaching and learning process. In Iran learners and teachers are mostly dependent on the textbook. This dependence on the textbook usually limits the amount or growth of teaching. In order to show the importance of appropriate instructional methods, procedures, and techniques for the learners and their requirements, materials should have common, true, real, and normal English. In addition, it is necessary for all stakeholders, including textbook authors, book developers, and teachers, to know the importance of innovation and try to achieve the recognized needs of the students.

With respect to the third element of the teaching system, the materials, they should be practical, applicable, and tangible for students. The instructional materials should be as complete as possible in order to meet all students' needs. The teachers should be allowed to select their own textbooks for each grade. The achievement of this goal will make students to enjoy learning and studying. It can also make the language learning experience more attractive and interesting for them.

This study is a small step in revealing the problems of the English textbook (1) taught in Iranian high schools. It is expected that this study could have an important influence on the users and provide them with a real perceptive towards the deficiencies of English book (1). At the end, it is worth to quote Cunningsworth (1984, p. 89) who contends that:

No coursebook will be totally suited to a particular teaching situation. The teacher will have found his own way of using it and adapting it if necessary. So, we should not be looking for the perfect coursebook which meets our entire requirement, but rather for the best possible fit between what we as teachers and students need.

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