

Adaptability of the In-Use Textbooks to Students in Rural Junior Middle School in Henan, China

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Received: May 7, 2013 Accepted: May 31, 2013 Online Published: July 4, 2013

doi:10.5539/elt.v6n8p133 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v6n8p133>

Abstract

In Henan province, and through out China, both students in cities and countrysides are using the same textbooks for junior high schools. This phenomenon unavoidably resulted in the fact that it is difficult for students in rural junior high school to understand the contents in textbooks. In order to investigate whether the learning difficulty results partly from the inadaptability of the in-use textbooks to students in junior high school of Henan Province, we assumed that the three-version textbooks being used in the schools are not adaptable. Through observation, plus analysis of the questionnaire, we find that in compiling textbooks, rural students' needs are always ignored consciously or unconsciously. Consequently, our hypothesis was confirmed by the conclusion. In the end we strongly recommend that rural students' special needs should be taken into consideration.

Keywords: adaptability, textbook, rural, junior high school

1. Introduction

From 1949 to the present, middle school textbooks have undergone three phases in the People's Republic of China. The first phase, from 1949 to 1956, was Probe Phase; the second one, from 1956 to 1966, was Establishing Phase; and the third, from 1978 to now, Developing Phase. The same characteristic of textbooks used in these three periods is that all textbooks are mainly compiled by a particular group of specialists in linguistics. There was no regional difference between rural and urban areas. Both students in countrysides and cities are learning from the same textbooks, and no consideration is ever given to the difference among city students and rural ones. Presently, as in urban junior high school, three versions of English textbooks are being used in rural junior high school in Henan Province. One is Junior English for China (1990) composed by People's Education Press of China and Longman Publishing Group of England in 1990; another one is the newest-version Go for It (2001) which was jointly formulated by People's Education Press of China and Thomson Publishing Group of America in 2001; and the third one was composed by Hunan Education Press. All these three versions are compiled according to the new English Curriculum Standard (2001) which is made in response to the voice of education reform. There are many ways to implement education reform, but in the final analysis, education reform won't be realized without curriculum reform. Therefore, the main focus of curriculum reform is the reform of teaching materials and the reform of textbooks should be the key of teaching material. Still the formulation or reform of any textbook should take learners' needs into first consideration, because satisfying learners' needs is the starting and ending point of educational reform in English (Bao, 2005).

Karl Marx held that anything should be done from each according to his abilities, and to each according to his needs. So any course should be based on an analysis of learners' needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Cunningsworth (1984) also considered, when assessing the textbooks, that four aspects should be taken into account, and one of those aspects is that textbooks should satisfy the needs of learners. Cunningsworth's (1995) criterion is particularly helpful for teachers of English as a foreign or second language to evaluate textbooks and select those which are most suitable for their purposes. Besides, students' age, English level, expectations, motive, existing learning resources, their preferred learning style and interest also must be taken into account. Tomlinson (1999) particularly emphasized the needs of the students. In his opinion, a good textbook should have the following characteristics: 1. It should be lively, informative and absorbing. 2. The contents and arrangements

of the textbook should encourage students to pursue further learning rather than frustrate them. 3. Topics for discussion should be relevant to the student's life. 4. Besides bringing students into contact with real linguistic context, a good textbook should always allow students access to practice. 5. Not only should a good textbook give consideration to students' difference, it should also develop their potential capacity and cultivate their emotion quotient (EQ) and intelligence quotient (IQ). 6. A good textbook should provide opportunities for students to give feedback on their learning effect. In China, the evaluation of English textbooks began with an article written by Hu Zhuanglin (1995), it was published in a Chinese journal, named Foreign Language World. He suggested that textbook evaluation should be conducted in conformity with the then-prevailing teaching program and the teaching effects of such textbooks should also be taken into account. After that, research on English textbook evaluation was neither comprehensive nor systematic until now. Many articles focus on the introductions and development of the textbook evaluation abroad (Jun Chen, 2007). However little attention was paid to assess whether the contents of the textbooks are adaptable to learners in rural junior middle school.

To sum up, textbook evaluation is a rather complex process, as there are complicated factors that will affect the success or failure of it when it is in use. Criteria both domestic and abroad evaluate a textbook from many perspectives: learners', teachers', etc. Whatever the criteria, they all believe that the needs of learners should never be ignored. But in practice, much less attention is paid to learners in countrysides than to those in urban schools. This is particularly obvious in compiling junior high school textbooks, which can be found with ease. But after reviewing works concerning that, what impressed us is that few people take it seriously, and as a result of the above two points, students in rural junior high schools are in a clearly disadvantageous position. The purpose of this study was not to make a comprehensive evaluation on textbooks themselves which are used in rural Henan, China, but to investigate whether the rural learners like the textbooks; and the possible factors which make them like or dislike them through questionnaire and observation. Tomlinson's (1999) criterion is adopted in this study.

2. Hypothesis

In this study, it is assumed that the adaptability of textbooks being used in rural junior high schools in Henan are not particularly high.

3. Research Design

3.1 Purpose of Research

The purpose of this study is aimed to find out whether the in-use textbooks are adaptable to students of rural junior high schools in Henan, China.

3.2 Respondent

This paper investigated 1 540 students coming from 14 rural junior high schools of Henan Province, those schools were selected at random. We selected 110 students in each school, and the age of them ranged from 12 to 16, including both male and female students. We received 1489 responses, and the available questionnaires are 1433, so the effective rate is about 96%. Also we interviewed 90 English teachers who teach in the above 14 schools.

3.3 Research Method

In order to make sure that the responses from students are reliable, we designed a questionnaire. Besides, we also interviewed some students and English teachers in the above 14 junior high schools to get first-hand information, SPSS18.0 are used to analyze the statistics.

3.4 Questions Designed

Totally, we designed the following three questions:

- (1) To which degree do you like the textbook?
- (2) How closely do you think the topics for discussion are relevant to your real life?
- (3) Are you familiar with the subjects and contents of your textbook?

4. Discussion and result

4.1 To Which Degree Do You Like your Textbook?

Table 1. Statistics on whether students like their textbook or not

	Frequency	Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent (%)
Valid	very like	97	6.8	6.8
	like	55	3.8	10.6
	a little	475	33.1	44.7
	not clear	542	37.8	81.5
	not like	263	18.4	99.9
	Total	1432	99.9	99.9
Missing	System	1	0.1	
Total		1433	100	99.9

As shown in the first table, among the 1433 students surveyed in the 14 rural junior middle schools, 6.8% students like their textbooks very much; 3.8% of them like the textbooks; 475 students (33.2%) only like them a little; still 542 students are not clear whether they like their textbook or not, and the percentage is 37.8%; about 18.4% students do not like their textbook. On the whole, students who actually like their textbooks only account for 10.6%. Those who are not clear whether they like it or not are in majority. Whether the textbook is adapted to rural junior high school students does not depend on the number of students who are fond of it, as their preference can be influenced by many factors. However, adaptability can have an effect on students' preference in a sense. Consequently, we designed the second question. Maybe we can discover useful information from the following table.

4.2 How Closely Do You Think the Topics for Discussion Are Relevant to Your Real Life?

Table 2. Statistics on the relevance of the topics for discussion to students' real life

	Frequency	Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent (%)
Valid	a little	119	8.3	8.3
	not clear	364	25.4	33.7
	not relevant	745	52	85.7
	relevant	143	10	95.7
	very relevant	61	4.3	99.9
	missing	1	0.1	100
Total	1433	100	99.9	

Maybe students' preferences should not be taken as the only factor indicating the adaptability of the textbook. However, the degree of their preference probably will be impacted by the contents and topics of the textbooks. As we can see from the second table, while there are 204 students who see their textbooks as accurate to their real life, only accounting for 14.3%; those who do not consider their textbook are accurate to their real life account for 52% (745 among the 1433 students). Obviously it is a striking contrast. In addition, there are 364 students who did not make it clear whether the textbooks are accurate to their life or not. According to Tomlinson (1999), topics for discussion should be close to student's life. Therefore, it is easy to see that the topics for discussion of the in-use textbooks used by rural junior high schools in Henan province are not adaptable to their students. And it shed light on what Table 1 has demonstrated.

4.3 Are You Familiar with the Subjects and Contents of Your Textbook?

Table 3. Statistics on whether students are familiar with the subjects and contents or not

		Frequency	Percent (%)	Valid (%)	Percent	Cumulative Percent (%)
Valid	very familiar	196	13.7	13.7		13.7
	familiar	287	20	20		33.7
	a little familiar	348	24.3	24.3		58
	not clear	142	9.9	9.9		67.9
	not familiar	460	32.1	32.1		100
	Total	1433	100	100		

Since table 2 suggests whether the topics for discussion are relevant to students' life, what about the subjects and contents of the textbooks? The 3rd table will tell us everything about it. It is clearly manifested that there are 460 students who are not familiar with the subject and content of the in-use textbooks, that is to say, the subjects and contents of the textbooks are not familiar to nearly one third of the 1433 respondents. If those who are just a little familiar are also taken into account, the ratio should reach 56.4%. Compared with the number (33.7%) of those who are familiar (including those who are very familiar), whether the subjects and contents of the in-use textbooks are adaptable to students in rural junior high schools of Henan Province is evident.

5. Conclusion

According to Tomlinson's (1999) theory, not only should a good textbook motivate learner's interest to further study, it should also be close to students' life. Moreover, the topics for discussion, subjects and contents should be familiar to learners. Thus, from what has been discussed above, it is not difficult for us to come to the following conclusion: whether evaluated from the contents, subjects or topics for discussions, or from to what degree students like the textbooks, in general, the in-use textbooks of rural junior high schools in Henan Province are not particularly adaptable to the local surroundings. At least it should be considered as one of the main factors that lead to the learning and understanding difficulties. As most urban junior high school teachers put it, compared with students in city schools, rural students are in obvious disadvantages in using the in-use textbooks. Besides, most of the topics for discussion, contents and subjects which talk about English language culture matters are much beyond rural students' reach. Because seldom did they have city life experience, less seldom were they exposed to it, much less can they get access to English language culture background.

6. Reflections

Certainly there is one potential problem with the textbooks' subject matter and social content, which pertains to the presentation of the target language culture. (David R. A. Litz) Some theorists, such as Prodromou (1988) and Alptekin, (1993) suggest that the inclusion of foreign subject matter and social constructs in ELT textbooks has the potential to create comprehension problems or other serious cultural misunderstandings, which is partly due to the fact that students might lack the proper schemata to interpret these foreign concepts correctly. Many theorists also believe that it is indisputable that language is culturally bound, since language teaching and culture can not be distinctly separated from each other. It is probably inevitable that students will be exposed to some elements of the target language culture when using many ELT textbooks. This, to some degree, explains why rural students have difficulty in liking and understanding textbooks.

Probably somebody will say that teachers in rural junior high schools should use textbooks creatively. Furthermore the new round of basic education curriculum reform advocates and encourages teachers not to passively use ready-made "product" developed by experts, hence they should process and adapt teaching materials according to actual teaching situations. Consequently, criticism is directed at rural teachers who are comparatively weaker in voicing. It is not wrong to encourage or expect teachers in rural junior high schools to creatively guide students in learning textbooks, but there is one problem that has been consciously or unconsciously overlooked. That is, rural English teachers are also at a disadvantage when it comes to reproduction. I'm not suggesting that those teaching in rural regions are less competent, only reminding that they are relatively less familiar with city life, just as their students. Besides it will increase rural English teachers' work pressure, which is unfair to them. Maybe they will wonder why those who are teaching in city high schools are not required to reproduce the textbooks. This phenomenon fully reveals that unfairness lies in junior high

school textbooks. As is known to all, the in-use textbooks are compiled for general use especially by specialists in linguistics and other fields. Both city high schools and rural ones have to use them, because they have no alternative.

This has unavoidably lead to a negative effect (Yingchan, Zeng, 2002), in that, there are great differences in the practice of achieving the wanted teaching objective. Normally, rural middle schools lag behind urban ones, and rural middle schools have a long way to go to achieve the set teaching objective. However, students in rural schools have to compete with city students in order to obtain the same opportunity of receiving education, which is obviously unfair to them. In fact, fewer students coming from rural areas were admitted into universities and colleges, especially into better universities. Certainly, many complicated variables will influence the teaching outcome. So I just cannot help wondering why rural students' actual situations and practical needs were not taken into consideration when textbooks were compiled for such a long time. Does it verify the fact that farmers' needs are not worthy of due consideration? Should it always give way to city people? Does the inadaptability of the in-use textbooks illuminate the educational unfairness in China? I dare not jump to assert it. But it should arouse the attention of the authorities and compilers concerned. If our work can draw attention from scholars and administrators who pay close attention to rural education problems, we will feel satisfied and at ease.

7. Limitations

When the questionnaire was designed, I kept asking myself "Can the three questions fully justify what I want to present?". This bothered me during the whole progress of the survey. However, after analyzing the statistics, we found that the outcome did not disappoint me. Although the rigor or scientific validity of this study will be questioned, it should be emphasized that we collected first-hand data from this survey, and what we found was and still is being ignored by many people. At least, it can awaken some people to realize the unfairness reflected by the in-use textbooks of junior high schools in Henan, China.

Acknowledgment

In the process of questionnaire design, distribution, collection, collation and analysis, so many people have given me help and support. First of all, I'd like to thank those who are teaching English in the 14 rural middle schools and the students in those schools. They were so anxious to tell us their difficulties in teaching and learning their textbooks; they are so longing for improvement. So I owe them gratitude. Without their encouragement and support, I won't have finished this survey. I also want to thank those teachers who hope my writing will draw public attention to this long-standing problem. Then my deep gratitude should also go to my dear colleagues who have spent much time with me to discuss the questions and analyze the statistics. Last but not least, I really appreciate the constant help from Becky Valdois. Although she is busy in taking care of children, she still stole time to read my article and corrected it. She helped me a lot in English language use and grammar, for which I am really grateful. Of course I also appreciate the time and patience from those who will read this article.

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