مجلهٔ پژوهش در مسائل تعلیم و تربیت
Journal of research On Issues of Education, No. 50, 2016 , 50, PP 1

Journal of Research on Issues of Education

Research Article **http://isoedmag.ir , http://isoed.ir**

From Expectations to Reality: Teachers' Perspectives of the Newly Developed English Textbook (Prospect 1) of the First Grade of Junior High School

Gholam Reza Kiany [1]

abstract

Radical changes in the English textbook of the first grade of junior high after 27 years have aroused researchers' incentives to conduct evaluations of the new textbook (Prospect 1) to get insights into its strengths and weaknesses. In line with this trend, this study aimed at evaluating the new textbook from teachers' perspectives. For this purpose, a quantitative research methodology was applied. To collect data, a researcher-made textbook evaluation checklist was administered to 405 junior high school English teachers and the data were analyzed by SPSS. The results revealed that from teachers' perspectives, there were some pitfalls with the new textbook such as applying an unsuitable method of literacy instruction; over-attention to the communication skills at the expense of literacy skills; over-localization of the content; overlooking the development of intercultural competence in students; and lack of authenticity in the presentation of the content. Finally, as the central figures in the process of educational change, teachers offered some suggestions to amend the new textbook with the hope that their voices be heard by the pertinent authorities.

Keywords: Radical changes, textbook evaluation, Prospect 1, English school teachers.

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[1] Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran, rezakiany@yahoo.com

Introduction

During the last two decades, Iranian EFL public schools textbooks have always been under fierce attack and criticism because they could not meet the expectations of most teachers and students (Shafiee, 2012). To address and tackle the problems, the Ministry of Education has decided to change the English textbooks of both junior and senior high schools based on the changes of both EFL curriculum policies and foreign language objectives of the National Curriculum (National Curriculum of Islamic Republic of Iran, 2012). The movement has begun by changing the EFL textbook of the first grade of junior high school in which students make their first official contact with English. Since the EFL textbook of the first grade of junior high school has undergone radical changes (in comparison to the previous textbook) and the textbook has been published only recently, its evaluation becomes essential because there is a need to evaluate the innovation to ensure that it is in effect a real improvement over past practices (Nation & Macalister, 2010).

Thus, this study aimed at conducting an evaluation of the new textbook in order to reveal its strengths and weaknesses. It is hoped that the study results will help in making some useful recommendations for the curriculum planners, course designers, and material developers in the Ministry of Education for further improving the quality of the textbooks.

Literature review

Tomlinson (2011) defined materials evaluation as "the systematic appraisal of the value of materials in relation to their objectives and to the objectives of the learners using them (p. xiv). On the significance of material evaluation, Brown (1995) stated that "materials evaluation is necessary to determine the suitability of the materials for a particular program" (p.159). Ellis (1997) considered textbook evaluation as being very useful in teacher development and professional growth. Therefore, "constant evaluation of textbooks to see if they are appropriate is of great importance" (Riazi & Mosalanejad, 2010, p.2).

Textbook evaluation becomes more significant in times of innovation and change. The reason is that textbooks could be beneficial in times of educational change by serving as a vehicle for teacher and learner training, by providing support and relief from the burden of looking for materials, by providing as complete a picture as possible of what the change will look like, and through the psychological support they give to teachers (Hutchinson and Torres, 1994). Thus, due to such important roles that textbooks play in innovation, their evaluation becomes a necessity.

Method

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For this study, a quantitative research methodology was adopted using a textbook evaluation checklist. Probably, one of the most prevalent methods of materials evaluation is the checklist method and it has been used extensively by researchers working in this area. It has the advantages of being systematic, costeffective, and convenient (Sherazi, 2007).

Participants

The participants of the study were 405 junior high school English teachers. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of the participants in terms of gender, age, educational degree, years of teaching experience, and geographical location.

Instrumentation

To evaluate the new textbook, a four point Likert scale checklist questionnaire was designed based on a comprehensive review of literature on EFL textbook evaluation, as well as stakeholders‟ perceptions, concerns, and expectations. The questionnaire was validated by 13 experts (5 PhD, and 8 PhD students, among them 3 teacher experts). The reliability of the questionnaire measured by Cronbach alpha (α) was 0.91. Moreover, two open-ended questions were included in the checklist in order to obtain a more in-depth understanding of teachers‟ perceptions on the new textbook. The questions addressed the strengths and weaknesses of the textbook as well as teachers‟ suggestions to improve the textbook.

Table 1

Distribution of Participants

Gender			
Male		Female	
202		203	
Educational degree			
Associate degree	BA	MA	PhD student
71	276	55	3
Age			
20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59
71	158	161	15

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| Teaching experience | | |

because the mean index was 1.99. Generally speaking, teachers were satisfied with the physical features of the textbook.

Taking a glance at the literature, one could easily perceive the importance of the textbook physical features because nearly all the textbook evaluation checklists (e.g., Skierso, 1991; Sheldon, 1988; etc) have physical features as one of their indispensible components. In line with what was found in this study, Hamidzadeh (2014) reported the physical make-up as one of the main strong points of the textbook in teachers‟ views.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Physical Features

I. Physical features		
Statement	M	S.D
The textbook is easy to handle.	3.3556	0.75255
The textbook paper is of high quality.	1.9950	0.72527
The textbook visuals are relevant to the content.	2.6987	0.78546
The textbook visuals add meaning to the content.	2.83703	0.7366
Total	2.718	0.:0:19

Linguistic features

The second part of the checklist included items for the evaluation of the linguistic features of the textbook. This part consisted of compliance with CLT principles, skills and sub-skills. Since the textbook was designed based on the CLT approach, compliance with CLT principles was deemed necessary to be included in the checklist.

Table 3

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Descriptive Statistics for Aautonomous Learning

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A. Compliance with CLT principles		
1. Autonomous learning		
Statement	M	S.D
The textbook provides clear pictograms for task instructions.	2.74567	0.73928
The textbook provides activities that use problem-solving techniques rather than finding right and wrong answers to closed questions.	2.1951	.75713
The textbook provides enough opportunities for self-assessment.	2.7333	0.74991
The textbook provides enough opportunities for peer-assessment.	2.69<9	0.986;6
Total	2.42	0.56863

The first issue under consideration in this part was autonomous learning. Clear pictograms for task instructions was the most favored item with the mean score of 2.74. Opportunities for self-assessment was the next supported item with the mean value of 2.73. Opportunities for peer assessment and providing problem solving techniques were the least supported items with means of 2.02 and 2.19.

Overall, autonomous learning gained a mean value of 2.42.

Manchón (2000) believed that learner autonomy is a direct consequence of the increasing pre-occupation with learner-centeredness and the emergence of communicative approach to language teaching. Thus, it could be inferred that since the new textbook is based on CLT, it could foster autonomy. The openended question results also confirmed this point because teachers considered one of the strengths of the new textbook as promoting autonomous learning.

In the studies that evaluated prospect 1, autonomous learning was not directly investigated. However, from the results of some studies (such as Behdad, 2014), it could be inferred that the textbook could foster learner autonomy.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for Authenticity

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II. Linguistic features		
A. Compliance to CLT principles		
2. Authenticity		
Statement	M	.D
The textbook provides the learners with opportunities to use the language in situations they are likely to encounter in the future.	2.3308	0.7340
The textbook contains realistic situations in dialogues or practice activities (i.e. not artificial or stilted).	2.0444	0.7499
Total	2.1876	0.5030

On authenticity, authentic learning situations gained the least support with the mean of 2.04. However, authentic learning opportunities got more support with the mean of 2.33. Total mean score of authenticity was 2.18 which is a low mean index.

The results of the open-ended questions also revealed lack of authenticity of conversations as one of the weak points of the textbook. To teachers, since the conversations of Prospect 1 are based on the pre-memorized chunks of the language, they are not authentic.

In line with this study, lack of authenticity of Prospect 1 has been confirmed by other studies. For instance, Hamidzadeh (2014) considered lack of authenticity as the most salient weak point of the textbook. Similarly, Kamyabigol and Baghaeeyan (2014) reported lack of authenticity of dialogues as one of the major pitfalls of the textbook.

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics for Skills Integration

II. Linguistic features		
A. Compliance to CLT principles		
3. Skills integration		
Statement	M	S.D
The textbook provides the integration of the four skills.	2.6049	0.8065

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The textbook provides opportunities for practice in skills integration.	2.55061	0.847553
Total	2.577777	0.78554
Total mean of compliance with CLT principles	2.4015	.68405

Regarding skills integration, teachers supported provision of skills integration more than practice of skills integration. The mean values for these items were 2.60 and 2.55 respectively. Total means of skills integration was 2.57 which was a satisfactory mean index. Moreover, total means of compliance with CLT principles was 2.40.

As it could be perceived in the literature, one of the key principles of communicative pedagogy is to teach skills in an integrated manner (Littlewood, 2013). On studies which were conducted on the evaluation of Prospect 1, only Hamidzadeh (2014) referred to the integration of the four skills as one of the strengths of the textbook.

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics for Speaking

II. Linguistic features		
B. Skills (Communication skills)		
1.Speaking		
Statement	M	S.D
The textbook contains sufficient tasks for practice in spoken English.	2.9;68	0.;:;9:
The textbook contains speaking tasks and dialogues that are authentic.	2.6<99	0.:6<99
The textbook contains speaking tasks and dialogues that promote meaningful communication.	2.:619	0.::896
Total	2.5255	0.1:<7:

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The next category in linguistic features addressed language skills. The skills part consisted of communication skills (speaking and listening), literacy skills (reading and writing), vocabulary, and pronunciation. Concerning the speaking skill, promotion of meaningful communication and sufficiency of speaking tasks were most favoured by teachers with the mean scores of 2.71 and 2.68. Yet, authenticity of speaking tasks was the least liked item with the mean value of 2.19. The total mean of the speaking skill was 2.52.

Table 7

Descriptive Statistics for Listening

II. Linguistic features		
B. Skills (Communication skills)		
2. Listening		
Statement	M	S.D
The textbook contains sufficient tasks for practice in listening.	2.6222	0.87766
The textbook contains listening tasks that are authentic.	2.1966	0.:<117
The textbook contains listening materials that are graded from slow to natural speed.	1.9160	0.5292
The textbook provides interactive listening tasks (more than listen and do, listen and repeat tasks).	2.9;;;<	0.80718
Total	2.1668	0.161
Total mean of communication skills	2.4131	.23749

As it could be perceived from Table 7, sufficiency of listening tasks gained the most support with the mean of 2.62. Conversely, sequencing of listening tasks was least liked with a low mean of 1.91. Other items such as authenticity and interactiveness of listening tasks received the mean scores of 2.32, and 2.28. The total mean score of listening was 2.30 and the total mean score of communication skills was 2.41 which were average but not satisfactory mean values for these categories.

Table 8

Descriptive Statistics for Reading

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II. Linguistic features		
B. Skills (Literacy skills)		
3. Reading		
Statement	M	S.D
The textbook contains sufficient tasks for practice in reading.	2.96:1	0.::;88
The textbook contains reading tasks that are interesting and meaningful to the students.	2.16<1	0.8786;
Total	2.2967	0.98899

On reading skills, sufficiency and meaningfulness gained the mean values of 2.21 and 2.31. The total mean of reading skill was 2.26 which was lower than the satisfactory mean value.

In writing skill, sufficiency and meaningfulness obtained the unsatisfactory mean values of 1.75 and 1.98. The total mean of literacy skills was 2.10 which is a low mean score.

In Prospect 1, communication skills (speaking and listening) have been paid more attention than the literacy skills (reading and writing). This might be due to the fact that students of the first grade of junior high school are young and most of the time, in developing materials for young learners, communication skills prevail

(Tomlinson, 2005). However, as the results of questionnaires and the open-ended questions revealed, the most area of discontent among teachers was the method of alphabet instruction in the textbook. Contrary to the old textbook that presented the alphabet in the order (from A to Z) and at the onset of English instruction; alphabets are spread across all units and are taught via conversations in the new textbook. Teachers believed that the authors should have paid attention to this fact that the audience are not limited to Tehrani students who are usually familiar with English before schools, but are from all over the country including faraway villages.

Table 9

Descriptive Statistics for Writing

II. Linguistic features

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B. Skills (Literacy skills)		
4.Writing		
Statement	M	S.D
The textbook contains sufficient tasks for practice in spelling.	1.:898	0.:6167
The textbook contains spelling tasks that are interesting and meaningful to the students.	6. 9;66	0.9:<<9
Total	6.<79<	0.969<9
Total mean of literacy skills	2.1054	.54039

The studies which were conducted on Prospect 1 evaluation further supported the results of the present study. For instance, finding the textbook deficient in teaching the alphabets, Elahi Shirvan et al. (2014) developed starters to help learners deal with alphabets of English. The results of Janfeshan and Nosrati (2014)‟s study revealed that Prospect 1 has a good focus on oral and communicative skills at the expense of literacy skills. Bagheri and Karampour (2015) considered the heavier weight that is attached to listening and speaking at the expense of reading and writing as one of the weak spots in Prospect 1. To sum up, teachers demanded striking a balance between communication (listening and speaking) and literacy skills (reading and writing).

Table 10

Descriptive Statistics for Vocabulary

II. Linguistic features		
B. Skills		
5.Vocabulary		
Statement	M	S.D
The textbook presents new vocabulary in context.	2.9802	0.674577
The new vocabulary items are repeated in subsequent lessons for reinforcement.	2.9179	0.78979

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The presentation of vocabulary move gradually from the simple to the more complex (i.e. from concrete to abstract).	2.9:69	0.717:<
Total	2.5099	0.5:89<

Contextualization got the highest mean value (i.e., 2.98) in vocabulary section. Recycling for reinforcement and sequencing gained the mean values of 2.23 and

2.27 which showed that these items could not gain teachers‟ support. The total mean of vocabulary was 2.50 which indicated that the vocabulary part of the textbook was satisfactory for teachers.

Whatever attention the recycling of materials receives, Cunningworths (1995) emphasized that recycling of vocabulary is an important consideration. Hinkel (2006) emphasized that a word should be encountered 12-20 times in order to be learned from a context (as cited in Cakit, 2006). This implies that textbook writers need to check that new vocabulary items are recycled appropriately in the course.

The results of open-ended questions also supported lack of recycling of vocabulary in subsequent lessons of the textbook. Teachers mainly believed that in each lesson, there is very little reference to the vocabulary items of the previous lessons and words are not sufficiently recycled in the textbook. The results of this study are in line with some other studies which were done in this respect. For instance, Kamyabigol and Baghaeeyan (2014) directly referred to the lack of the recycling of the new words as one of the pitfalls of the textbook. On sequencing, Khansir and Mohammadifard (2015) found that the textbook authors did not pay enough attention to the sequencing of the activities on the basis of difficulty.

On pronunciation, both sufficiency and suitability obtained the mean scores below 2.5 (i.e. 2.20 and 2.19). Overall, pronunciation gained the mean value of 2.20. Moreover, the total mean index of skills was 2.33 which showed that the teachers were not consent with the presentation of different skills in the textbook.

Moreover, as the answer to open-ended questions revealed, one of the most obvious deficiencies of the textbook was lack attention to teaching of word stress, sentence stress, and intonation. However, it should be pointed out that one of the fundamental problems that teachers have to grapple with is teaching pronunciation in CLT since “the proponents of this approach have not dealt adequately with the role of pronunciation in language teaching, nor have they developed an agreed-upon set of strategies for teaching pronunciation communicatively” (Seidlhofer, 2001, p.57).

Table 11

Descriptive Statistics for Pronunciation

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II. Linguistic features

B. Skills		
6. Pronunciation		
Statement	M	S.D
The textbook includes adequate material for pronunciation practice.	2.96:<	0.79<18
The textbook contains pronunciation tasks that are suitable for the intended students.	2.6<86	0.:7696
Total	2.966:	.9;;6<
Total mean of skills	901161	609;8<9

The same as the results of the present study, Seddigh et al. (2014) found lack of pronunciation practice as one of the major weak points of the textbook. Kamyabigol and Baghaeeyan (2014) criticized the textbook for not providing phonetic transcriptions for the new words.

To sum up the discussion of linguistic features, it should be reiterated that the total mean of linguistic features (M= 2.37) was less than other features in the textbook. It could thus be inferred that the textbook linguistic features of the textbook should gain special attention in the possible future revisions of the textbook.

Cultural features

The last part in the checklist was directed towards cultural features of the textbook.

Table 12

Descriptive Statistics for Cultural Features

III. Cultural features

Statement	M	S.D

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The textbook is free from cultural biases.	6.<18;	0.:1;7<
The textbook provides opportunities for cultural awareness in the native culture.	3.789;	0.87969
The textbook provides opportunities for cultural awareness in international cultures	1.:869	0.8<991
Total	2.37	0.79

In this part, nearly all the teachers disagreed with the item that the textbook provides cultural awareness in other cultures (M= 1.75). Furthermore, being free from cultural bias gained a low mean value of 1.93. Conversely, nearly all the teachers concurred that the textbook only provides opportunities for cultural awareness in the native culture (M= 3.45). Overall, cultural features gained the mean score of 2.37 which was below the satisfactory mean index.

Discussion

Culture has become an increasingly important component of English language teaching in recent times (Guilani et al., 2011). Whatever the reason, the presentation of only the Iranian culture was not appealing for most of the teachers because this was contradictory to both principles of CLT and Common European Framework of Reference (Lappalainen, 2011).

The same as this study, other studies also reported negative reactions towards the presentation of only Iranian culture in the new textbook. For instance, Khansir and Mohammadifard (2015) considered the separation of English culture from English language as one of the salient pitfalls of the textbook. Janfeshan and Nosrati (2014) found that the culture of English language countries is ignored in the new textbook. In fact, there have been debates over how to integrate culture into l2 materials and which culture (native or target) should be given priority over the other one. The best method is striking a balance between the source and the target cultures to give the learners comprehensive view of cultural awareness (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

To sum up, radical changes in the English textbook of the first grade of junior high after 27 years has evoked a lot of reactions (mostly negative ones) from different stakeholders (especially teachers). An interesting point observed was that teachers‟ expectations was high because they had waited so long to get a perfect version of the textbook. However, they were disappointed since the new textbook could not meet their expectations. Besides, based on

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many teachers' viewpoints, the book was far from other similar internationally recognized textbooks. To respond to this expectation, one of the Prospect 1 authors stated that "because of lack of enough resources and a very low budget, Prospect 1 could not compete with the glittering international textbooks in the market" (Prospect 1 authors, personal communication, July, 20, 2014). Still, another author asserted that "Prospect 1 has not been produced under a very powerful international supervision of big names like Oxford, Cambridge, and British Council. Therefore, it could not compete with global textbooks" (Prospect 1 authors, personal communication, July, 20, 2014).

In fact, for the successful implementation of any change, three conditions should be met: First, the culture of new trends should be cultivated in the stakeholders (such as learners, teachers, parents, authorities, and administrators). Second, the government should provide adequate funds, personnel, and resources. Third, assuming that a teacher is the most significant factor in the whole educational program, the teacher education centers should train teachers to implement the new approaches in different contexts (Farhady et al., 2010). Unfortunately, in case of the new textbook, none of these three conditions have been met: The culture of the new trends were not cultivated in stakeholders; the government did not provide adequate fund, personnel, and resources for the change; and most teachers did not receive training regarding the implementation of the new approach in their contexts (Prospect 1 authors, personal communication, July, 11, 2014).

However, most Prospect 1 teachers confirmed that they have not been psychologically and educationally ready for such a tremendous change. Except some head teachers, most teachers have not received any training on the new textbook. Because of this, they confessed that they were sticking to their traditional methods in reality because in this case they were more confidence and less frustrated in their work. They experienced a lot of concerns about the application of the new textbook in their classes since they did not have adequate information, time, and access to resources.

Conclusions

This study aimed at evaluating Prospect 1 from teachers‟ perspectives. The reason is that teachers are the key variables for successful implementation of any change since they must shoulder classroom burdens by themselves (Fullan, 2007). Most of the teachers considered the new textbook as a significant move forward for English instruction at public schools compared with the old version. However, they believed that like any other initiative; this innovation is not without its pitfalls. Nearly all teachers were discontent about the method of

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alphabet instruction as well as the ignorance of the development of intercultural competence in the textbook.

Any evaluation is done in the hope of utilizing the strong points and amending the weak points. To improve the textbook, some suggestions have been offered by teachers such as focusing more on literacy skills (reading and writing); injecting a healthy dose of grammar in the textbook; including more authentic, meaningful conversations in the textbook; presenting the positive and negative aspects of the target and international cultures in order to promote critical thinking in students; and finally hearing teachers‟ voices.

However, it must be noted that one round of evaluation is never enough for such a sensitive textbook at the national level because the textbook will have a great impact on the success or failure of English education of millions of students who attend public schools. It is hoped that those interested will carefully put the textbook under their lens once more to come up with more cases of weak and strong points. Such evaluations will prove to be invaluable when similar national textbooks are to be developed once more by the Ministry of Education in the future.

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