

An Evaluation of English Textbooks Used in Iranian High Schools: Teachers' and Learners' Attitudes

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Abstract

The quality of a textbook might have fundamental roles that it can determine the success or failure in teaching and learning course. The present study evaluated English textbooks used in Iranian high schools, which are claimed to have been published based on the components of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. The purpose of this study was to explore high school teachers' and students' attitudes towards the Iranian high school English textbooks. To fulfill the objectives, a questionnaire consisting of 45 questions related to high school English textbooks was administered to 150 male and female high school students and their teachers in Isfahan, Iran. The participants were also interviewed in terms of their attitudes towards CLT and its implementation in Iranian high school English textbooks. The descriptive analysis of the data indicated that Iranian teachers and learners in Isfahan had a positive attitude towards the English textbooks based on the CLT principles. The majority of participants stated that 80 percent of CLT principles were currently practiced in Iranian high school English textbooks; however, some changes might improve the quality of these English textbooks.

Keywords: Textbook Evaluation, CLT, Communicative Competence, Learners' Needs, Iranian Teachers' and Learners' Attitude

1. Introduction

Learning a new language depends on so many factors such as the learners' abilities, the teachers' skills, and the environment in

which the learning event is taking place, the purpose of learning, and more importantly the textbooks. Textbooks provide the objectives of language learning. They

function as a lesson plan for teachers and learners. Cunningsworth (1995) argued that textbooks are an effective resource for presentation of materials, a source of ideas and activities, a reference source for students, and support for less experienced teachers who have yet to gain confidence.

In spite of the significant studies in this area, unfortunately the educational system in Iran has not been very successful in preparing the students ready for communication in English. According to Sadeghi and Richards (2014), students are hardly able to be fluent enough in English or understand more than a limited number of sentences; even though, having studied English at high school for six years. Therefore, the researcher attempted to see whether or not learners' and their teachers' attitudes regarding high school textbooks were positively oriented.

It has been recognized that Iranian learners need communicative contexts in order to learn the international language for many reasons. The main aim of this study was to explore high school teachers' and students' attitudes toward English textbooks based on the principles of CLT. This study might be practical and important because the textbooks are recently modified and not many studies have been conducted on them in Iran. In previous Iranian senior high school textbooks, the focus was on reading comprehension, grammar, translation, and vocabulary development, with little emphasis on speaking, writing, and listening which is almost absent in the syllabus, but the recent textbooks have tried to take care of some of these shortcomings.

2. Literature Review

Textbooks should be designed, developed, and chosen carefully based on the needs of the learners. They play very important roles in EFL education, since it is generally through textbooks that learners get

acquainted with the target language. Sheldom (1988) suggested that "textbooks represent the visible heart of any ELT program" (p.237).

Textbooks are designed to construct a bridge between teaching and learning process. McGrath (2002) states that a textbook is important because it sets the direction, content, and to a certain extent how the lesson is to be taught. Similarly, he indicates that it is significant to consider the images that instructors have; as this reflects their attitudes and beliefs towards textbooks which will have impact on how they use books. According to Tomlinson (2008), textbooks can serve as a reference point for teachers managing their teaching progress, and also help provide a focus for teaching.

The quality of a textbook might have fundamental roles that it can determine the success or failure in teaching and learning course; therefore, textbook evaluation is a practical linguistic activity through which teachers, supervisors, administrators, and materials developers can make judgments regarding the effect of the materials on the learners. McGrath (2002) believes that textbook evaluation is also of an important value for the development and administration of language learning programs.

Textbooks have been evaluated from different perspectives such as teachers' and students' attitudes, the method of the textbooks, skills and sub-skills, and so on. The researcher tried to evaluate the Iranian junior high school English textbooks in terms of teachers' and learners' attitudes and content of these textbooks based on CLT principles.

English textbooks which are used in Iranian public education are written by a team of authors authorized by the Ministry of Education. The researcher focused on the English textbooks which are taught in Iranian high schools, written by Alavi Moghaddam, Khodaparastan, Kheirabadi, Anani Sarab, Foruzنده, and Ghorbani,

(2012). These textbooks are entitled *English for schools: Prospect 1 and Prospect 2*. The former introduces the letters and sounds of English alphabets, basic vocabulary items, listening and reading exercises, and dialogues and pair works. The latter includes further vocabulary tasks, dialogues and conversations, spelling and pronunciation practice, listening and writing exercises, speaking and reading comprehension. These textbooks were developed based on the components of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach.

The CLT approach has been created by a theory of language as communication, and its goal is to develop learners' communicative competence (Celce-Murcia, 1989; Li, 1998). The characteristics of CLT include: the objective of language use for communicative competence; use of real-life communicative situations in classroom learning; emphasis on two-way communicative function; sufficient exposure to the target language; development of all four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing); use of authentic materials, meaningful tasks, and group activities; and the attempt to create a secure, nonthreatening atmosphere (Li, 1998; Liao, 1997).

In other countries, textbook evaluation studies have become the central attention for researchers. Weiten, Deguara, Rehmke, and Sewell (1999) focused on textbook pedagogical aids. They examined students' evaluation of textbook pedagogical aids and found that boldface technical terms, running or chapter glossaries, chapter summaries and self-tests earned the highest marks in their evaluation. Vellenga (2004) was concerned with how pragmatics was presented in EFL/ESL textbooks. The researcher found that teachers rarely brought outside materials related to pragmatics into the classroom, and concluded that learning pragmatics from

textbooks would be highly unlikely. Moreover, Lawrence, W. P. W (2011) evaluated the new secondary school (NSS) curriculum in Hong Kong. Results have effective tool in determining fitness with the new curriculum.

Zohrabi (2011, p. 214) emphasizes that "material evaluation should be the top priority of any curriculum". Pourhassan Moghaddam (2013) analyzed four internationally-distributed English textbooks based on Fairclough's (1989) CDA model. The result of this study showed that ESL learners and teachers are highly critical thinker and have shown significantly positive attitudes towards power dominance, gender differentiation and culture diversity, while showing moderate attitudes towards religious and ethnic minorities, social inequality and colonialism in the west.

Based on the problems and purposes discussed above, the present study was an attempt to provide answers to the following questions:

- 1- What are the overall attitudes of Iranian high school English teachers and learners towards new English textbooks with respect to the principles of CLT?
- 2- To what extent, are the CLT principles implemented in Iranian high school English textbooks?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Because the main users of the textbooks are the students and teachers, their opinions towards textbooks were surveyed. The participants of this study were 150 Iranian high school English students, and experienced high school English teachers.

This study surveyed of 50 English teachers (20 males and 30 females) with the age range of 32 to 48 years, and a mean age of 40. Their teaching experiences ranged from 10 to 28 years with an average of 19. Twenty of them held B.A. degrees and five

held M.A. in Linguistics, Teaching English, and English Literature. They had been teaching English in Iranian male and female public high schools in Isfahan, Iran.

One hundred English language learners (30 males and 70 females) took part in this study, 30 of whom were elementary and 70 were intermediate language learners. They were all non-native speakers. The age range of the students who took part in this research was 12 -15. All the English language learners were teenagers.

3.2. Instruments

The instruments consisted of a questionnaire and a structured interview. Textbooks evaluation questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part was designed to elicit some demographic information from the participants, including their level, grade, age, gender, and the name of the textbooks through which they are learning or teaching English. The second part of the questionnaire included questions on five domains: topic, tasks and exercises, skills, content, and face validity of the textbooks. This questionnaire was originally developed by Karavas-Doukas (1996), and consisted of 44 statements in Likert scale, and one evaluative question at the end.

The structured interview validated by experts (university professors) was conducted with the teachers and students. The aim was to collect qualitative data in order to obtain verbal explanation and further elaboration for answering research questions. The face-to-face interview was conducted at the participants' school, where they had the easiest access to the high school English textbooks used. The questions attempted to elicit the participants' perception towards the Iranian high school English textbooks, and also applied special methods that measured respondents' critical thinking concerning overall content of English language textbooks in Iranian high schools with respect to the principles of CLT approach.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

First, the textbooks were analyzed based on components of communicative language teaching approach. Then, 150 English language learners and their teachers were asked to answer the questionnaire. The whole data collection and analysis procedure including questionnaire and interview lasted for six months in 2014. The questionnaire was administered during language learners' regular class session. The questionnaires were completed anonymously to eliminate language learners' desirability inclination. Instruction as how to complete the questionnaire was given in Persian and they were reminded the research results would have no negative effect on their final exams, so that they could freely answer the questions.

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 categorize 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 45 items of the questionnaire. The items were grouped into five main domains including topics, tasks and exercises, skills, content, and face validity. Then, the information collected through questionnaires was analyzed through SPSS 21. The data was entered into SPSS and the frequencies, percentage, of the individual items were calculated and analyzed.

4. Results

According to the results, the teachers and learners had positive view regarding the current Iranian high school English textbooks. Instructors and learners believed listening and speaking skills were highly emphasized in comparison with reading and writing skills. Teachers asserted that reading activities could motivate learners. Also, listening and

speaking could be appropriately practiced via these textbooks. In general, most of the participants believed the main purposes of English textbooks were to focus on listening and speaking skills. Eighty percent of them believed only a small part of the junior English textbooks was dedicated to reading and writing skills.

It should be taken into consideration that this kind of teaching skills is consistent with CLT approach; however, teachers and students declared the lack of writing tasks in these textbooks. Teachers and students believed that tasks and exercises were relevant and interesting to learners; exercises were arranged from easy to difficult. Teachers agreed that tasks and exercises contained instructions on how to use learning materials.

Related to content and face validity of Iranian high school English textbooks, the teachers supported the idea. But the students had a different opinion concerning the issue. They disagreed that the textbooks and supporting learning materials encouraged the use of technology in English learning. They believed online resources and supporting learning materials were not equally distributed for students in different schools. In other words, the access for such resources was limited at some schools.

Teachers answered approximately positive regarding the layout of the Iranian junior high school English textbooks. They believed that the books were acceptable in terms of clarity and orthographic beauty. However, it would be more appealing if colorful and beautiful pictures of real people and real environments were used. Learners had the opposite idea about face validity of their high school English textbooks. Most of them believed that English textbook were not attractive enough.

Educators and learners believed that topics encourage group work and pair work, give opportunities for students to express

their own ideas, and stimulates meaningful communication. The results of the data showed teachers agreed that exercises in English textbooks could give learners wide exposure to English and wide range of activities that can help learners develop speaking skill in real life. About 30 percent of participants believed these textbooks could develop students' accuracy and fluency in their English speaking skill. Learners agreed with the opinion that exercises in Iranian junior high school English textbooks could give them wide exposure to English.

4.1. Teachers' Attitudes

The results of teachers' attitudes are summarized in Table 4.1 below.

4.2. Learners' Attitudes

The results of learners' attitudes are summarized in Table 4.2 below.

In order to consolidate the results of the questionnaire, interview sessions were held with some of the randomly selected participants. All the teachers expected to achieve proficiency in the communication at the end of their education and they believed that they could enhance communication through devoting part of the class time for communication, pair work, group work, use of short story, and speaking. They, however, acknowledged that time of the class was not enough for these activities. The data obtained indicated that Iranian teachers in Isfahan province might have a positive attitude toward the Iranian high school textbooks based on CLT and its principles but they implemented the CLT approach partially in their classes, and attached no importance to CLT and its principles in real practice. The majority of them stated that in practice the CLT principles in large classes were impractical if not impossible, and the time of the class was not enough for more practice in pair and group work.

Table 1. Results of the Teacher's Questionnaire Concerning Their Attitudes Towards Textbook

No.	Statements	Frequency/ Percent	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean
1	The topics suit my learner's needs.	Frequency Percent	12 24	34 68	4 8	- 0	- 0	4.16
4	They have clear and appropriate objectives.	Frequency Percent	12 24	28 56	6 12	2 4	2 4	3.92
9	They are motivating, interesting and enjoyable.	Frequency Percent	6 12	32 64	12 24	- 0	- 0	3.88
13	They are relevant and interesting to learners	Frequency Percent	2 4	30 60	16 32	2 4	- 0	3.64
15	They are graded and arranged from easy to difficult.	Frequency Percent	6 12	24 48	8 16	6 12	6 12	3.36
16	They contain instructions on how to use the learning materials.	Frequency Percent	10 20	28 56	6 12	4 8	2 4	3.80
29	Reading activities can motivate learners.	Frequency Percent	4 8	12 24	16 32	18 36	- 0	3.04
34	Likelihood of interest to the learners	Frequency Percent	2 4	32 64	16 32	- 0	- 0	3.72
35	Amount of cultural knowledge required	Frequency Percent	4 8	34 68	8 16	4 8	- 0	3.76
38	The textbook and supporting learning materials encourage the use of technology in learning English	Frequency Percent	6 12	34 68	8 16	2 4	- 0	3.88
39	Online resources are available for students to motivate English language learning	Frequency Percent	2 4	18 36	12 24	14 28	4 8	3.00
41	Degree of visual support	Frequency Percent	4 8	22 44	12 24	12 24	- 0	3.36
42	Clarity of sound and pictures	Frequency Percent	6 12	20 40	10 20	12 24	2 4	3.32
43	Pictures and tables are relevant and interesting to learners	Frequency Percent	6 12	22 44	10 20	12 24	- 0	3.44
44	The layout (physical format) of the Iranian high school English textbooks are clear, attractive and easy to read	Frequency Percent	- 0%	24 48%	6 12%	20 40%	- 0%	3.08

Table 2. Results of the Learners' Questionnaire Concerning Their Attitudes Towards Textbook

No	Statements	Frequency/ Percent	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean
1	The topics suit my learner's needs.	Frequency Percent	20 20	60 60	20 20	- 0	- 0	4.00
4	They have clear and appropriate objectives.	Frequency Percent	60 60	36 36	4 4	- 0	- 0	4.56
9	They are motivating, interesting and enjoyable.	Frequency Percent	24 24	40 40	16 16	12 12	8 8	3.60
13	They are relevant and interesting to learners	Frequency Percent	28 28	28 28	18 18	18 18	8 8	3.50
15	They are graded and arranged from easy to difficult.	Frequency Percent	16 16	20 20	24 24	32 32	8 8	3.04
16	They contain instructions on how to use the learning materials.	Frequency Percent	52 52	28 28	20 20	- 0	- 0	4.32
29	Reading activities can motivate learners.	Frequency Percent	24 24	44 44	16 16	12 12	4 4	3.72
34	Likelihood of interest to the learners	Frequency Percent	8 8	32 32	28 28	20 20	12 12	3.04
35	Amount of cultural knowledge required	Frequency Percent	- 0	24 24	48 48	16 16	12 12	2.84
38	The textbook and supporting learning materials encourage the use of technology in learning English	Frequency Percent	20 20	40 40	30 30	10 10	- 0	3.70
39	Online resources are available for students to motivate English language learning	Frequency Percent	- 0	10 10	40 40	30 30	20 20	2.40
41	Degree of visual support	Frequency Percent	- 0	10 10	10 10	40 40	40 40	1.90
42	Clarity of sound and pictures	Frequency Percent	- 0	10 10	10 10	30 30	50 50	1.80
43	Pictures and tables are relevant and interesting to learners	Frequency Percent	- 0	36 36	28 28	20 20	16 16	2.84
44	The layout (physical format) of the Iranian high school English textbooks are clear, attractive and easy to read	Frequency Percent	- 0	20 20	20 20	48 48	12 12	2.48

Almost all of the interviewed participants believed that the main purposes of English textbooks were to focus on the listening and speaking skills. Almost 80% of them believed that the focus was on communication. The participants believed that there were some instructional aids Using high school English textbook such as Prospect series only provides a framework for communicative competence, but some schools were not equipped with them.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The language proficiency of teachers, their use of teaching resources, as well as the techniques they use in choosing materials and planning their lessons for teaching English, can surely improve communicative competence through English textbooks. If curriculum developers and teachers have a confused or inadequate understanding of the nature of English textbooks, it is likely that they might not transfer the materials appropriately to students.

Learning how to use and adapt textbooks is an important part of a teacher's professional knowledge. Using textbooks, without any supplementary materials is not the satisfactory method for the needs of students.

The researcher found that majority of participants believed that 80% of CLT principals are practiced in Iranian high school English textbooks, but in reality CLT principles cannot be practical in crowded classes, classes with large number of students. The reason is the time of the class is not sufficient enough for more practice in pair and group work. Also the researcher agreed that access for resources is not equally distributed in all Iranian high schools.

The implication of this study is useful for the researcher as a practitioner and the English language teachers to convey concepts of textbooks and manage their teaching. The results of this study pave the

way for improving teaching and learning process in Iran based on the component of CLT approach.

Important limitation for this study was the time duration. The time specified to analyze the high school English textbooks was short. It would be useful to analyze the results of data collected over a long time.

The data analyzed in this study were gathered from a questionnaire and structural interview to identify English language learners' and their teachers' attitudes towards high school English textbooks based on CLT approach. Therefore, it is suggested that researchers may collect the same data by using other tools such as observation scheme, diaries etc. in order to be able to generalize the results more reliably. The participants' race, cultural, motivation, social background, personality traits, etc. have not been taken into consideration; therefore it is suggested that further research may take these factors into consideration.

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