

Evaluating the 7th grade Basic Education English Language Textbooks in use in Tunisia

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ABSTRACT: Textbooks are important teaching materials inside the classroom setting. In Tunisia, only the textbooks published and testified by an official body (the ministry or department of education) are authorized for classroom use in various educational institutions (public or private prep-schools, primary schools or secondary schools) for the study of a particular subject depending on the educational level.

This study is set up to assess the 7th grade basic education English language textbooks (the student's book and its corresponding activity book entitled "Let's learn English") currently used at all the preparatory schools in Tunisia from the perspective of the Tunisian EFL teachers. In order to answer the research questions, a 42-items questionnaire was developed and was administered to a total population of 45 EFL teachers. The questionnaire is made of three sections: the first section focuses on textbooks' physical design, the second section deals with the textbooks' content in terms of reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, communicative functions and pronunciation and spelling, and the final section concerns some practical considerations.

The results revealed that the majority of the informants are not satisfied with the textbooks considering their content and some practical considerations. However, the respondents seem to accept to some extent the physical design of the 7th grade textbooks.

KEYWORDS: Textbook evaluation, EFL teachers' perceptions, syllabus design, curriculum, Tunisian EFL classroom context.

The contribution of the study: The present paper contributes to the existing literature and research on textbook evaluation in EFL context in general and in the Tunisian EFL context in particular. The primary aim of this study is outlining the possible deficiencies detected in 7th grade basic education English Language textbooks used in Tunisia, in order to work on improving, compensating and reforming these identified weaknesses.

I. INTRODUCTION

The issue of evaluating textbooks in EFL context has gained considerable interest among many researchers all over the world. Several scholars have conducted research on evaluating textbooks through the use of different checklists and questionnaires (Tomlinson, 2001; Aliakbari, 2007; Cunningsworth, 1995; Ellis, 1997; Razmjoo, 2007; Azizfar, Koosha and Lotfi, 2010). Ellis (1997), for instance, argues that textbook evaluation taking into consideration teachers' views is very influential and beneficial for this allows teachers to gain practical, accurate, systematic, and appropriate knowledge of the general profile of the textbook material in hand and to avoid impressionistic assessments. In Tunisia, evaluating the textbooks designed for the 7th grade basic education with regard to EFL teachers' perspectives and attitudes seems to gain little attention.

Therefore, this research paper endeavors to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions in order to reach a comprehensible evaluation of the 7th grade students' book and its corresponding activity book and to contribute to the existing knowledge in this research area. For this purpose, the study comprises six parts: the present introduction presents the main motivation and claims that justify the need for conducting this research. The following part briefly reviews literature on textbook evaluation. It presents and defines the key roles of textbooks in CLT classroom context and the different stages proposed by scholars to evaluate textbooks. It closes with a presentation of the 7th year students' book and its corresponding activity book as important ELT materials in the Tunisian context. Then, the methodology outlines the research questions, the participants as well as the methods used for both collecting and exploring data. The findings and interpretation part applies the methodological instruments and presents the corresponding results in both a quantitative and qualitative forms.

The current paper ends with a conclusion that constitutes a recapitulation of the major findings, and implications of the study.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The role of textbooks in EFL classroom context

Generally speaking, textbooks are designed with the ultimate objective to support FL learners to develop their linguistic and communicative abilities (Litz, 2005; Sheldon, 1987). They are perceived as universal elements for both learning and teaching (O'Neil, 1982; Ur, 1996; Lee, 1997). Therefore, the basic teaching tool in EFL/ESL classroom, worldwide, is the textbook (Dendrinos, 1992). As Hutchinson & Torres (1994: 315) suggest:

“The textbook is an almost universal element of teaching. Millions of copies are sold every year, and numerous aid projects have been set up to produce them in countries...No teaching-learning situation, it seems, is complete until it has its relevant textbook”.

In the same respect, Mares (2003) highlights that “textbooks are designed to give cohesion to the language teaching and learning process by providing direction, support and specific language-based activities aimed at offering classroom practice for students”. According to Průcha (2002: 27), textbooks are useful in three respects: firstly, the textbook is “a part of educational program”, i.e., a part of the teaching curriculum at schools. They formulate the aims of education on general or in particular subjects. Secondly, the textbook is “a part of didactic means”, i.e., relying on technical means in lessons (audio-visual media). Finally, the textbook is “as a type of school didactic texts”, i.e., including several didactic texts that are intended to didactic reasons.

With regard to the role of textbook in the language classroom, Průcha (2002) believes that the textbook is an important source, from which learners acquire knowledge and with which teachers prepare their lesson plans whether they heavily rely on the textbook or they just refer to it as pedagogical guidance. As such textbook is a map that lays out the general content of lessons and the structure that gives coherence to individual lessons, as well as to an entire course. Given its significant role, textbooks are the main basis for the curriculum in many schools (Richard, 1993). As Appel (2011: 50) states “in no other school subjects do course books exert a similar influence as in language teaching”. Hence, textbook is a pivotal teaching material that underlines the goals and the content of teaching as well as the methods teachers are expected to use.

Additionally, the large majority of teachers are using textbook as a main teaching basis which includes the content of modules and the type of language practice. In this respect, Cunningsworth (1995) contends that textbooks display different roles mainly in language classes, they can be “a resource for presentation of material, a source of activities for learner practice and communicative interaction, a reference source for learners on grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, etc., a source of stimulation and ideas for classroom language activities, a syllabus, a resource for self-directed learning or self-access work, and a support for less experienced teachers who have yet to gain in confidence” (Cunningsworth, 1995: 4).

As for FL learners, the textbook is a key source of language input and serves for both class use and self-study (Crawford, 2002). Therefore, it can give learners a sense of independence, progress and achievement. As Crawford (2002: 28) states:

“It may be this sense of control which explains the popularity of textbooks with students consequently a teacher’s decision not to use a textbook may actually be ‘a touch of imperialism’...because it retains control in the hands of the teacher rather than the learner”.

Textbooks are set up to motivate and stimulate language learning (Allwright, 1981, Skierso, 1991) in order to create a classroom environment conducive to language acquisition (Tomlinson, 2008). Moreover, in ELT context, textbooks can be seen as a map that plays an important role in monitoring the progress of the teaching process (McGrath, 2002) and providing guidelines in terms of lessons’ instruction. Added to that, textbooks constitute potential teaching material that support and back up novice teachers (Edge and Wharton, 1998; Tomlinson, 2010).

2.2 Textbook Evaluation

The general guidelines for textbook evaluation have been outlined by many researchers (Garinger, 2002; Breen & Candlin, 1987; Cunningsworth 1984; Harmer, 1991; McDonough & Shaw, 1993; Rea-Dickins & Germaine, 1992; Skierso, 1991). Most of the studies focus on elaborating systems of checklists for the practical purpose of selecting a particular textbook for a particular teaching context. Most of these systematic evaluations either have an implied theoretical component throughout (Skierso, 1991) or ‘theory’ as one of many criteria to consider (Rea-Dickinson & Germaine, 1992). Richards (2018), Cunningsworth (1995) and Ellis (1997) identified three stages of textbook’s evaluation that include: the ‘pre-use’ (known also as pre-evaluation) refers to the analysis and the interpretation of the contents of the textbook in terms of scope, sequence, organization, exercises and texts included. The ‘in-use’ evaluation focuses on the examination of how well the textbook at

hand (being used) functions in class. Finally, the 'post-use' evaluation (known also as retrospective evaluation) that helps decide if the textbook will be used for future programmes.

According to Tomlinson & Mashura (2004: 25), textbook evaluation includes “measuring the values (or potential value) of a set of learning materials (textbooks) by making judgments about the effect of the materials (textbook) on the people using them”. Tomlinson (2001) argues that textbook evaluation is an applied linguistic activity through which teachers, inspectors, textbooks’ writers, and syllabus designers can reach sound decisions and judgments about the effectiveness of the material in use. Judging the quality of the textbook, both in terms of content and coverage, and assessing textbook’s match to the curriculum are highly needed because textbooks directly influence the teaching and learning process (Mukundan, 2007; Byrd, 2001; Richards, 2001; Brown, 1995).

3.3 Focus on the Tunisian context: A presentation of the 7th grade (Basic Education) textbooks

The current research paper is interested to study the physical make-up, the content, and practical concerns related to the 7th grade students’ textbook and its corresponding activity book in order to make a comprehensible evaluation. The student’s book as well as its corresponding activity book designed for 7th grade (basic education) are entitled “Let’s learn English”. As the title indicates, it is expected that those textbooks will introduce and initiate Tunisian 7th grade learners to the discovering and the learning of the English language, especially this 7th year basic education (after completion of the primary cycle) constitutes the first academic encounter of Tunisian learners with the English language. As such, there is an invitation of the learner to engage in the learning process and to discover the learning of the English language.

✚ *Let’s learn English: 7th year Basic Education; Student’s Book*

This book tackles different issues/ subjects related to every-day life situations and contexts as the main objective is to make learners able to learn English and to interact and live with others (Tunisian official programmes). Each module consists of four lessons. Module one consists of the following section: “Tell me more about your family, What are your hobbies ? How do you spend your day ?”. Module two includes these lessons: “Aly’s Friend, What’s happening ?, Welcome to Tunisia, and Time for lunch”. Module three is made up of the following sections: “Aly’s house, Uncle Hedy’s farm, Market day, and Happy Birthday”. Module four tackles these titles: “You must be careful, What’s the matter ?, Let’s keep fit and What’s the weather like ?”. Module five, the final one, includes “ Let’s Visit Aly’s School, Who is your favourite teacher ?, Let’s help others and Good bye Peter”. So it is worth noticing that the book lessons are arranged in way as if they are episodes of a story which the learner unwraps and discovers as he/she progresses through the various sections. The story is about a cultural exchange whereby a British teenager comes to stay with a Tunisian family as a token for intercultural learning, which facilitates access to universal culture (Tunisian official programmes).

Each section presents, develops, and incorporates the language skills, the structures and the language functions and offers the opportunity for practicing them. Each section also integrates phonetic symbols used to teach pronunciation and dictation, word games, and puzzles used to teach spelling. Every section closes with a ‘production task’ to consolidate and demonstrate learning and to evaluate teaching and learning. Moreover, a review section, in the form of self- evaluation checklists, is presented in order to promote and assess teaching and learning and to increase learners’ autonomy and responsibility of their own learning. It may be noted here that “the teacher can be selective in dealing with this section depending on the learner's needs. With regard to timing, each module can be covered over an approximate timeline of ten teaching hours. The remaining time is devoted to project work, consolidation, and remedial work.”(The teacher’s book, p.6)3

✚ *The Activity Book*

The Activity Book is meant to be used as subsequent to the Student’s book in the classroom, i.e. after dealing with the student’s book, the activity book offers the learner the opportunity to more practice the acquired knowledge (from the student’s book) through a set of corresponding activities and tasks. However, the authors of textbooks claim that this book should especially used when the teacher sees it necessary to consolidate what has been acquired in the student’s book. In the *Teacher’s Book*, the authors clarify that “the decision regarding the amount of practice i.e. the number of activities dealt with is left to the teacher's discretion depending on learner's needs.” (p. 7).

The Activity Book includes a vast range of activities: test-type activities and games together with TPR activities that suit learners' age and cognitive development.

It should be added that an important material used in addition to the textbooks is the “Audio-Cassette”. It includes listening passages that, along with the pronunciation activities in the activity book, will help the learners develop their listening skills by listening to the practiced in different situations for different purposes.

III. METHOD

3.1 Research Questions

This study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent are the EL textbooks satisfactory in terms of their content?
2. To what extent are the EL textbooks appropriate in terms of physical make-up?
3. To what extent are the EL textbooks adequate in terms of some practical considerations?

3.2 Participants

Because this research is interested in evaluating textbooks in use in Tunisia from the perspectives of EFL teachers, the participants form a total sample size of 45 Tunisian EFL teachers who are currently teaching in different prep-schools in Gabes, Tunisia. They were randomly selected from the whole population of almost 209 EFL teachers of Basic education. The sample population is fairly heterogeneous in terms of sex (both female and male were included in the study), age and number of years of teaching experience, but homogeneous in terms of first language (Arabic) and second language (French). The informants accepted to answer the questionnaire survey on a voluntary basis.

3.3 Materials

The materials to be evaluated in this study included the two English language textbooks (the student's book and its corresponding activity book) currently used at basic education throughout Tunisia. They are entitled "Let's Learn English" (see the previous section Literature review for more information about the textbooks in focus).

3.4 Data collection tool

The selection of particular instruments, in any kind of research, is highly important because these devices do not only facilitate the gathering and obtaining of relevant information but also they influence and affect the interpretation and the discussion of the obtained results. Since the present paper seeks to gain insights on teachers' perceptions regarding the textbooks in use, the use of a questionnaire survey designed by the researcher deemed necessary and helpful. For this purpose, I designed a 42-items questionnaire, divided into three major section (physical make-up, content and practical considerations). The first section, physical design, includes eight items. The second, content, is sub-divided into five parts: reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and spelling, and communicative functions (each part includes three to six questions). The final section, practical considerations, integrates seven items. Two English language teachers who had different teaching experiences participated in the pilot study of the questionnaire. This pilot study is very helpful for me because I had the opportunity to reflect on and refine my questionnaire items in order to reach interesting findings.

3.5 Research design

This study attempts to evaluate the 7th year basic education English textbooks currently used at all the preparatory schools all over Tunisia. First, after a pilot study of the questionnaire survey was conducted, the 42-items questionnaire targeting diverse features of the English language textbooks was confirmed. Then, it was administered to 45 English language teachers who voluntarily answered the various questions. The items are assessed on the basis of a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 'not at all' 1, 'not satisfactorily' 2, 'to some extent' 3, to 'to a great extent' 4. Using Cronbach's alpha, the reliability estimate of the questionnaire items is calculated to be $r = .85$ for the first part and $r = .86$ for the second part and $r = .85$ for the final part. Then, the self-reporting questionnaire was administered to the participants in order to probe the degree of their satisfaction about the textbooks in use in terms of physical design, reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and spelling, and communicative functions and practical considerations. Afterward, the self-reported data collected were quantified and analyzed using descriptive data (median, mean and SD) and finally discussed in order to reach answers the three research questions set forth.

IV. FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

The central tendency is represented by the median which is less affected by the extreme data at either end of the scale. The 42 items of the questionnaire survey were arranged and examined based on the median of the answers given to them. The following table 1 displays the results of the descriptive statistics.

| | | Median | Mean | SD |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------|------|-------|
| Physical design | | 3 | 1.95 | 0.488 |
| Content | Reading comprehension | 2 | 2.09 | 0.425 |
| | Vocabulary | 2 | 2.01 | 0.556 |
| | Grammar | 2 | 2.30 | 0.560 |
| | Pronunciation and spelling | 2 | 1.82 | 0.625 |
| | Communicative functions | 2 | 1.42 | 0.602 |
| Practical Considerations | | 2 | 2.01 | 0.523 |

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics: the results of Medians, Means and Standard Deviations

The statistics reveal that the mode and median of the items about the physical design section of the textbooks turned out to be 3. The mean is (1.95) with 0.95% confidence level. This implies that the respondents seem to be satisfied to some extent with the physical appearance and design of the textbooks (as 3 stands for 'satisfied to some extent'). The participants, hence, seem to accept and 'like' the wide range of pictures, images, the clarity of illustrations, the paper quality, the type size, the size and the weight of the textbooks that were perceived as appropriate, adequate and convenient to the level of pupils. This result is correlated to the different types of colorful pictures, authentic images of real people (especially teenagers), and environment included in the 7th grade textbooks given that the central idea upon which all the sections are built revolve around the story of a cultural exchange (a British teenager comes to stay with a Tunisian family as a token for intercultural learning). Therefore, it can be inferred that textbooks' authors did take into consideration the aptness of the pictures not only to the content of the lessons but also to the pupils' age and needs, as such there is a focus on presenting and designing visuals that are appealing and motivating for learners. However, this result contradicts the findings of other researches. Jahangard (2007), for instance, examined English textbooks used in Iran and found out that physical layout of books is not at all satisfactory especially regarding the low paper quality and ambiguity of pictures used.

In terms of textbooks' content, it can be deduced that both the students' textbook and its corresponding activity book were "not satisfactorily" acceptable concerning the texts used to teach reading comprehension. The informants' dissatisfaction can be related to three reasons: First, the teachers may have noticed their pupils' disinterest with the topics dealt with in the texts inside the classroom setting. Second, the themes and topics raised may be out-dated. Third, lack of variety and diversification of the topics which may lead to monotony as all the sections are bound by one main story. Concerning the vocabulary presentation and practice, the results show that the participants are dissatisfied by the vocabulary presentation. This finding can be related to a lack of correspondence among the vocabulary items presented as well as a lack of diversification of vocabulary activities used for consolidating learning. This result echoes other findings. Dahmardeh (2009), for example, argues that the new lexis reflected by the textbooks is out of a plausible context and is presented as isolated fragment. Responses to items related to grammar features unfold un-acceptance among the majority of the informants. This implies that textbook' authors may have not considered the introduction and reinforcement of grammar points critical. It can be concluded that the textbooks are "not satisfactory" acceptable in terms of "Grammar" presentation and practice. Similarly, EFL teachers' responses to pronunciation and spelling items reveal discontent which can be due to the lack or restricted opportunities for practice inside the classroom setting. The last part in this content section, the communicative functions of the textbooks in use, shows that the median of the items is 2 as "not satisfactory". However, the mean (1.46) can be considered as 1 (not at all). This means that the textbooks are "not at all" acceptable in terms of communicative functions' presentation and practice. This fact implies that the communicative functions introduced in the textbooks are context-limited so that pupils may find it very difficult to visualize the interactive real life situation. This result in fact mismatches the authors' claim that they focused on promoting learners' interactive skills (the teacher's book).

Concerning the final section of the questionnaire survey, the results demonstrate that the majority of the respondents perceive the textbooks as "not satisfactorily" acceptable in terms of some practical concerns. This implies that the teaching methodology advocated by the Tunisian official curriculum (which calls for CLT implementation) contradicts the methods in which the 7th grade textbooks' tasks and exercises are introduced in class. Within this view, Azizfar et al (2010) contends that textbook's writers emphasized mainly mechanical

drills, substitution and repetition drills, and learners are merely producing simple sentences. In the Tunisian context, many researchers (Ounis & Ounis, 2017; Mrabet-Abid, 2005; Abdesslem, 1996) outlined that opportunities for genuine communication and language practice are very rare and occasional inside the classroom setting, especially with form-focused teaching methodology. Therefore, it can be concluded that the textbooks designed for 7th year basic education do not serve or support the objectives stated by the curriculum.

V. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to evaluate 7th grade textbooks through examining EFL teachers' perceptions regarding different characteristics of the textbooks. The basic outcome is that the informants reported dissatisfactory attitude regarding the content as well as some practical concerns (basically the teaching methodology), yet they seem to accept the general physical design of the textbooks in focus. Nevertheless, more valid judgments and assessment of the textbooks require more studies that tend to rely on a triangulation of different research instruments (classroom observation, interviews, document analysis).

VI. IMPLICATIONS

On the one hand, results of this study may offer interesting guidelines for syllabus and curriculum designers, and materials developers. Inappropriate sections of the textbooks can be revisited, improved or reformed by the committee of textbook designers in Tunisia in order to develop and enhance their quality in terms of both content and physical make up. On the other hand, EFL teachers must be aware of the importance of employing different strategies and creating new teaching supports to compensate for the weak points of the textbooks.

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