

Textbook Evaluation:

EFL Teachers' Perspectives on "New Interchange"

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Abstract: The present study aims at evaluating New Interchange Series, which is widely used in language classrooms in Iran. The purpose of this research project is to determine the overall pedagogical value and suitability of the series. Thirty-five Iranian EFL teachers comprising males and females participated in this study. The instrument employed in the study was a textbook evaluation questionnaire developed by Litz (2000). Descriptive statistics were carried out to interpret the data. The findings showed that most teachers have similar opinions with regard to the effectiveness and suitability of the series. Results also demonstrated that the series suffer from a number of weak points that require teachers' awareness and consideration.

Key words: Textbook; Textbook evaluation; New Interchange Series; Iranian EFL teachers

BACKGROUND

Textbooks play a crucial role in the realm of language teaching and learning and are considered to be the second important factor in the second/foreign language classroom compared to the teacher. The textbook is a useful tool in the hands of the teacher, and the teacher must know not only how to use it, but also how effective it can be. Teachers throughout the world use texts to guide their instruction. They greatly influence how content is delivered. Textbooks, in fact, serve as guides that teachers can refer to in order to make their teaching more effective. Without a textbook available, it is really difficult, if not impossible, for a teacher to deliver his teaching to the students. As Hutchinson and Torres (1994, cited in Litz, 2005) suggest:

The textbook is an almost universal element of [English language] teaching.

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Millions of copies are sold every year, and numerous aid projects have been set up to produce them in [various] countries...No teaching-learning situation, it seems, is complete until it has its relevant textbook. (p. 315)

There is no doubt that no textbook is perfect. Every single textbook suffers from some shortcomings. Teachers, therefore, should have the potential to supplement a textbook with certain materials based on their learners' learning styles and needs. However, there exist a lot of arguments for using textbooks. Some of them are listed below:

- a textbook is a framework which regulates the programs,
- in the eyes of learners, having no textbook means there is no goal to achieve,
- without a textbook, learners do not take their learning seriously,
- in many situations, a textbook can play the role of a syllabus,
- a textbook provides ready-made teaching texts and learning tasks,
- a textbook is a cheap way of providing learning materials,
- a learner without a textbook is overly dependent upon the teacher, and
- a textbook means security, guidance, and support, especially for novice teachers.

On the contrary, many arguments exist that are against using textbooks, some of them are listed below:

- for different groups of learners with differing learning needs and learning styles, no single textbook can be perfect,
- topics in a textbook may not be relevant for and interesting to all learners,
- a textbook is confining, that is, it inhibits teachers' creativity,
- a textbook sets prearranged sequence and structure that may not be realistic and situation-friendly (Ur, 1996).

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a vast body of literature on textbook evaluation in different contexts. Different authors and researchers have employed different textbook evaluation schemes or checklists to evaluate different textbooks or materials. Litz (2000), for example, tried to evaluate a textbook called English Firsthand 2 (EF2). He came to the conclusion that EF2 is a relatively new addition to the vast array of ELT materials that are currently available on the market. While perhaps not as well known as other prominent series of textbooks, EF2 has many notable and worthwhile characteristics. For example, the entire textbook package is well conceived and it contains a wide variety of useful supplementary materials. The book is also very attractive and organized in a clear, logical, and coherent manner. In addition, EF2 reflects a multi-skills syllabus, and it manages to integrate the four language skills without neglecting other important aspects of ELT such as vocabulary development. Despite its strengths, EF2 had some shortcomings. Many of the activities, for instance, were repetitive, failed to encourage truly meaningful practice, promote realistic discourse, lead to the internalization of language.

Ranalli (2002) evaluated *New Headway Upper-Intermediate*, one of the course books used at the Foreign Language Institute of Yonsei University in Seoul, South Korea. Having analysed the data, the researcher concluded that *New Headway Upper-Intermediate* is well designed and well written which provides a great deal of support for learning. The book offers a good balance of work on accuracy and fluency while the overall emphasis is clearly on oral communication. The language input is useful and relevant, especially the material focusing on the grammar of speech and vocabulary systems, although

the language variety is not ideal. The primary disadvantages lie in the methodology, which is somewhat restrictive and rests on some arguably shaky theoretical foundations. Moreover, there is not enough emphasis on speaking skill in the book. The researcher finally concludes that the book's shortcomings are outweighed by its strengths and these can be overcome through supplementary materials.

Morgan (2003) evaluated IELTS preparation materials and showed that such materials do not provide the learners with enough knowledge that they need to achieve their vocational or academic goals. He, furthermore, found out that the books do not build up the candidates' motivation since they are not visually attractive enough, which is a major shortcoming of the IELTS books.

In a different study, Melo (2003) evaluated and analyzed a textbook series called True Colors, which was taught in Brazil. The researcher explored the extent to which the series were reflective of Brazilian language learners' needs as perceived by the teachers. She concluded that the instructors were not highly satisfied with the series for several reasons. One is that the book did not seem to be interesting to the learners as a result of repetitious lessons. Moreover, the number of exercises in the book was not sufficient.

In Iran EFL context, too, the issue of textbook evaluation has attracted the attention of several researchers. Ansari and Babaii (2002), for example, evaluated ten EFL/ESL textbooks and came up with a list of some characteristics of a suitable textbook, as follows:

- 1). Dissemination of a vision (theory or approach) about the nature of language,
- 2). The nature of learning and how the theory can be put to applied use;
- 3). Stating purpose(s) and objective(s) for the total course and for individual units;
- 4). Selection and its rationale for coverage, grading, organization and sequencing;
- 5). Teacher's satisfaction with the syllabus for providing a guide book, advice on the methodology and explaining theoretical orientations, and keys to the exercises and supplementary materials;
- 6). Learner satisfaction with the syllabus for giving piecemeal, unit-by-unit instruction and clear instructions for exercises.

In another study, Jahangard (2007) evaluated four EFL textbooks that have been taught in Iran high schools. He uses several criteria to analyze the textbooks. One strong point that the researcher finds is that the tasks and topics introduced in each lesson are interesting and hence attractive to learners in EFL classes. However, in terms of vocabulary explanation, the writer concludes that the new words are not contextualized, which makes it difficult for the learners to understand the meanings. Another shortcoming that the researcher has noticed in these textbooks is that the listening skill is neglected. In fact, there is no specific section devoted to the practice of listening skill in the learners. The researcher finally suggests that EFL materials taught in high schools need to be examined more attentively by a group of experts in the field.

Using Bloom's taxonomy of learning objectives, Riazi and Mosallanejad (2010) studied the types of learning objectives in four textbooks taught in Iran. In terms of level of difficulty and text length, a logical sequence of difficulty was noticed in the textbooks. Moreover, the researchers conclude that the most prevalent learning objectives in the textbooks were lower-order cognitive skills, that is, knowledge, comprehension, and application.

Such being the case, the current study fills the gap in the literature by investigating the effectiveness of New Interchange Series from the viewpoint of Iranian EFL teachers to contribute to the body of knowledge in this area. Since this series is widely accepted in Iran EFL context and many language teachers employ the series in their teaching, it is crucial to figure out what they think of the series. Moreover, discovering the weaknesses of the series might make them more aware of the limitations of the series and hence take measures to compensate for them.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study aims at evaluating New Interchange Series in terms of its suitability and appropriateness for Iranian audience. It endeavors to find out whether or not teachers are satisfied with the series. Moreover, it seeks teachers' perceptions of the weaknesses of the series. Specifically, the study seeks answers to the following questions:

What do Iranian EFL teachers think of New Interchange Series in terms of their appropriateness and suitability in Iran EFL educational setting?

How do teachers rate practical considerations, layout and design, activities, skills, language type, subject and content of the series?

What are the shortcomings of the series from the perspective of Iranian EFL teachers?

METHODOLOGY

The data required for the study were gathered from 35 teachers comprising both male and female teachers. They were recruited based on purposive sampling. The teachers who were chosen had been teaching New Interchange books for several years, hence experienced enough to be able to evaluate the book and identify its strengths and weaknesses. The teachers were selected from different language institutes in different parts of Iran. They were between 25-40 years of age.

The instrument used in this study was a textbook evaluation questionnaire developed by Litz (2000). In order to check the reliability of the questionnaire, a test – retest with a two-week interval was administered. The questionnaire showed a reliability index of 0.81 which can be considered satisfactory. The questionnaire, which comprises 40 items, is divided into several categories, each of which explores a certain aspect of the textbook. These categories include layout and design of the book, activities, skills, language type, subject and content of the book. In order to elicit more information from the participants, an open-ended question was added to the questionnaire. The purpose of this question was to give the respondents the opportunity to report any weakness they might have noticed in the series.

The series selected for evaluation was New Interchange Series (by Jack. C. Richards with Jonathan Hull and Susan Proctor) which includes 4 textbooks, i.e., Intro, Interchange 1, Interchange 2, and Interchange 3, each of which has its own textbook, workbook, cassettes, teacher's manual, and CDs. Each book includes sixteen units. At the end of the books, there are some extra activities to provide more exercise over the previous lessons. The reason why such textbook was chosen for evaluation is that New Interchange Series has been widely used in many language institutes across the country and many language educators in Iran see the series as an effective textbook to achieve their linguistic goals.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Having collected the required data, the researchers embarked on data analysis procedures. One objective of the study was to see what Iranian EFL teachers thought of the series in terms of several aspects. To meet this objective, descriptive statistics was used as presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Result of descriptive statistics

Feature	Mean	SD
Practical Consideration	4.11	0.43
Layout and Design	3.88	0.49
Activities	3.99	0.54
Skills	4.02	0.54
Language type	3.90	0.61
Subject and Content	4.01	0.58

Note: SD (Standard Deviation)

As indicated in Table 1, in terms of practical considerations the obtained standard deviation was 0.43 and the mean was 4.11, showing that most of the teachers' answers were scattered round the mean. This means that most teachers had the same opinion with regard to the practical considerations of the books. Results showed that teachers mostly agreed that the price of the textbook is reasonable, they are easily accessible, recently published, accompanied by a teacher's guide, workbook, and audio-tapes. They also believed that the textbooks' methodology is comparable to theirs.

Pertaining layout and design, the standard deviation obtained is 0.49 and the mean is 3.88. This shows that teachers had the same view towards layout and design of the books. Nearly most teachers, according to the results, were of the belief that the textbooks include a detailed overview of the functions, structures, and vocabulary to be taught in each unit. They also agreed that the layout and design of the books is appropriate and clear, they are organized effectively, include an adequate vocabulary list, adequate review sections and exercises, an adequate set of evaluation quizzes or testing suggestions. They were also of the same opinion that the teacher's book contains guidance about how they can be used to the utmost advantage, and that the materials' objectives are clear to both the teacher and student.

With regard to activities, the data reveal that the standard deviation is 0.54, while the mean is 3.99. The results show that most teachers were satisfied with the activities used in New Interchange Series. As can be concluded from the results, teachers were unanimous with the opinion that the textbooks provide a balance of activities, that is, there is an even distribution of free vs. controlled exercises and tasks that focus on both fluent and accurate production. They think that the activities encourage sufficient communicative meaningful practice, incorporate individual, pair, and group work, promote creative, original, and independent responses, and can be modified or supplemented easily. Also, they believed that the grammar points and vocabulary items are introduced in motivating and realistic contexts, and that the tasks are conducive to the internalization of newly introduced language.

As it is clear from the data presented above, regarding the skills, the size of the mean is 4.02 and that of standard deviation is 0.54. This, too, shows that the teachers all agreed on the skills utilized in New Interchange Series. The outcomes of the study demonstrated that in teachers' opinion, the books include and focus on the skills that the students need to practice, and that they provide an appropriate balance of the four language skills. Teachers unanimously agreed that the textbooks pay attention to sub-skills, i.e., listening for gist, note-taking, skimming for information, and highlights and practices natural pronunciation (i.e., stress and intonation). Moreover, the practice of individual skills is integrated into the practice of other skills.

As the data reveals, the mean score of the respondents regarding the language type is 3.90, and the standard deviation is 0.61. The results show that the language in the series is appropriated and acceptable in order for the teachers to teach. The teachers, as revealed by the outcomes of the study, were of the same belief that the language used in the textbooks is authentic, i.e., like real-life English, and is at the right level of students' English ability, represents a diverse range of registers and accents. To teachers, the progression of grammar points and vocabulary items is appropriate, and the language functions exemplify English that the students will be likely to use.

Finally, with respect to the subject and content of the books, the mean obtained is 4.01 and standard deviation is 0.58. This shows that most of the teachers are happy with the subject and content of the

series. According to the results of the study teachers were of the same opinion that the subject and content of the textbooks is relevant to their students' needs as English language learners. In addition, they contended that the subject and content of the textbooks is realistic, interesting, challenging, motivating, with sufficient variety of topics.

To answer the second question of the study, the subcategories of the questionnaire were rated based on the obtained means. The purpose was to see which category the teachers were more satisfied with. As can be seen, the categories are rated as follows:

- 1) Practical consideration
- 2) Skills
- 3) Subject and content
- 4) Activities
- 5) Language type
- 6) Layout and design

It can be considered that the category which the teachers were happiest with is the practical consideration. However, the category which the teachers were the least satisfied with is the layout and design of the series. The teachers didn't have a very positive view towards "layout and design" of the series. They believed that the textbook does not include a detailed overview of the functions, structures and vocabulary that will be taught in each unit. In addition, the layout and design is not appropriate and clear; the textbook is not organized effectively; there are no vocabulary lists or review sections and exercises, and there are no evaluation quizzes. This is a drawback of the series, both for teachers who would like to assess the progress of the students and see how effective his/her teaching has been, and for students who need to evaluate themselves and their learning after studying a set number of units.

Another category which is worth discussing is "subject and content" which was ranked as the fourth category. It can be argued that teachers were not highly satisfied with the textbooks' content and subject. One of the items some teachers did not agree with was the relevancy of the subject and content of the books to their students' needs as English language learners. The reason may be the fact that in every class there are different students with different needs. One student is after getting grades and being promoted to a higher level. Another is after learning English to achieve a business goal. Another one is seeking an educational goal, etc. Therefore, it is very improbable, if not impossible, in order for a teacher to be able to satisfy all his/her students' needs.

The third objective of the study was to elicit more information from the teachers with regard to what they perceived as the weaknesses of the series. To this end, an open-ended question was added to the questionnaire. Having content-analyzed the data derived from the open-ended question, the researchers came up with a list of weaknesses that the teachers reported to exist in the series. The following is a list of the shortcomings the teachers mentioned:

- 1) lack of supplementary teaching materials,
- 2) some parts of the series are beyond the linguistic capacity of the learners,
- 3) some items and topics that exist in the series do not correspond to Iranian learners' culture,
- 4) too many testing exercises,
- 5) inadequate number of Teacher's Manual,
- 6) writing skill does not receive enough attention, and therefore, learners do not receive much practice in this skill.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study was an attempt to evaluate the suitability of New Interchange Series from the Iranian EFL teachers' perception. Results demonstrated the strong points and weak points of the series. One strong point that the teachers mentioned is the practical consideration of the series, which include the reasonable price, its accessibility, and the existence of teacher's guide as well as audio tape. Another good point is the layout and design of the series, which is appropriate and clear, and appropriately organized. Moreover, there is a balance of activities and four skills in the series as well as adequate communicative practices. On the contrary, the series suffers from a number of limitations that need to be taken into account by the language teachers who intend to use the series in their teaching. However, as discussed above, no single textbook can meet the needs of a large and different group of language learners. As a result, the burden lies on the teacher to take appropriate measures to compensate for the deficiencies of a certain textbook in order to bring about effective learning outcomes.

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