

Textbook Evaluation: An Investigation into Touchstone Series

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Abstract—“It is absolutely essential that we establish and apply a wide variety of relevant and contextually appropriate criteria for the evaluation of the textbooks that we use in our language classrooms” (Litz,2000). ELT materials (textbooks) play a really crucial role in many language classrooms, but in recent years there has been a lot of debate throughout the ELT profession on the actual role of materials in teaching English as a Second/Foreign Language (TESL/TEFL). Some issues that have been discussed in recent years include textbook design and practicality, methodological validity, the role of textbooks in innovation, the authenticity of materials in terms of their representation of language, and the appropriateness of gender representation, subject matter, and cultural components. This study aims at an investigation into Touchstone series in Iran EFL context. To this end, forty highly experienced teachers (20 males and 20 females) holding degree from BA to Ph.D. and age range 24-35 were called for cooperation. A forty item questionnaire adapted from David R.A. Litz (2000) was used to elicit information needed for the study. The data obtained through the questionnaire were subject to basic statistics and Independent Sample T-test to check the significance of difference between male and female responses. Results indicated that Touchstone series was a suitable and appropriate device for language teachers to obtain their aims as well as the aims of the language institutes and that except for practical considerations of the books there was no statistically significant difference between the attitudes of male and female teachers towards the series.

Index Terms—evaluation, ELT materials, TESL, practicality, methodological validity, authenticity, Independent Sample T-test

I. INTRODUCTION

A very important professional activity for all EFL teachers is the ability to evaluate teaching materials effectively. Today there is a wealth of EFL materials available, with hundreds of new, commercially available titles appearing every year. Teachers or course organizers are often under considerable professional and financial pressure to select a course book for an ELT program that will then become the textbook for years to come. Moreover, materials are usually seen as being the core of a particular program and are the most visible representation of what happens in the classroom. O'Neill (1982) states that ‘No other medium is as easy to use as a book’ (p.107).

The evaluation of current materials therefore deserves serious consideration since an inappropriate choice may waste funds and time and has a demotivating effect on students and possibly teachers. Another reason for textbook evaluation is the fact that it can be very useful in teacher development and professional growth. Cunningsworth (1995) and Ellis (1997) believe that textbook evaluation helps teachers move beyond impressionistic assessments and helps them to get useful, accurate, systematic, and contextual insights into the overall nature of textbook material. Textbook evaluation can also be a valuable part of teacher training programs since it serves the purpose of making teachers aware of important features to look for in textbooks while familiarizing them with a wide range of published language instruction materials.

No textbook or set of materials is likely to be perfect. What's more, according to Sheldon (1988) “coursebook assessment is fundamentally a subjective, rule-of-thumb activity” and there exists no neat formula or system to provide a definite yardstick (p.245). Nevertheless, there is a need for a model that's brief, practical to use and comprehensive in its coverage of criteria. As Cunningsworth (1995) notes, ‘it is important to limit the number of criteria used and the number of questions asked to manageable proportions’ (p.5). Otherwise we risk being swamped in a sea of detail. Tomlinson (1999) also suggests that ‘the obvious but important point is that there can be no one model framework for the evaluation of materials; the framework used must be determined by the reasons, objectives, and circumstances of the evaluation’ (p.11).

A. *The Role of Textbooks in EFL / ESL Classrooms*

Textbooks play a very crucial role in language teaching and learning and are considered to be the second important factor in the second / foreign language classroom compared to the teacher. As Hutchinson and Torres (1994) suggest:

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

Haycroft (1998) suggests that one of the primary advantages of using textbooks is that they are psychologically essential for students since their progress and achievement can be measured concretely when we use them. Sheldon (1988) has stated, students often have expectations about using a textbook in their particular language classroom and program and believe that published materials have more credibility than teacher-generated or "in-house" materials. O'Neill (1982) has indicated, textbooks are sensitive to students' needs, even if they are not made specifically for them, they are efficient in terms of time and money, and they should allow for adaptation and improvisation. Another advantage identified by Cunningsworth (1995) is the potential which textbooks have for serving several additional roles in the ELT curriculum. He argues that they are an effective source for self-directed learning, an effective resource for presentation material, a source of ideas and activities, a reference source for students, a syllabus where they reflect pre-determined learning objectives, and support for less experienced teachers who have yet to gain in confidence. Hutchinson and Torres (1994) have pointed out that textbooks play a central role in innovation. They suggest that textbooks can support teachers by potentially disturbing and threatening change processes; moreover, they demonstrate new and/or untried methodologies, introduce change gradually, and create scaffolding upon which teachers can build a more creative methodology of their own.

Textbooks take on a very important role in language classes, and it's important to select a good textbook. This study seeks to evaluate new Touchstone series from the teacher's viewpoint and to see how appropriate and useful they are in order to meet the needs of students and to get a good feedback in terms of their instructional philosophy, approach, method, and technique which suits the students and their needs.

B. Review of Literature

Textbooks in ELT are of crucial importance. They must be of a suitable level of quality, usefulness, and appropriateness for the context and people with whom they are being used. While the literature on textbook evaluation is not particularly extensive, various writers have presented evaluation 'checklists' based on supposedly generalizable criteria that can be used by both teachers and students in many different situations. Although Sheldon (1988) states that no general list of criteria can really be applied to all teaching and learning contexts without considerable modification, many of these standardized evaluation checklists contain same components that can be used as helpful starting points for ELT practitioners in different situations. In the field of ELT textbook design and analysis theorists like Williams (1983), Sheldon (1988), Brown (1995), Cunningsworth (1995) and Harmer (1996) all agree that evaluation checklists should have some criteria related to the physical characteristics of textbooks such as layout, organizational, and logistical characteristics. Other important criteria should also be incorporated; those that assess a textbook's methodology, aims, and approaches, and the degree to which a set of materials is not only teachable but also fits the needs of the individual teacher's approach as well as the organization's overall curriculum.

What's more, criteria should investigate the specific language, functions, grammar, and skills content that are covered by a particular textbook as well as the relevance of linguistic items to the prevailing socio-cultural environment. Finally, textbook evaluations should contain criteria that pertain to representation of cultural and gender components in addition to the extent to which the linguistic items, subjects, content, and topics match up to students' personalities, backgrounds, needs, and interests as well as those of the teacher and/or institution. Following is a list of some pre-eminent textbook evaluation schemes:

- Davison's (1975) scheme
- Tucker's (1975) scheme
- Dauod & Cele-Murcia's (1979) scheme
- William's (1983) scheme
- Sheldon's (1988) scheme
- Skierso's (1991) scheme
- Cunningsworth's (1995) scheme
- Ur's (1996) scheme
- Littlejohn's (1998) scheme

Only a few studies have recently been conducted on textbook evaluation. With regard to the inclusion of pragmatic issues a study has been conducted by Darali (2007). She made a careful analysis of Spectrum series and reported that the series have provided a variety of language functions, but some important language functions that are used in everyday conversation more frequently, e.g. promising, and threatening, not only were in the form of unintended functions, but also they were not as frequent as others.

Iraji (2007) conducted a study and made a careful analysis on the New Interchange series based on the principles of communicative and task-based approaches to investigate to what extent the principles of CLT and TBLT approaches have been included in the series. To do this, she has employed Ellis's (2003) task model and found that the New Interchange series do not follow the principles of communicative and task-based approaches as the author has claimed.

Toolabi (2002) has used Tsui's model (1995) of Initiation, Follow-up and Response (IRF) to analyze the 'Language Functions' of the three English textbooks taught in the Iranian high schools to see whether these dialogues utilize different possible and available models of structures in conveying different functions or not. His findings indicated that, first, the dialogs in the textbooks do not cover all the classes and sub-classifications of Tsui's framework (1995), and second, the distribution of moves in the three books has enjoyed an irregularity.

Another study was by Rastegar (1992) who analyzed and evaluated the dialogs in English textbooks taught in Guidance and High schools in Iran from the perspective of dispreferred seconds and dispreferred markers based on Levinson's (1983) model. According to Rastegar (1992) only two of the five models proposed by Levinson (1983) are used.

Some comparative studies in the area of textbook evaluation have been conducted as well. One of the most recent ones belongs to Vellenga (2004) who makes a comparison between EFL and ESL textbooks. She believes that textbooks rarely provide enough information for learners to successfully acquire pragmatic competence. She reported that regarding speech acts in each of the books, there is a focus on explicit mention and metapragmatic description of speech acts such as requests, apologies, complaints, etc.

C. Significance of the Study

It's only recently that textbooks are being systematically evaluated in Iran. The results of this study would be significant to all who are in the process of second or foreign language learning or teaching (SLL, FLL, SLT, or FLT). The outcomes of this study can help teachers decide what to do in their classes in terms of presentation, procedure and evaluation of students' learning. The results of the study would be helpful not only to teachers and administrators, but also to material developers and syllabus planners.

D. Objectives of the Study

The present study aimed at evaluating Touchstone series in terms of its appropriateness for Iranian students. It endeavored to find out whether or not the series can satisfy the students' needs and to see if the teachers are satisfied with the series and its feedback. Specifically, the study sought answers to following questions:

1. What do EFL teachers think of Touchstone series in terms of its suitability in Iran EFL educational setting known to them?
2. How do teachers rank practical considerations, layout and design, activities, skills, language type, and subject and content of the series?
3. Is there any significant difference between the attitudes of male and female teachers towards the series?

II. METHOD

A. Judges

Forty teachers comprising of 20 males and 20 females were called for cooperation. These teachers had been teaching Touchstone books for several years, hence experienced enough to be able to evaluate the books and identify their strengths and weaknesses. They were both males and females between 24-35 years of age and ranged from BA holders to Ph.D. candidates. The questionnaires were given to all the judges one by one, and they were asked to fill them out attentively. There was no time limit to complete the questionnaire.

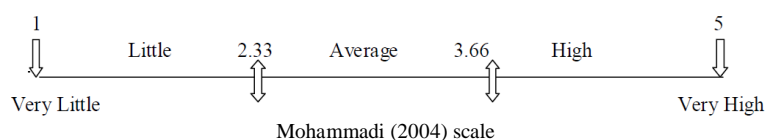
B. Instrument

We must make every effort to establish and apply a wide variety of relevant and contextually appropriate criteria for the evaluation of the textbooks that we use in our language classrooms. We should also ensure "that careful selection is made, and that the materials selected closely reflect [the needs of the learners and] the aims, methods, and values of the teaching program." (Cunningsworth, 1995, p.7).

The instrument used in this study was a textbook evaluation questionnaire developed by David R. A. Litz (2000). The questionnaire, which comprises 40 items, is divided into several categories, each of which explores a certain aspect of the textbook. This questionnaire was applied to Touchstone series authored by Michael McCarthy, Jeanne McCarten, and Helen Sandiford (2006).

C. Procedure of Data Analysis

After gathering the required data, statistical analyses were performed using PASW Statistics 18. The data of the study were subjected to descriptive and inferential statistics upon which the results and conclusions were made. In descriptive statistics mean and standard deviation were utilized to analyze the data which were then discussed based on Mohammadi (2004) scale.



In this scale the values between “1 to 2.33” are little, the ones between “2.33 to 3.66” are average, and finally the values between “3.66 to 5” are high.

In the inferential statistics Independent Sample T-test was carried out to check the significance of differences between male and female responses.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To answer the first question of the study, descriptive statistics was used as presented in the following table.

TABLE1:
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Categories	N	Mean	Range	Std. Deviation	Mohammadi Scale
practical consideration	40	20.52	5-25	1.70	high
Layout and Design	40	30.67	8-40	4.60	high
Activities	40	28.82	7-35	2.48	high
Skills	40	18.72	5-25	4.16	high
Language Type	40	23.25	6-30	3.21	high
Subject and content	40	19.97	6-30	3.26	average
Conclusion	40	16.15	4-20	1.99	high
Valid N	40				

The table shows the mean, range, and standard deviation obtained for each category. Mohammadi (2004) scale indicates that with regard to most categories- the practical considerations of the books, their layout and design, activities, skills, language type, and conclusion- the teachers were highly satisfied and considered the books an appropriate device to achieve educative goals. As table 1 reveals, regarding the subject and content of the series only, the results of the study showed an average level of satisfaction among teachers which may be due to the fact that the series is not to satisfy all people regardless of the culture in which they live.

The first category in the questionnaire was practical considerations of the series. Most teachers agreed that the price of the textbook is reasonable, they are easily accessible, recently published, and accompanied by a teacher's guide, workbook, and audio CDs. They also believed that the authors' view on methodology was comparable to theirs.

The second category was layout and design of the series. Nearly most teachers 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 book is appropriate and clear, they are organized effectively, include an adequate vocabulary list, review sections and exercises, and an adequate set of evaluation quizzes and testing suggestions. They are 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 the student.

The third category utilized in the questionnaire regarded activities. This category is the one that is most favored and most agreed on by many of the teachers. As can be concluded from the results, most teachers were of the opinion that the textbooks provide a balance of activities- there is an even distribution of free versus controlled exercises and tasks that focus on both fluent and accurate production. They believed 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. They also agreed 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.

The fourth category of the questionnaire discussed skills. The results 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 seemed to agree that the textbooks paid attention to sub-skills, such as 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 was integrated into the practice of other skills.

The fifth category concerned the type of language used in the series. Most teachers, as shown 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. To most 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.

The sixth category discussed the subject and content of the series. This category was the least favored by teachers. Subjects were of the opinion that the subject and content of the textbook is not completely relevant to students' needs as English language learners. The reason may be the fact that in every class there are different students with different needs, and it seems very improbable, if not impossible for a teacher to be able to satisfy all his/her students' needs. In addition they contended that the subject and content of the textbooks can be more realistic, interesting, challenging, and motivating. They also believed that to some extent the series suffer from cultural bias and negative stereotypes.

The last item of the questionnaire was the conclusion of the questionnaire. Most teachers in general believed that the series is appropriate for the language learning aims of their institutions.

To answer the second question of the study, the subcategories of the questionnaire were ranked based on the percentage of satisfaction. The purpose was to figure out which category the teachers were more satisfied with. The results are shown below.

TABLE 2:
RANKS

Percentage of satisfaction	Rank
82.08	3
76.67	5
96.06	1
74.88	6
77.5	4
66.56	7
82.5	2

As table 2 clarifies the category which the teachers were the happiest with is the activities, conclusion takes the second place which shows the appropriateness of the books for the language learning aims of teachers, and its suitability for different types of classes. Practical consideration, language type, layout and design, and skills are ranked 3-6 respectively. The category which the teachers were the least satisfied with is the subject and content of the series which covers a wide variety of interesting contemporary topics and themes such as stories, travel, entertainment, culture, and custom. A potential problem with the textbook's subject matter and social content relates to the presentation of the target language culture. In this regard Alptekin (1993) suggests that the inclusion of foreign subject matter and social constructs in ELT textbooks has the potential to create comprehension problems or other serious cultural misunderstanding due to the fact that the students might lack proper schemata to interpret these foreign concepts correctly. Nevertheless, a simple explanation given by the teacher can prevent miscomprehension of the subject matter and content. Moreover if activities seem redundant, de-motivating, and uninteresting the experienced teacher should quickly modify and adopt it to suit the needs of their particular students; this should not be considered as a serious problem.

To find the answer to the third question of the study since different means were revealed for male and female teachers regarding all various categories included in this study, Independent Sample T-test was employed in order to ascertain the statistically significance of the difference between male and female teachers' attitudes towards TouchStone series in terms of its suitability and appropriateness in Iran EFL setting known to them. The following tables display the pertinent results.

TABLE 3:
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE TEACHERS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
male	20	21.30	2.02
female	20	19.75	.78

TABLE 4:
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST

practical considerations	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Equal variances assumed	17.230	.000	3.186	38	.003
Equal variances not assumed			3.186	24.580	.004

The results of Levene's Test used to compare the two groups' variances indicates that :Sig=0<.05 which rejects the equality of variances. The results of t-test for equality of means show that Sig=.004<.05 which proves the significance of the difference between male and female teachers' attitude towards practical considerations.

TABLE 5:
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE TEACHERS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS LAYOUT AND DESIGN

gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
male	20	30.45	4.57
female	20	30.90	4.75

TABLE 6:
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST

Layout and Design	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
Equal variances assumed	.262	.612	-.305	38	.762
Equal variances not assumed			-.305	37.940	.762

The results of Levene's Test indicate that: $\text{Sig}=0.612>.05$ which confirms the equality of variances. The results of t-test for equality of means clarifies that $\text{Sig}=.762>.05$. So the difference between the male and female teachers' responses about Layout and Design is statistically insignificant; they have the same view towards the Layout and Design of the books.

TABLE 7:
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE TEACHERS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS ACTIVITIES

gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
male	20	28.45	2.76
female	20	29.20	2.19

TABLE 8:
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST

Activities	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Equal variances assumed	.588	.448	-.951	38	.347
Equal variances not assumed			-.951	36.128	.348

Table 7 presents the results of the third category, activities. In table 8 Levene's Test for Equality of Variances show that: $\text{Sig}=0.448>.05$; the variances are equal. The results of the t-test show that $\text{Sig}=.347>.05$. So the difference between the means of the two groups is statistically insignificant. Consequently there seems to be no significant difference between the males teachers' responses and those of female ones to the questions under the category of activities.

TABLE 9:
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE TEACHERS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS SKILLS

gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
male	20	18.40	3.45
female	20	19.05	4.83

TABLE 10:
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST

Skills	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Equal variances assumed	8.348	.006	-.489	38.000	.628
Equal variances not assumed			-.489	34.375	.628

As is clear from the data presented in table 10, equality of variances is rejected; $\text{Sig}=0.006<.05$, and the results of the t-test show that the difference between means is statistically insignificant. So the male and female teachers seem to have the same view towards the skills utilized in the books.

TABLE 11:
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE TEACHERS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS LANGUAGE TYPES

gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
male	20	23.60	1.93
female	20	22.90	4.15

TABLE 12:
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST

Language Type	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Equal variances assumed	5.464	.025	.683	38.000	.498
Equal variances not assumed			.683	26.842	.500

Table 12 indicates the Levene's Test for Equality of Variances. $\text{Sig}=0.025<.05$, so the equality of variances is refused. The t-test results, $\text{Sig}=.5>.05$, show that the difference between the means of the two groups is not significant; there seems to be no statistically significant difference between male and female teachers with respect to this issue.

TABLE 13:
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE TEACHERS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS SUBJECT AND CONTENT

gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
male	20	19.95	2.03
female	20	20.00	4.20

TABLE 14:
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST

Subject and content	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Equal variances assumed	13.760	.001	-.048	38.000	.962
Equal variances not assumed			-.048	27.462	.962

Tables 13 shows different means for male and female teachers. According to Levene's Test, equality of variances is rejected ($\text{Sig}=0.001<.05$), and independent t-test confirms insignificance of the difference between the means ($\text{Sig}=.962>.05$). Hence, the male and females have different views towards subject and content.

TABLE 15:
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE TEACHERS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS CONCLUSION

gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
male	20	16.55	2.03
female	20	15.75	1.91

TABLE 16:
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST

Conclusion	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Equal variances assumed	.000	1.000	1.279	38.000	.209
Equal variances not assumed			1.279	37.855	.209

As table 16 shows, the equality of variances is confirmed ($\text{Sig}=1.0>.05$), and the results of t-test indicate that the difference between the two means is insignificant ($\text{Sig}=.209>.05$). So the male and female teachers have the same view towards conclusion.

Overall the tables clarify that there is no significant difference between the responses of male and female teachers with regard to TouchStone series. The only category towards which they have various views is practical considerations of the series.

IV. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that Touchstone series appears to be an effective device for language teachers to obtain their aims as well as the language institutes' aims. Furthermore, the textbooks seem suitable for different classes with different number of students and sexes. In other words, they fit small, medium, homogeneous, and coeducational classes.

A strong point of the book is that they seem to increase the students' interest and motivation to continue their English language study. This can be considered as a great advantage of Touchstone series, since there is no doubt that students' motivation is one of the most important factors which encourage them to learn any kind of material.

It is apparent that there are cultural differences among different people from different nations. These cultural differences are brought into language learning classes and may hinder language learning. Any kind of textbook may portray points and materials which may be acceptable to some cultures but contradict some others. Touchstone series is not an exception in this respect. It does portray some points and materials which are not in harmony with Iranian students' culture, customs, and traditions.

Results suggested most of the teachers were all of the same belief in their desire to teach the series again. In general, they could be considered satisfied with the series and had a positive attitude towards the series. To conclude the books seem to be a multi-purpose source which can be safely used in different classes, and can be considered as a motivating source for students to aid them achieve their learning goals.

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