Design and Application of a 'Textbook Visual Effects' Evaluation Checklist

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Abstract—Textbook evaluation is a well-known area of instructional material development. Different studies have attempted, so far, to provide criteria for rating the efficiency of textbooks designed for academic purposes. Among different features of textbooks which have been studied, little attention was paid to the visual aspects of the designed materials. In this paper, we attempted to highlight the value of textbook visualization from several related perspectives and then to design a categorized checklist which specifically focused on the visual aspects. This checklist was later used to compare and contrast EFL textbooks taught at Iran's public schools and those taught at private language institutes. The results of this research not only revealed the areas of difference between the two groups, but also elucidated the subtle weak or strong points among the representative sample books of each group. The more significant application of this research, however, was to provide an evaluative tool of the visual effects which can at best be used by textbook compilers, designers and illustrators in their design of new textbooks or edition of the existing materials widely used either at national or international level.

Index Terms—textbook evaluation, visual effects, checklist design

I. INTRODUCTION

Verbal language is not the only way in which we could perform communication acts. Nonverbal language and visual forms could also be used as effectively to convey meaning particularly in instructional materials. As described in New Mediatrix (2008), communicative acts are not necessarily language specific; they could be understood across languages. Therefore, if visual and nonverbal semiotic activities could be understood across languages, illustrations and graphics can be used in instructional materials by ESL teachers and learners in order to evoke memory schemata of learners and improve learning.

According to Landoni & Gibb (2000), the value of textual information is enhanced by the use of graphical and typographical elements. These elements activate reader's cognitive processes when exploring a book for the first time, as they make it easier to recognize which parts are of greater interest to the reader. Visual rhetoric provides the reader with a graphical language which is immediately recognizable based on previous reading activity. These investigators believe book rhetoric is a combination of both visual and written rhetoric because of its physical aspects.

Textbooks are believed to play a pivotal role in language classrooms and in many situations they serve even as the syllabus which yet adds to its value. As posed by Ansary & Babaii (2002), no textbook means no purpose to the learners, and they do not take learning seriously anymore. For teachers, they are important as they provide a framework that regulates their programs. Therefore, the quality of textbooks has greatly been taken under scrutiny. What we aim to draw attention to is the fact that the visual, nonverbal aspects of the published materials should be attended more carefully, when they are used as instructional tools in academic environments. In case of second or foreign language learning, for instance, the appropriate visual design of the textbooks plays important roles in motivating the students, involving their interest and attention and affecting the readability of the texts presented to them.

Tens of textbook evaluation checklists exist for the evaluation of EFL/ESL textbooks which have these universal features as their underlying basis: approach (nature of language, nature of learning), content presentation (coverage, grading, sequencing, etc.), physical makeup (size and weight, layout, title, etc.) and administrative concerns (macrostate policies, appropriate price, etc.). Among these checklists, mention can be made of Chastain's, Tucker's, Daoud & Celce-Murcia's, Sheldon's and so on. On the whole, visual aspects of textbooks have been just superficially touched, and this is the gap which we aim to fill.

In this study it is intended to design a checklist focusing on textbook visualization exclusively since they have widely been ignored in the previous evaluative studies. The items included in the checklist are mostly derived from the review of literature which investigated some sort of visualization quality both in its general sense and also specifically in educational domains. What we hoped to do next was to apply this checklist to evaluate the visual design of two groups of EFL textbooks widely used in the academic scene either publicly or privately. Therefore, the whole study is comprised of two major phases: the design and introduction of this particular evaluative instrument, and its application

on the most prevalently-used EFL textbooks of Iran. In the following section we cast a look at a body of research on the value of graphical designs in learning.

II. BACKGROUND

Among the body of research focusing on pedagogic functions of visualization, reference can be made to Dimopoulos, Koulaidis, & Sklaveniti (2003) who examined the pedagogic functions of visual images. The three dimensions of visual representations these researchers examined included classification, framing and formality. They concluded that the functional knowledge about the visual language would enable teachers to control the distinctive characteristics of this particular type of language and help their students exploit it more effectively.

Angeli & Valanides (2004) examined whether the text-only (T-O) and textual-visual (T-V) educational materials affect learners' achievement differently in problem-solving activities. They also investigated the probable influence of learner's field-dependence/independence on the achievement results. They believed learning from textual or visual information is also directly related to representational preferences and cognitive styles. The result of their study revealed that the text-and-visual participants outperformed the text-only ones. Therefore, as concluded, adding visuals to textual explanations can improve understanding and that the functional of visuals depends on cognitive differences.

Jamet, Gavota & Quaireau (2008) examined the visual scanning process of an illustrated document. They studied two types of attention guiding devices, one the color factor and the other the sequential presentation of diagram elements synchronized with spoken explanations. They concluded that the change of the color of the object should capture attention automatically and facilitate the choice of the relevant element and its processing in memory regardless of its static or sequential display.

In addition to illustrations, typographic issues have also been known to be effective in many aspects of text intelligibility and mental processing. According to Landoni & Gibb (2000), good and bad typography could be differentiated in terms of factors such as the comparative time taken to read a book, the degree of pleasure derived and consideration of care for the eyes. They believe typography plays a vital role in determining the amount of the author's message that is successfully conveyed. Its close relationship with legibility is undeniable.

Serifs have been found to have a positive effect on readability. They are claimed to increase letter discrimination since it complicates the spatial code of letter forms. They are also believed to increase the visibility of the ends of strokes which adds to the salience of the main strokes of the letters. Another reason why serifs improve legibility, as described by Arditi & Cho (2005), is that the horizontal serifs at the base of letters make readers better capable of following the line of type with eye movements and lead to more efficient reading. Another major variable highly effective in text legibility is letter size comprised of two categories of upper-case and lower-case characters. According to Arditi & Cho (2007), typographers generally agree that lower-case texts are better legible than the upper-case maybe because of their higher inherent variation in shape.

While speaking about typography, another important element to consider is spacing. As Riemersma (2008) puts it, reading does not occur by picking letters one by one. Groups of letters are taken as words and even groups of phrases. Therefore, we could think of two main spacing: inter-letters and inter-words. Both are vital in the process of reading.

Related to the issue of typography is the design of page and its layout. With this concern, Jirousek (2007) introduces principles of design including balance, proportion, rhythm, emphasis and unity. Hildegard (1992) suggests using decorative initial capitals, even of sizes several times bigger than the ordinary to draw attention to the beginning of a chapter, lesson, etc. It is even recommended to apply different colors or styles of characters to serve this purpose.

Cover design has been also recognized as influential in the design of instructional materials. As well as being informative, the cover design should be able to capture the attention of potential readers; therefore, as put forth in New Mediatrix (2008), it should be attractive, more durable, prestigious and easy to identify.

Textbook visual effect extends itself to the design of physical makeup as well. The size and weight of school books were analyzed by Association of American Publishers (2007). These analyses revealed that since mid-1990s, the size and weight of textbooks of almost all the states have increased due to the increase of their content, in comparison to the ones used before 1995. They emphasized that depending on the period of time during which the textbooks are expected to be used (sometimes for a couple of years), the size of the textbook, the weight of the paper and the thickness of the book should be decided up on. Therefore, the two factors they highlighted were durability and the ease of carrying the textbook.

The afore-mentioned proposals and investigations along with a greater body of related research as well as the perusal of general textbook evaluation questionnaires helped us to propose our specialized checklist. This checklist addresses the visual effects only, which as explained in the introduction play a significant role in the quality of learning. In the following section the major procedures followed in this research are explained in detail.

III. METHODOLOGY

There are two major phases in this study. The first phase is concerned with the design of the checklist. Next it is followed by applying this checklist to evaluate EFL textbooks.

A. Design of the Checklist

Having reviewed the related literature on the visual aspects of published materials, we decided to include five major sections in our checklist. These five sections are:

- Typography
- Visual Arts
- Page Layout
- Cover Design
- Physical Makeup

The order does not suggest a hierarchal priority of one over the other. It rather starts with the most controversial ones. On the whole, these components interact in order to affect the reading process, comprehension or other cognitive and psychological impressions. Each of the major sections divided above, respectively consist of a number of items as follows: 8, 8, 5, 4, 4. These items have been selected from a wider range of options. We have tried to choose the most influential factors and especially those with firm basis in the background research, however. Feasibility did not allow us to include all and every relate issue in this concern.

Appendix A indicates the overall schema of the checklist. As it can be seen, each item consists of a keyword title and one or two following questions which are to be rated in a likert type. Four options are provided for rating: Number (1) is the most negative, showing the total lack of the feature. (2) shows an inadequate existence of the feature. (3) and (4) respectively indicate the sufficient or great attention to the quality. For later comparisons, the sum of scores given to every section is calculated. Therefore, the greater the score that a textbook obtains in any individual item or any of the major divisions as the sum, the more qualified it is in terms of that certain visual feature.

B. EFL Textbook Evaluation

Two groups of EFL textbooks were selected, first to be evaluated based on the visualization checklist and then to be compared. The first group belongs to public school EFL textbooks which were designed in Iran and have been taught nationwide. The second group consists of EFL textbooks that are taught widely in Iran's private language institutes.

Samples of the first group are high school English books designed by Dr. Parviz Birjandi et al, published in Iran's Instructional Textbook Publication and Printing Company. Samples of the second group are:

- Interchange series, 3rd edition, by Jack C. Richards (2005), published by Cambridge University press,
- ILI English series, by the Research and Planning Department of Iran language Institute (2006).

The reason why high school textbooks were selected as the samples of the first group was that they covered four educational years of the students' language learning experience. Among several different choices available for the second group, the interchange series were selected as they are undoubtedly the most popular and extensively-taught EFL textbooks in private institutes of Iran. The second choice is quite interesting since it was designed in Iran to be taught in Iran Language Institute. This institute, so far, played a leading role among language teaching centers nationwide, with more than 120000 learners throughout the country.

120 female language learners (40 high school students, 40 ILI students and 40 students learning English through Interchange series) were given the textbook visual effects evaluation checklist to do the ratings. They were 17-25 years of age; were all Iranian and residents of Mashhad which is the second biggest and most populated metropolis of Iran, and shared the same first language, Persian. The purpose of this research as well as how they were supposed to do the ratings were explained to them They were requested to take the checklist home and spend as much time as they wished to fill it out, and then submit it the following session. It was made sure that no ambiguity was left. The mean score of rating for each section of the checklist was later calculated and used to make comparison between the target textbooks.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Having applied the textbook evaluation checklist to the three sample EFL textbooks, here are the obtained results indicated in the following tables:

TABLE 1
THE RATINGS OF HIGH SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS

Checklist	Typography	Visual	Page	Cover	Physical
section	71 - 8 - F 7	Arts	Layout	Design	Makeup
Mean score	26	17	24	10	4

TABLE 2
THE RATINGS OF INTERCHANGE TEXTBOOK SERIES

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Checklist	Typography	Visual	Page	Cover	Physical	
section		Arts	Layout	Design	Makeup	
Mean score	28	27	20	9	13	

TABLE 3
THE RATINGS OF ILI TEXTBOOK SERIES

Checklist	Typography	Visual	Page	Cover	Physical
section		Arts	Layout	Design	Makeup
Mean score	37	15	15	13	9

It should be noted that the scores of each section could possibly vary between the following ranges:

Typography \rightarrow (min.11-max.44) average: 27.5

Visual Arts \rightarrow (8-32) average: 20 Page Layout \rightarrow (6-24) average: 15 Cover Design \rightarrow (4-16) average: 10 Physical Makeup \rightarrow (4-16) average: 10

Knowledge of these ranges helps us to have a better view of where each obtained score stands between the highest and lowest possible extremes.

Our discussion starts with High school textbooks. Concerning typographical issues, the score obtained is not only below the average, but also lower than the two other samples. No attention was paid to the choice of font and typographic color. Type size and line spacing were also little-attended. In terms of the visual arts (illustrations, photos, charts, etc.), the total rating is still below the average and also far from that of the foreign-design counterpart. Little and almost no attention was paid to authenticity, size and motivation factor of the images. However, the position, clarity and relevance of the visuals were acceptable. The page layout got the maximum expected score, the best of all. An average score was obtained for the cover design although the difference is not significant in comparison to the Interchange series. The style and color composition were the least attended features of this section. According to table 1, the physical makeup is almost disappointing, as it received the lowest possible score. On the whole, we can see that the visual arts and physical makeup of High school textbooks require further careful edition and revision.

As indicated in table 2, typographical features of Interchange book series are above the average, in quality. However, their great difference with the same quality of ILI series shows that they still can be improved. In terms of visual arts, they remarkably outscore their counterparts. This can be considered as their strongest point of quality. Concerning the page layout, although they stand above the average, they are outscored by High school textbooks. Use of negative space is among the features which got a low rating in this section. The cover design, as demonstrated in table 2, is rated not only below the average, but also lower than the two other textbooks. The cover style is not attractive and well-designed and no visual clues are employed to identify the content. Although no rating is offered for the physical makeup of these series due to unavailability of the original version, we can be, to a great extent, sure that they score the highest, since the quality of paper, printing and binding of textbooks designed overseas, particularly those published by Cambridge University Press is incomparable to that of ours in Iran, especially in case of textbooks which are in wide circulation.

Table 3 indicates the visual qualities of ILI textbooks which are published in Iran and are taught widely in all ILI branches throughout the country. As it can be observed, the score obtained for typographical features is not only significantly higher than the average possible score, but is as well significantly higher than those of the two other textbooks. The application of the visual arts, however, stands both below the average and the other sample books. In fact, little attention was paid to contextualizing illustrations or employing authentic images. Although the page layout rating obtained is neither higher nor lower than the average, it is noticeably less qualified than that of the other two book series. Overall use was not made of the pages, and it was also not attempted to use the negative space effectively. In terms of the cover design, a high score is given to these books winning over their counterparts, as almost all the related qualities have been very well attended. Concerning the physical makeup, the overall rating is not high. It is expected to stand between those of the other two samples. Among the physical features, durability got the lowest rating. As it is directly related to the binding quality, further attention is required to improve the overall quality.

V. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we tried to call attention to the visual aspects of the instructional materials which play a fundamental role in cognitive-affective process of learning. Having considered other theoretical and practical studies concerning the impact and value of visual displays in learning, our textbook visualization checklist was developed, which is in fact the first checklist designed to evaluate only the visual displays in instructional materials.

In this study, we decided to focus on EFL textbooks since we encountered a gap in the related literature concerning foreign language learning. Therefore, our three EFL textbook samples are among the most widely used EFL sources in Iran. We were eager to see, first, how the English textbooks taught at Iran's public schools differed from those taught at private language institutes, in terms of visualization attributes. The second question we tried to answer was to see what the similarities/differences and strong/weak points are between EFL textbooks designed in Iran and those designed by native English experts in English-speaking countries.

With respect to the first question, as detected by our evaluation checklist, public high school textbooks showed weakness in these areas: typographic issues, employment of visual arts (illustrations, photos, charts, etc.) and physical makeup. What the designers and editors can attend to in their revisions, is better application of various attractive typefaces, font colors and line spacing. They also need to use more authentic, motivating and colorful images as well as paying attention to the proportion of text and image in every page. In terms of physical makeup, serious efforts should be made to improve the quality of paper, binding and size. Textbooks taught at private institutes, since they are mostly copied in Iran, suffer from similar problem of low physical quality. However, their visual arts and typographic features are better designed in comparison to the public textbooks.

Based on our evaluation, concerning the second question, the two major areas that privilege foreign-design English textbooks over the Iranian ones are the skillful application of the visual arts and the high-quality physical structure. What can be recommended to Iranian textbook designers is, first of all, the attempt to use contextualized visuals which can turn the students' interest and motivation on, to activate their creative mental powers to discuss and even predict what the related content does focus on. It is also highly recommended to apply the best quality printing and binding equipment possible to facilitate carrying and using the material for the students specially public school students who spend longer periods of time dealing with their textbooks.

The evaluation checklist we designed can, as well, be applied to textbooks other than just EFL materials. What we hoped to achieve was, first of all, to call attention to these visual/physical values of instructional materials and then to provide an evaluative means to that end. Now we hope what we presented here will be considered and employed by instructional material developers, in our country or abroad, who really wish their products to act effectively and positively on the emotions and cognition of their consumers. Paying attention to every section of this checklist which consists of its own sub-items is actually one step closer to enhancing the instructional impact of the material through better involving the learners and facilitating the learning process.

APPENDIX A. TEXTBOOK VISUAL EFFECTS EVALUATION CHECKLIST

(extbook Visual offects Evaluation Checklist			Ratinge			
Book title: Author: Publisher:	Date of publication: Date of evaluation:	NOT AT ALL (1)	A LITTLE (2)	ADEQUATEL V	TO A GREAT EXTENT	
	A) Typography					
Choice of Font i Are decorative fonts use distinctive?	ed for headings or titles to make them attractive and	1	2	3	4	
• Are serif fonts such as T	imes used for texts to maximize readability?	1	2	3	4	
i. Typeface Sizing		1	2	3	4	
	tively larger than the rest?		-			
Have activity instruction larger font size?	as been distinguished from the content through being bold or of	1	2	3	4	
ii. Word Spacing • Are you as a reader awa difficulty?	are of the beginnings and endings of words without	1	2	3	4	
v. Line Spacing * Is enough space left betware reading and not to the li	ween the lines so that your eyes are pulled to the next word — as you ine above or below?	1	2	3	4	
. Time Towards		1	2	3	4	
v. Line Length • Are the lines of the text : width of the page?	appropriate in length and are not spanning more than half the	1	2	,		
vi. Typographic Color		_				
 Are the text color and th 	e background color in appropriate contrast, without re they quite easily legible?	1	2	3	4	
• Do they help conveying effective?	the tone and nature of the subject matter and are they emotionally	1	2	3	4	
	ed i.e. the lines of type are kept all at the same length in eading comfort, not to distract the reader and to boost	1	2	3	4	
	of more than two or three at the end of lines in a row, aragraph to make the right edge look weak?	1	2	3	4	

B) Visual Arts (including photographs, drawings, charts, tables &	mans)			
i. Function & Relevance Do the visuals have the reinforcing and elaborative function to help convey the thematic issues of the texts? Are they relevant to the subject they follow, precede or are part of?	1	2	3	4
 ii. Authenticity Are the photographs prioritized over drawings (wherever possible) to create better authentic and life-like learning environment? 	1	2	3	4
iii. Size • Are the visuals of proper size to create the desirable mood and to touch the viewer's sense of involvement and attraction to the subject? (For instance, setting a whole picture or photo as the background of the page or the creates a better mood and atmosphere for learning to take place.)	1	2	3	4
 iv. Location Are the illustrations close enough to the text they refer to? Are they at the same page, producing no difficulty for the reader to identify which text or activity they belong to? 	1	2	3	4
v. Clarity and Unambiguity • Are the visuals clear and void of equivocalness (unless for the sake of raising discussion or learner engagement)?	1	2	3	4
vi. Motivation • Do the visuals spark enthusiasm? Do they resist exhaustion and act as the energy on a page?	1	2	3	4
vii. Extension • Do the visual images extend the imagery of the text, encouraging imagination? Can they extend learners' experience of the text beyond limits of their personal experiences?	1	2	3	4
viii. Value and Hue Contrast • Is the relative lightness and darkness of the colors adjusted in a way to maximize naturalness? Besides, is the contrast adequate to clarify the separating borders of objects at best?	1	2	3	4
Are at least half of the graphics in color?	1	2	3	4

C) Page Layout				
 Overall Use of the Page Has maximal use been made of the whole surface of the page so as to motivate reading? (It doesn't mean to create a cluttered, confusing page.) 	1	2	3	4
Use of Negative Space Does the negative space (page background) provide proper focus and emphasis on main content?	1	2	3	4
• Is the placement of objects (different components of content) effective in relation to the surrounding negative space for success in composition?	1	2	3	4
iii. Proportion of Texts & Visuals • Has it been tried to adjust the proportion of texts and visuals in every page in order to maintain their inter-reinforcing function?	1	2	3	4
 iv. Boundaries between activities or Skill Are the boundaries between various activities easily distinguishable? (This could be done through leaving enough space between them or using different colored headings for different skills, or allocating separate pages to each skill if possible.) 	1	2	3	4
v. Boundaries between Lessons or Units * Has any special attempt been made to better clarify the separation of the lessons/units such as making use of: - different page or page margin colors, - noticeable titles of large typeface size and/or attractive decorative fonts or colors, - fixed no. of pages for every unit, e.g. 4 pages for each?	1	2	3	4
D. Comm. Donier.				
i. Style • Is the selected cover style attractive and well-designed? Is the application of lettering, photos and illustrations distinctive and satisfactory?	1	2	3	4
ii. Color composition • If there is a composition of colors, is it attractive and harmonic? If there is a dominant color, is it significant, appealing to senses and attractive enough to recommend itself?	1	2	3	4
iii. Visual clues * Are any special badges, colors, symbols, etc. used to identify the content?	1	2	3	4
 iv. Cover Information Is the cover as informative as possible? Does it include the title, author(s), publisher(s), collaborators, level, etc.? 	1	2	3	4

E) Physical Makeup				
 i. Size & Weight Is the textbook easy to carry and use? Do you think its size and weight are justified by its content and span of time anticipated for the content coverage? 	1	2	3	4
ii. Durability * Considering factors such as quality of binding and its paper size, do you evaluate it as a durable volume, sufficiently resistant to getting torn apart through frequent use or exposure to water?	1	2	3	4
iii. Printing and Binding • Have high quality printing and binding equipment and techniques been used such as digital printing systems? Has it made use of best quality paper, ink, proofs, bindings, etc. to create a high-caliber product?	1	2	3	4
 iv. Title Selection • Is the title attractive, relevant, concise, non-offensive, different and in line with the goal that the work is aiming at? 	1	2	3	4

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