

Evaluating an English Textbook for Application in Iranian EFL Academic Context

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Abstract—This study was aimed at evaluating a textbook, namely *Active Skills for Reading, Book 1* by Neil J. Anderson, which is currently used extensively in English as Foreign Language academic context of Iran. In doing so, a checklist developed by Ghorbani (2011) was adapted and applied in order to see to what extent this book conforms to the universally accepted standards of EFL textbooks. Data were collected based on the stipulated criteria which consider the relative realization of the general features of EFL textbooks adapted to the requirements of students. These merit scores were ranging from 0 to 2 showing total lack to perfect match of criteria to their realization in the textbook. Hence, the collected data were exported to SPSS version 20 in order to be descriptively analyzed. The findings for the seven extensive subheadings included in the checklist showed that 79 percent of the textbook under evaluation matched the common worldwide features of EFL textbooks. The results also indicated that the book is really appropriate in increasing the learners' level of reading and vocabulary competence, along with improving the use of reading strategies for Iranian non-English major college students in General English Courses. It is hoped that textbook developers along with language instructors will take into consideration general features in their EFL textbooks by using appropriate checklists in order to come up with their desired textbooks.

Index Terms—EFL textbook evaluation, academic context, checklist, Active 1

I. INTRODUCTION

Textbook selection can be dealt with in a variety of approaches, but the process is often practiced according to personal choices of the educators and might be affected by causes not related to education (Garinger, 2002). Availability, price, and degree of knowledge on the issue can be among the factors influencing the teachers' decisions on the sort of textbook used in classes. According to Tomlinson (1998) a qualified textbook must be appealing to students as well as appropriate to cater to their different learning styles, and make them interested and curious through both its subjects and appearance. At the same time, it must boost their self-confidence and be related to the needs of learners and engage them in authentic use of the language in order to get communicative purposes. It is also of high importance to select the sort of textbook that considers the delayed positive influence of language education in formal situation (Tomlinson, 1998).

This study examines one of the General English textbooks used in Iran's universities for non-English majors, namely *Active Skills for Reading, Book 1* by Neil J. Anderson, taking into account the results of the recent studies in syllabus design, and EFL teaching and learning situation in Iran in order to decide to what extent it is in conformity with the universally accepted standards of EFL textbooks. In doing so, this research adapted the criteria for evaluating this textbook from Ghorbani's (2011) checklist which is according to a certain amount of general features that not only agree with the local requirements, but also have adequate flexibility to be applied universally with some modifications.

A. General English Course Specifications

According to the 'implementation guidelines for general courses' by Ministry of Higher Education of Iran (1995), there are some characteristics for the course 'General English' which includes:

- 68 hours for 3 credits
- No prerequisite
- Objective: gaining skill in reading comprehension of English texts by non-English major students in order to get ready for learning semi-professional texts

B. Rubrics of General English course

The following rubrics are also considered for the course 'General English' by the Ministry of higher education in Iran:

- A review of English language structure and vocabulary in high school level through reading texts of around 3500 words with an emphasis on learning skills such as:

- how to use a dictionary,
- building vocabulary,
- outlining,
- summarizing,
- skimming & scanning,
- introducing and practicing complicated grammatical patterns in semi-professional texts, and finally
- simple exercises for finding Farsi equivalent of English words and translating sentences and paragraphs into English.

II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Having a look back at literature on textbook evaluation, one can find different classifications of it taking two different aspects of 'time' and 'quality' of evaluation into consideration. Concerning the time of evaluation, there exist three different types of evaluation as 'pre-use', 'in-use', and 'post-use' evaluations which are in turn referring to before using or prospective performance, at the time of using, and after using of the textbooks dealing with retrospective analysis (Ellis, 1997). This study follows the procedures of in-use textbook evaluation.

Also, regarding the quality of textbook evaluation, there are considered three general approaches for it. They are referred to as "impressionistic", "checklist", and "in-depth" approaches as claimed by McGrath (2002, p. 25). As the name suggests, the impressionistic model deals with the general impression obtained from the material or textbook. While, the checklist model, which is used in this study, is a relatively objective means of evaluating textbooks consisting of a set of items provided for the purpose of finding the degree of conformity of the intended textbook with the generally accepted criteria. And finally, the in-depth evaluation approach which is based on close analysis of features or sections in a textbook. Since the two methods of impressionistic and in-depth evaluations are not in the scope of this paper, we will only deal with checklist evaluation approach in here. Checklist model has some four advantages of being "systematic", "cost effective", "convenient" to record information, and "explicit" to easily understand the items in checklist (McGrath, 2002, p. 27).

One important point concerning conducting textbook evaluation in an educational setting is that educational managers pay enough attention to this evaluation means by investing in it (Sheldon, 1988). Through comprehensive evaluation of materials and textbooks, the managers and teachers of an institute will be able to distinguish among a variety of available textbooks. This case is even more important in EFL context where textbook plays a much more significant role in English learning of the learners as compared with ESL environment.

On other important issue regarding textbook evaluation is mentioned by Brown (1995) as he recommends the curriculum developers to consider and emphasize both institutional objectives and conformity with classroom setting in evaluating any textbook. Of course, in the context of this study, since the objectives set by the Ministry of Higher Education do not require providing a fully authentic context for learning, the very thing needed for effective learning of English, a revision in the objectives and outlines for the course 'General English' seems quite necessary. Of course, with the purpose of improving the quality of materials and textbooks in EFL context of Iran, there have been done some studies (Davoudi & Khani, 2012; Ghorbani, 2011; Azizifara et al. (2010); Dahmardeh, 2009; Jahangard, 2007), but they mainly speak of school environment and analyzed the high school textbooks for learning English, and the academic setting with a specific look at General English for non-English majors has not been so far taken into account.

III. BOOK COMPONENTS

The book comprises 12 units, each covering two chapters that are related to the central theme of the unit. Each unit starts with pictures and some questions that require students to brainstorm for ideas and activate students' background knowledge on the subject before reading begins.

The questions of reading comprehension come after the reading texts, and they are followed by word formation and vocabulary exercises along with post-reading discussion questions.

The final part of each chapter – Real Life Skill – develops the learners' skills to relate and make use of what they have acquired to the authentic world. These after-reading exercises are mostly for the purpose of reinforcing learners' understanding of the new words. There are also some Review Units, recently added to this second edition, which is aimed at assisting learners to improve the reading rate.

IV. METHOD

After reviewing the related literature and through considering the context of English education in Iran, the researcher searched for the generally accepted criteria to analyze the various aspects of the book *Active 1*.

A. Adopting the Checklist for Evaluating *Active 1*

Initially, the earlier available lists were studied and their characteristics taken into account. Subsequently, an attempt was made to find a sense of balance between the real and hypothetical concerns included in considering the norms and

criteria in the adopted checklist to see if it fits the book to be evaluated. Finally, as the context of the study for both studies was locally the same, the validity of the selected checklist to a great extent could be verified.

B. Data Collection

A value of 0 to 2 is seen in the checklist in the second column. A relative significance is given to the fulfilment of each real norm in the textbook being examined closely. According to Ghorbani (2011, p. 514) “a perfect match between the ideal defined criterion and its actual realization in the textbook receiving 2, a total lack a score of 0, and any inadequate match a score of 1”.

V. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

In this study the book ‘Active1’ by Neil J Anderson was analyzed descriptively for non-English majors at universities in Iran. This evaluation was done in order to help the curriculum developers, teachers, and educational administrators to be able to make appropriate decisions regarding the textbook selection and use. The checklist used in the study has seven subheadings which includes: “A. Practical Considerations, B. Skills, C. Exercises and Activities, D. Pedagogic Analysis, E. Appropriacy, F. Supplementary Materials, and G. General Impression” (Ghorbani, 2011, p. 514). This checklist was employed to evaluate to what extent the book - Active 1 book used in Iranian non-English major universities follows the common agreed-upon features of EFL textbooks.

The data collected is based on the actual realization of the criteria in the textbook which includes the merit scores of “total lack” = 0, interpreted as poor, “inadequate match” = 1, interpreted as satisfactory, and “perfect match” = 2, interpreted as good, assigned to 50 items (Ghorbani, 2011; p.514). Then, the data were exported to SPSS version 20 in order to be descriptively analyzed. The findings show that 79 percent of the textbook under evaluation matches the common worldwide features of EFL textbooks. The results for the seven extensive subheadings as shown in the index are explained below (refer to Table 1 and Figure 1).

TABLE 1:
MERIT SCORE

| | | Frequency | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|--------------|-----------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Poor | 2 | 4.0 | 4.0 |
| | Satisfactory | 16 | 32.0 | 36.0 |
| | Good | 32 | 64.0 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 50 | 100.0 | |

Active 1 Merit Chart

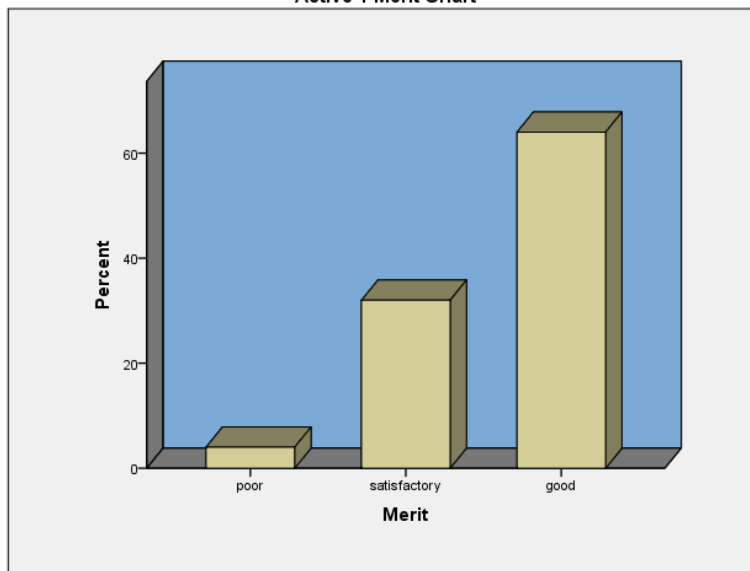


Figure 1: Merit Chart (Active 1)

A. Practical Considerations

Since some publications in Iran do not follow the universal copyright regulations, they can be printed easily without having to obtain prior authorization from the publisher and author and Active 1 is no exception. So, this book is easily available and cost-effective for the English learners though sometimes the quality of paper and color are not given priority and often ignored by the printing companies.

The physical appearance of the book is interesting and appealing. Its high quality printing causes it to look attractive that students would want to read it. In addition, the book has a distinct and well organized design. No problems could be found in the text types, and on the whole it has a good quality editing. Going carefully through the textbook, the researcher could not detect any errors and the revision and proofreading of the textbook are meticulously done. Overall, the book can be considered a useful book for developing reading skills.

B. Skills

The objectives of the course for improving the reading comprehension of the learners are considered in this book along with a focus on this skill in integration with the other skills which include some multi-skill tasks. The book provides adequate guidance for the learners in order to acquire the knowledge. However, it cannot be claimed that it includes an extensive amount of cognitive skills that could be interesting and thought-provoking to the students as there is very little amount of practice of the skills in the exercises. In addition, there seems to be an imbalance between the objectives of the course and the four skills that learners should be practicing. Because of that other than reading, listening is dealt with just by letting students listen to tape scripts of native accent readings through the lessons in CDs, and writing skill is done by asking learners to compose simple sentences and in later stages to connect them to form guided writing paragraphs in some exercises. Speaking is the least practiced skill and is only found in preview or pre-reading tasks in the lesson along with critical thinking in post-reading activities where they are usually ignored because of time constraint. The integration of skills and the improvement of fluency skills are not paid enough attention, too.

C. Exercises and Activities

The tasks and exercises in this book are mainly promoting learners' language development. They work on vocabulary items, guessing the meaning of new vocabularies, finding synonyms or antonyms and incorporating language related games to new words, quizzes, and word puzzles. In addition, as the context of the reading presents the meaning of new words in a clear format, it becomes easier for students to learn and remember them.

The development of communicative competence of the students is emphasized in this book, therefore, the exercises gradually move from controlled to free ones in order to enable students after comprehending the readings to steps into the field of generating their own ideas. If the exercises on pronunciation practice and sound patterns are fully covered in the class, the phonological gaps between native and foreign language will be filled, and students will be able to recognize and follow standard sounds, stress patterns and intonation.

D. Pedagogic Analysis

This book could be categorized in the series of books which are methodologically consistent with the present global models and applications of language teaching and learning. However, it does not comprise enough quizzes about achievement of the students, and this could be due to the limited range of the book that does not cover an extended body of such tests. Some mechanisms for instructors to give regular feedback to learners in the book are provided as well, but they are not usually fully followed by instructors as the large numbers of students in the class and time constraint do not permit them to give students such feedbacks.

If matching is done between the syllabuses of the course with the book, it can be observed that there is much more content being covered compared to the objectives of the course. However; the time allocated to cover the content in the book is much less and deemed inappropriate for fulfilling the objectives of the course.

E. Appropriacy

On the whole, this book has suitable tasks and instructions for the students. An extensive range of realistic text types are also included, such as news bulletin stories, interviews, weblog pages, and travel journals, in order to offer a wide range of reading practices and more significantly, encourage reading with certain purposes. With the collection of authentic and real-life themes, learners are probably more driven to study and do practices in English. At the same time, considering the major role of culture in learning a foreign language and knowing that authentic language is inaccessible out of the classroom, the Active 1 book puts a great emphasis on this essential part of language learning.

F. Supplementary Materials

The 'Active 1' book is accompanied with an audio CD, included in the book where instructors can get access to the tape scripts of the listening activities. However, as the teacher's book and workbook are not available in Iran, or at least are not released in the market, the only supplementary material available is the audio CD. The teacher guide and workbook would be of great help to both instructors and students if they were provided.

G. General Impression

All in all, Active Book 1 follows some clear objectives and instructions. It considers the development of the reading skill as a process of previewing, viewing, and reviewing that if followed by learners can result in improved performance particularly in reading skills. The activities are motivating enough for students to make them engaged and interested as they attempt on the tasks. Furthermore, since the book contains articles related to the multi-cultural contexts, it is largely appropriate for application in the EFL context. There is also some guidance provided for the students to be autonomous and assume responsibility for their own learning.

One last point is to see whether the objectives of the course set through guidelines for general courses by the Ministry of Higher Education are achieved or not. It is observed that overall usefulness of the book overweighs the expected results required by those objectives on the condition that the book is appropriately gone through and fully taught.

VI. CONCLUSION

Having obtained the relative acceptable conformity level of 79 percent for this book and having used it with Iranian non-English major college students in General English Course for more than six semesters, the researcher found the book to be appropriate in increasing the learners' level of reading and vocabulary competence, along with improving the use of reading strategies. The skills of guessing the meaning, scanning, and skimming which help students to develop their reading comprehension abilities are also highlighted in the book.

The results also indicate that the issues such as autonomy and independent learning which are of great concern in today's context are strongly emphasized in this book, and this job is done through including necessary skills for reading and new-word learning in the book.

Unlike the school settings in Iran, there is not one prescribed curriculum and textbook for the universities to follow as a standard benchmark. Despite the opportunities given to the faculty members to decide on the appropriate books for the classes which are in line with the objectives of the courses and needs of the students, there has not yet been provided a guideline that can be followed to decide on this matter. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that textbook developers along with language instructors take into account more general features in their EFL textbooks by using appropriate checklists in order to come up with their desired textbooks. Further research can also be done to get better results of in-use textbook evaluation through analyzing the teachers' journals, and classroom observations.

APPENDIX. EFL TEXTBOOK EVALUATION CHECKLIST

| NO | Criteria for EFL textbook evaluation | Merit Score |
|----------|--|-------------|
| A | PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS | |
| 1 | Is it available locally? | 2 |
| 2 | Is it cost-effective? | 2 |
| 3 | Is the physical appearance interesting and attractive? | 2 |
| 4 | Is there an appropriate mix of graphics and text? | 2 |
| 5 | Is the layout clear and Well-organized? | 2 |
| 6 | Are the headings effectively used? | 2 |
| 7 | Is it appropriate for local situation? | 2 |
| 8 | Does it have an appropriate size, weight and title? | 2 |
| B | SKILLS | |
| 9 | Are the skills presented in the textbook appropriate to the course? | 2 |
| 10 | Does the textbook provide learners with adequate guidance as they are acquiring these skills? | 2 |
| 11 | Do the skills that are presented in the textbook include a wide range of cognitive skills that will be challenging to learners? | 1 |
| 12 | Is the balance between listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills development in the book appropriate to the particular learners and learning situation? | 1 |
| 13 | Is the skills integration given sufficient attention? | 1 |
| 14 | Is the development of discourse and fluency skills given sufficient attention? | 1 |
| C | EXERCISES AND ACTIVITIES | |
| 15 | Do the exercises and activities in the textbook promote learners' language development? | 2 |
| 16 | 16. Is there a balance between controlled and free exercises? | 2 |
| 17 | Do the exercises and activities reinforce what students have already learned and represent a progression from simple to more complex? | 2 |
| 18 | Are the exercises and activities varied in format so that they will continually motivate and challenge learners? | 2 |
| 19 | Are there activities for communicative interaction and the development of communicative strategies? | 2 |
| 20 | Are new structures presented systematically and in a meaningful context? | 2 |
| 21 | Is the meaning of new vocabulary presented in context? | 2 |
| 22 | Is there sufficient work on recognition and production of individual sounds for pronunciation practice? | 1 |
| 23 | Is there sufficient work on recognition and production of stress patterns and intonation? | 1 |
| 24 | Is there a summary of new and reviewed grammar? | 1 |
| 25 | In general are the activities in the book neither too difficult nor too easy for the learners? | 2 |
| D | PEDAGOGIC ANALYSIS | |
| 26 | Is the book methodologically in line with current worldwide theories and practices of language learning? | 2 |
| 27 | Does the book contain adequate formal learner achievement tests? | 1 |
| 28 | Is the book enabling learners to use English outside the classroom situation? | 1 |
| 29 | Is the book sufficiently challenging to learners? | 1 |
| 30 | Are there mechanisms for giving regular feedback to learners? | 2 |
| 31 | Are new items reviewed and recycled throughout the book? | 1 |
| 32 | Does the book match the syllabus of the course to a sufficient extent? Is the time allowance indicated appropriate? | 1 |
| E | APPROPRIACY | |
| 33 | Are the materials, instructions, language focus and activities in general appropriate for the learners? | 2 |

| | | |
|----------|---|----|
| 34 | Will the textbook meet the long and short term goals specific to the learners? | 1 |
| 35 | Does the material match learner objectives? | 2 |
| 36 | Does the material facilitate interactive learning? | 2 |
| 37 | Is the material socio-culturally appropriate? | 2 |
| 38 | Is the material up-to-date? | 2 |
| 39 | Are vocabulary and comprehensible input levels well-graded? | 2 |
| 40 | Is the material age-appropriate? | 1 |
| 41 | Is the material relevant to real life? | 2 |
| F | SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS | |
| 42 | Is a teacher's book available and does it give useful and complete guidance, along with alternative activities? | 0 |
| 43 | Is a workbook available and does it contain appropriate supplementary activities? | 0 |
| 44 | Are audio-visual aids accompanied? And are they of good quality? | 1 |
| G | GENERAL IMPRESSION | |
| 45 | Does it have clear objectives & instructions? | 2 |
| 46 | Does it include reasonable balance & range in skills and activities? | 2 |
| 47 | Does it motivate learners by pleasurable activities or arouse learner interest? | 2 |
| 48 | Does it provide a variety of Communicative activities? Does it promote the use of information/opinion gap? | 1 |
| 49 | Is the cultural tone of the book overall appropriate for use in the setting? | 2 |
| 50 | Does the book encourage learners to assume responsibility for their own learning? | 2 |
| Total | | 79 |

Note. Adapted from *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, Vol. 1(5), p. 517, by M. R. Ghorbani, 2011

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