

Evaluation of Prospect Series: A Paradigm Shift from GTM to CLT in Iran

Reza Kheirabadi

Organization for Educational Research and Planning (OERP), Islamic Republic of Iran

Seyyed Behnam Alavimoghaddam

Organization for Educational Research and Planning (OERP), Islamic Republic of Iran

Abstract—The newly published English textbooks for Iranian students have been developed and distributed by the ministry of education of the Islamic Republic of Iran since 2012 and in this article, the researchers intend to represent the findings of a textbook evaluation over the series. This newly introduced series titled “Prospect” includes three consecutive textbooks Prospect 1 to 3 designed for grades 7th to 9th of junior high school. This series is a critical turning point from various content and methodological aspects mostly due to a paradigm shift from GTM to communicative approach. The main aim of this paper is to evaluate the English Textbook “Prospect” series from teachers’ point of view and represent experts’ recommendations to help the material developers in improving the series. The data of this research is gathered from English teachers working in junior high school level and the population of the research included male and female teachers teaching in capital city of Tehran. The researchers developed a questioner and distributed it among a sample of 100 English teachers (50 male and 50 female teachers). The findings of the research showed that “Prospect” series is evaluated very poor in field of shape and printing quality. Teachers believed that the main pitfall of the books is lacking high quality illustrations which foster students learning. Although many teachers and practitioners participating in the research have found the new series a considerable step forward, it seems that the series faces some serious shortcomings.

Index Terms—prospect series, English textbook, Iran, GTM, CLT

I. INTRODUCTION

As Foroozandeh (2011) wrote, English has been thought in formal education system of Iran since 1939 when the first English series was published and put to use in high schools of Iran. This pioneering textbook series developed in academic year of 1938-9 included 6 books for 6 grades of high school education. Kheirabadi and Alavimoghaddam (2014) evaluated that initial series as the following: “The Iranian committee of writers of this series and a group of English speaking educators who launched and implemented this joint project under the sponsorship of the ministry of culture had adopted the Direct Method (DM) and Reading Method (RM) and the series course books were not designed based upon any official curriculum.” Foroozandeh (2011) evaluates that “the 6-book series did not follow the same design and procedure in all the lessons. ... The 1939 series was not accompanied by any work book or teachers’ manual, but the “foreword to teachers” provided comprehensive guidelines on classroom managements, student-teacher relationship, the importance and necessity of adopting a humanitarian approach to language teaching and learning, taking account of learner factors, error correction, and dictation.”

The story of formal textbooks in Iran went based on traditional methods such as GTM and Reading based approaches until the publication of the recently designed series called “Prospect” introduced by the ministry of education of Iran since 2012. In this article, we aim to report the findings of a textbook evaluation research on various aspects of this series and provide a snapshot of the on-going “communicative” movement initiated by the ministry of education of Iran. To elicit the positive and negative aspects of “prospect” series from teachers’ point of view, besides reviewing the researches and articles previously published on this series, we have done a qualitative research to reflect teachers point of views by preparing and distributing a short answer and open ended questioner among a group of 100 Iranian English teachers who are busy teaching Prospect book 7 and 8 in high schools of Tehran.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Although much has been written about the history and background of teaching English in Iran before and after the Islamic revolution of 1979, still there is no comprehensive resource which presents a realistic and holistic account of teaching English in Iran. As Foroozandeh (2011) mentioned in her leading article about the history of teaching English in Iran, the history goes back to more than seven decades ago (1939) when the ministry of Farhang (Culture) of that time, introduced the first textbooks to be taught in Iran high schools. Due to the fact that revising and updating textbooks, especially English ones has always been done very slowly, formal education system of Iran has experienced a very few number of formal textbooks since its initiation in 1939. Two of the most well-known textbook series in

education system of Iran are Graded English series and Right Path to English each of them stayed in education system of the country for many years. Graded English was introduced to the Iran high schools in 1964 and put to use until 1979 when the Islamic revolution changed the education system of the country in general. Foroozandeh writes: "The Iranian high school English course books during 1964-1978 were claimed to have followed the general trend of the time (1960s to early 1970s), specifically the SLT. They were developed in a way that the students would gain a powerful basic knowledge of English necessary for future proficiency. The reading texts were selected based on the learned vocabulary. The lessons and grammar points followed a principled sequencing and grading, and that is why this revised English series is referred to as "Graded English."

In general, teaching English, before the victory of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 was strongly under the influence of two major powers of USA and UK. As Davari and Aghagolzadeh (2015) note: "During Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979), Iran experienced an extensive collaboration with the West on economics, education, political and cultural affairs. Through the practical steps were taken towards establishing a modern society, the sphere of education was not an exception to this rule. In fact, in response to the needs of national economic reform agenda and the country's push for modernization, new aims for education were formulated with an orientation to outside world and the future. Undoubtedly, in such a new context, English and English education received much more attention and the use of this language to the status of Iran's number one foreign language dates back to this period."

Teaching English in post-revolutionary Iran has totally a different story which passed through a host of pros and cons. As Aghagolzadeh and Davari cited: "As Borjian (2013) notes, during the early years of the Revolution, the questions as to what to do with English and whether it stays on school and university curricula or be entirely banned were at the center stage of a heated debate among the new ruling power of the country."

The most well-known series of English textbooks which came to use during the post-revolutionary era and lasted for more than 25 years without any major modification was titled "Right Path to English". Many researches had been done and much has been published to evaluate this series. Kheirabadi and Alavimoghaddam (2014) did a comprehensive meta-analysis on the subject from both internal and external aspects and studied Authenticity, Gender parity, Cohesion and coherence and Cultural issues among internal factors and the findings of their analysis showed that among the main weak points of "Right Path to English", its traditional methodology which is mostly based upon teaching Grammar and Reading, is the most prominent one.

III. WINDS OF CHANGE: PROSPECT SERIES

Publication of new English textbooks is a radical paradigm shift in sphere of TEFL in Iran from each and every aspect. This series includes 6 books under the general name of "English for Schools" and is divided into two 3 volumes series titled as "Prospect 1 to 3" for junior high school and "Vision 1 to 3" for senior high school level. The first volume of the series distributed and put to use in 2013-2014 Academic year in all grade 7th of junior high school classes covering more than one million students annually. The series developer is Curriculum Development Center (CDC) of Organization for Educational Research and Planning (OERP) of Islamic Republic of Iran, and the authors are a group of Iranian language experts. Prospect series is thematically designed and each lesson is developed around a central idea or them. The authors referred to CEFR in Teachers' Guide of the series and apparently, in choosing the themes of the books this European Framework has been a source of inspiration. Prospect 1 has 8 lessons titled and themed as bellow:

- Lesson 1: My Nationality (Functions: Introducing yourself/Greeting)
- Lesson 2: My Classmates (Functions: Asking someone's name/Introducing others)
- Lesson 3: My Age (Functions: Talking about your age/Talking about dates)
- Lesson 4: My Family (Functions: Talking about your family)
- Lesson 5: My Appearance (Functions: Talking about appearance)
- Lesson 6: My House (Functions: Talking about Where people are / Talking about what people are doing)
- Lesson 7: My Address (Functions: Talking about your address/ phone number/ Telling the time)
- Lesson 8: My Favorite Food (Functions: Talking about your favorite food/ Making Suggestions) (Prospect 1 teachers' guide, 2013, PDF available on: http://eng-dept.talif.sch.ir/index.php?page_id=96)

To have a better understanding of the design of a lesson in Prospect 1 let us have glance at the objectives of a lesson excerpted from its official Teachers' Guide.

Lesson Objectives (Lesson2 My Classmates)

Functions

Introducing others/ Asking someone's name

Literacy Skills

Identifying, saying, and writing **e, b, p**/ Spelling one's name

Key Language

Words and Expressions: boy, girl, man, woman, friend, classmate/ **Conversational Language Frames:**

Who's that (boy)? He's my (friend) This is my (friend) Nice to meet you.

Nice to meet you, too. Sorry, what's your (last) name again? Can you help me, please? I can't spell

The teaching procedure of the lesson is as the following:

Conversation

Preparation (10 minutes)

- Describe the lesson objectives in Persian.
- Tell students to look at the picture on Page 10. Ask them some introductory questions in Persian:

Listening (10 minutes)

- Now ask the students to look at the picture again and listen to the conversation on CD.
- Play the CD two or three times.
- Now ask questions (in Persian) to check what your students have understood.

Practice 1: Introducing Others (15 minutes)

- Tell your students that they are going to learn different ways of introducing and greeting others. Let them know what each turn means.
 - Let them know what the words *classmate* and *friend* mean and ask them to repeat the words several times.
 - Then play the CD two or three times and ask them to repeat the turns. You can also divide the class into two groups and ask each group to repeat one turn. This can be practiced with individual students.
 - Then ask the class to introduce one student to you and you do the greeting.
 - Next ask your students to work in groups of three and practice introducing and greeting others. They can refer to the photo dictionary at the end of their student books for words they don't know.
 - Finally, invite groups to come to the front of the class to role play the introductions and greetings.

Sounds and Letters**Preparation (5 minutes)**

- Tell your students that they are going to learn to identify, say, and write the letters **e**, **b**, and **p**.
- Tell students to look at the conversation on Page 12. Then play the CD two or three times.
- Now ask questions (in Persian) to check what they have understood.

Letter E/e (15 minutes)

- Ask your students to look at the conversation in their books and identify the letter e in the word Behparvar.
- Show the flash card for letter E/e and say the name of the letter two or three times.
- Show the flash card, say the name and ask students to repeat it.
- Using the example words on the flash card, explain the two written forms for the letter. Tell them that the upper-case forms are used at the beginning of proper names and the first word in a sentence.
- Now ask your students to find words with the letter E/e in their books.
- Then draw your students' attention to the sound of the letter: /e/. Give examples of names with the sound and ask students to repeat them.

Example names: Behnaz, Pedram, Emad, Esmat, Sepehr, Sepideh, etc.

- Ask if there are students in class whose names include the letter E/e. Ask them to decide what the letter e in their names sounds like.
 - Using the board, show them how to write the letter in the two forms. Draw their attention to the directions in shaping the letter.
 - Now ask them to practice writing the letter E/e on Page 56 in the appendix at the end of their workbooks.

Listening and Reading**Preparation (5 minutes)**

- Explain that the students are going to listen to two conversations in which people are greeting and introducing themselves. The students are supposed to listen carefully and (through reading) put a check mark (✓) in the box below the names (first and last) based on what they hear on the CD for each conversation.
 - Ask them to use pencils rather than pens so that they can correct their answers if wrong.

Listening (15 minutes)

- Play the CD once and ask students to check the correct names.
- Play the CD again and ask them to check their answers.
- Ask them to compare their answers in pairs.
- If needed, play the CD again and check the students' answers.

Speaking and Writing**(15 minutes)**

- Explain what your students are supposed to do in this part: Each student greets three other students and asks for their names. Then he/she decides on the shortest and the longest first and last names in the group and writes them in the spaces provided in the table on Page 13 in their student books.
 - Tell them to use the question *How do you spell your name?* or *Can you help me, please? I can't spell when needed.*
 - Walk around the class and monitor what your students are doing and help them if needed.
 - Once completed, ask students to report the names they have found.

Your Conversation (15 minutes)

- Explain that your students are going to work in groups and practice the lesson functions using their own information.
 - Remember that the incomplete conversation on Page 13 in the student book is only a model and that your students are not supposed to write anything to complete it. ***This is only an oral practice.***
 - Give them enough time to practice their conversation in groups.
 - Walk around the class and help them if necessary.
 - Then ask them to act out the conversation for the class.
 - **(Optional Activity)** Ask students from different parts of the class to do the conversation.
 - **(Game)** Ask a student to spell his/her name and the class will say the name. Then ask another student to say his/her name and the class will spell the name. Continue this with several students in class. This can be a chain practice.
- (Prospect 1 teachers' guide, 2013, PDF available on: http://eng-dept.talif.sch.ir/index.php?page_id=96)

This theme based design based on CLT principle is considered to be quite an achievement for the educational system of Iran which was bounded into grammar and reading based methods in field of teaching foreign languages and many teachers have found this paradigm shift a dream came true and a miracle accomplishment. For comparing Prospect series with its previous Right Path to English counterpart see Kheirabadi and Alavimoghaddam (2014)

IV. METHODOLOGY

As previously mentioned, the role of textbooks in fully centralized education system is indispensable. Nunan (1987) notice the importance of materials as an essential element within the curriculum, which do more than simply lubricate the wheels of learning. They also provide concrete models for desirable classroom practice and act as curriculum models and at their very best they fulfill a teacher development role.

Consequently, textbook evaluation can play a crucial role in improving the process. Materials evaluation plays such an important role in language teaching that its potential for influencing the way teachers operate is considerable. Materials evaluation can and should be a two-way process which enables teachers not just to select a textbook, but also to develop their awareness of their own teaching/learning situation.

Sawin [7] points that "Evaluation studies can shed light on the points of strengths and weaknesses of the syllabus" and finding these points of strength and weaknesses is exactly what we aim to do in this study. To do so, we did a qualitative research based on a researcher developed a questioner and distributed among highly experienced teachers who were busy teaching the relevant books in city of Tehran. The population of the study included all English teachers of the city of Tehran (from all municipality districts) in academic year of 2014-2015.

Prior to the data collection phase, we did a pilot administration of the research and distributed the instrument of the research, the researchers' devised questioner, among a group of 30 English teachers belonging to the population of the study. The results of analyzing the collected questioners helped us in improving the instrument and smoothing the administration phase.

We distributed the copies of the instrument among a group of 100 English teachers in May 2015. Distribution of the instrument was equally divided among four major geographical parts of the city. The respondents were a group of 100 teachers (50 males and 50 females), the most crucial including condition was teaching Prospect 1 and 2 in the relevant academic year.

In order to improve the validity and credibility of the findings, we asked the teachers to fill out the lists either immediately or within a time span of one week. Thanks to their interest about the subject of the research and their highly appreciable cooperation, most of the lists were completed on the same day.

The questioner was including three major open ended questions:

- What are the most observable positive points of Prospect series? (Especially with an eye to the previous series).
- What are the most serious weak points and shortcomings of this series?
- What are your suggestion(s) to the authors of the books to improve the negative issues and boost the positive ones?

In the following section the analyzed findings of the research are represented.

V. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

As mentioned above, this paper is the reflections of a group of teachers about the Prospect series and findings are demarcated within this teacher-based framework. Teachers as the main stakeholders of teaching process are considered as one of the best sources for textbook evaluation. After analyzing the data derived from questioners we summarized the findings as below:

In response to the first research question, many teachers believe that the most significant privilege of Prospect (especially while comparing with the preceding series) is definitely its more updated approach as a whole. Its communicative approach is responding to highly demanded change of method from very traditional ones to modern ones. Above 85 percent of answers were centered on this feature of the book. However, this most prominent advantage of the books has simultaneously been found as the most challenging aspect of the book. As teachers mentioned, many of

their colleagues are not effectively trained for this paradigm shift and they are baffled with new theoretical concepts represented in teachers' guides. It seems that lack of realistic and relevant professional development courses is a serious shortcoming of this national program. A teacher's response is very illuminating: "it seems to us a sudden tsunami reached the calm and peaceful coasts that we (teachers) were relaxing there. Although we all support this new wave of change and find it as a necessary evolution, most of us were, and even are unprepared for it. We have some colleagues with more than 25 years of teaching experience and they had not had any in-service training during this long span of time after their recruitment, so how we can expect them to adapt themselves with this new wave?..."

The official answer of the ministry of education to this group of teachers is mainly referring them to the teachers' guide, while the circulation of this manual shows that many teachers do not welcome it warmly and a group of them are even unable to understand its content fully and truly.

The second advantage of the series is its supporting components: TG, workbook, audio CD, teachers' flashcard and teachers' video file. Almost all respondents declared that they found this series more comprehensive and supporting when comparing with its previous ancestors. Unfortunately this good point of the series is coincided with another shortcoming: poor distribution of some particles especially the teachers' guide and audio CD.

In general, our findings show that: Prospect series is evaluated as successful in its approach and methodology, its teaching aids and setting objectives and preparing content. Although, in case of content, some conversations are evaluated as very long, time-consuming and above zero beginner level needing background knowledge of students to be taught.

In terms of pitfalls and shortcomings of the program and series, in addition to what stated above, we found that:

- Many teachers have found the general shape of the books, their size, illustrations and photos, and printing quality poor and very low degree of consent came to this feature. Many of the respondents believe that the photos are both of low quality and relevance to the subject and one can easily replace them with any other photos. Choosing photos from popular web engines (mainly Google Image service) is another weak point of the series which seems to be even humiliating to some teachers!

- Above 90 percent of participants in this research feel that the time allocated to this series is too short and 80 minutes in one session weakly is almost nothing. It is evaluated as a violation of the accepted principles of CLT in their point of view.

- Lack of supplementary material, teacher training and in-service courses, some facilities and tools such as high quality audio player in some cases is reported as other pitfalls of the program in general.

As gist of the findings, it is clear that teachers are strongly supporting the program as a whole but do have many questions and ambiguities about various aspects of this on-going quest.

VI. CONCLUSION

The findings of the research showed that "Prospect" series is evaluated very successful in some aspects while very poor in field of others. Paying attention to modern evolution in methodology, teaching all four skills at the same time, and preparing a more communicative book which responds to students needs are among the high grounds and low quality of the general shape and printing condition of the books are the most debated weak points. The best feature of the series as evaluated by the teachers is considering students' needs and its CLT approach. Although many teachers and practitioners participating in the research have found the new series a considerable step forward, it seems that the series faces some serious shortcomings. The findings of this research can be useful for both series designers and authors and the policy makers in the ministry of the education.

REFERENCES

- [1] Borjian, M. (2013). English in Post-revolutionary Iran: From Indigenization to Internationalization. Multilingual Matters. Bristol, Buffalo and Toronto: Multilingual Matters.
- [2] Davari, H. & Aghagolzadeh, F. (2015) "To teach or not to teach? Still an open question for the Iranian education system" in English language teaching in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Innovations, trends and challenges. UK: British Council.
- [3] Foroozandeh, E. (2011). History of High School English Course Books in Iran: 1318-1389 (1939-2010), *Roshd Foreign Language Teaching journal*, vol.26 No.1 (57-69).
- [4] Kheirabadi, R., & Alavi Moghaddam, S.B. (2014). New horizons in teaching English in Iran: A transition from reading based methods to communicative ones by "English for School Series". *International Journal of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics World*, 5(4), 225-232.
- [5] Kheirabadi, R., & Alavi Moghaddam, S.B. (2014). Meta-analysis of the researchers on evaluating English textbooks in Iran. *International Journal of Economy, Management and Social Sciences* 3 (12), 894-897.
- [6] Nunan, David. (1987). *The learner-Centered Curriculum*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [7] Sawin, E.L. (1990). *Evaluation and the Work of Teachers*, Wordworth.

Reza Kheirabadi was born in Tehran in 1979. He got his PhD in general linguistics from Tarbiat Modares University in 2011. He has published many articles mostly in TEFL and Critical Discourse Analysis. He is a faculty member of organization for educational research and planning (OERP).

Seyyed Behnam Alavimoghaddam received his PhD in general linguistics from Allameh Tabatabaee University, Tehran-Iran. He has published some books and articles mainly on Teaching and Learning. He is a faculty member of organization for educational research and planning (OERP)