EFL Practitioners' Perspectives on "The Prospect" Textbook: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract—**Using a qualitative mode of inquiry, this paper aims at evaluating "The Prospect" course-book, taught nation-wide at junior high schools of Iran. To this end, the researchers interviewed experienced practitioners who were willing to share their views with the researchers. Having assured the participants that pseudonyms will be used in reporting the finding and having had their informed consent, the qualitative interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and finally coded to unearth themes specifying the strengths and weaknesses of the textbook. Iterative data collection and analysis continued until the practitioners' perspectives reached a point of theoretical saturation. Grounded in teachers' perspectives, the findings not only clearly show the merits and demerits of the textbooks, they also reveal suggestions for improvement. The findings have clear implications for practitioners, syllabus designers and policy makers**

Index Terms—**course-book evaluation, teachers' perspectives, strengths, weaknesses**

I. INTRODUCTION

More often than not syllabuses are evaluated using checklists developed by people external to language education. There are two problems with these checklists: first, they do not reflect contextual constraints; second, they do not reflect practitioners' perspectives. To fill in this gap and provide policy makers with the situated knowledge of syllabus evaluation, the field is in need of data-driven evaluation criteria grounded in language teachers' perspectives. Since checklist designers have no access to local constraints in language education, they mainly focus on the universal features of textbooks. These checklists are useful if and only if they are supplemented with data-driven criteria covering local exigencies. For instance a checklist may emphasize the balanced and integrated presentation of language skills. Though this criterion is theoretically justified, it is totally useless in practice since language education in public high schools of Iran focuses on reading, vocabulary and grammar and this focus is shaped by the high-stake university entrance exam. Thus the field is in need of data-first studies that conceptualize teachers' perspectives to uncover context-sensitive criteria to be used along with theory-driven checklists which cover the universal features of textbooks.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Technology has overshadowed each and every aspect of language education; nonetheless, nothing can replace textbooks since they have withstood the test of time (Tomlinson, 2001). On the importance of textbooks, Skierso (1991) believes that teaching is next to impossible without textbooks. Similarly, Ansari and babaii (2002) believe that not using a textbook is synonymous with aimlessness in learners' views; a textbook can serve as a tool for managing teaching time; and it can act as a source of security and guidance for novice teachers. Having a textbook, on the other hand, students feel a sense of achievement through goal-oriented activities. Further, as Cunningworth (1995) contends, a textbook specifies activities, systematizes teaching and learning activities, and act as a scaffold for inexperienced teachers.

Despite the importance of textbook for teaching and learning, it happens that at times they subjugate teachers and learners. Without a doubt, there is no single best textbook; hence, teachers should: (1) evaluate the textbook in terms of content, skill coverage, activities, exercises, topics and embedded cultural values; (2) do away with exercises which do not raise learners' awareness cognitively; (3) remove topics which are culturally biased; (4) add communicative activities if the textbook is medium-oriented; (4) add form-focused activities if it focuses exclusively on communication; 6) remove communicative activities which have very low communicative value. In short, rather than following the textbook, the teacher should actively manipulate the textbook by adding what is missing and removing what is redundant.

To be effective, textbook evaluation should be multidimensional, i.e., it cannot focus on one aspect at the cost of other aspects. A quick review of textbook evaluation in Iran reveals that this criterion has not been met. To date, many textbook evaluation studies have focused on one single dimension, e.g. culture (Aliakbari, 2005), pronunciation and grammar (Azizifar, et al, 2010), authenticity (Abdullahi-Guilani, et al, 2011), and gender bias (Amini & birjandi, 2012).

As a result, they cannot help practitioners in selecting, evaluating and modifying EFL textbooks.

According to Ostovar-Namaghi, Saboor and Tajzad (2014) textbook evaluation studies in Iran follow two important objectives: they develop textbook evaluation criteria; and they evaluate textbooks using textbook evaluation checklists. None of them, however, actively involved teachers' in developing criteria for evaluation through exploring their views through qualitative interviews. Since it is the language teachers who are actually in tune with the heartbeat of the students and deeply aware of contextual constraints, they are in a position to develop and propose evaluation criteria. Nonetheless textbook evaluation studies consider teachers at the consumer end of criteria since they have no part in developing the criteria for textbook evaluation.

III. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

To fill in this gap, this data-first study aims at theorizing teachers' perspectives concerning the strengths and weaknesses of an ELT textbook, rather than making them respond to externally-imposed criteria pre-determined by a textbook evaluation checklist. To this end, the study explores teachers' perspectives by eliciting relevant information through a general question. More specifically, the study collects theoretically-relevant data through the general question, "How do you evaluate "The Prospect"? Please identify areas of strengths and weaknesses and substantiate your position with reference to specific parts and activities of the textbook.

IV. RESEARCH METHOD

A. Participants

The study was conducted in Iran. Participants of this study were from Mashhad and Kashmar in Iran. This is an EFL context which concentrates on English as a foreign language in both public schools and private institutes. Focusing on snowball sampling, the study started with one interested participant who was willing to share his views with the researchers and then he was asked to introduce another interested participant. All in all, fifteen participants shared their views on the strengths and weaknesses of the local course book for junior high school- the prospect. To add diversity to the data, the participants were selected from both rural and urban areas. All of them had more than ten years of teaching experience and they were both males and females

B. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through an open-ended qualitative interview. Prior to data collection, the researchers: (1) sought the participants' consented participation; (2) made sure that the information they present will never be accessible to any third parties; (3) informed the participants that the results will be reported through pseudonyms rather than the participant's real names. Having paved the way for naturalistic data collection, the participants' perspectives were audio-taped, transcribed verbatim and finally coded for themes and categories. The interview data was coded according to Miles and Huberman's (1994) qualitative data analysis scheme – data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. To establish the credibility of the findings final propositions summarizing the participants' perspectives were verified through member-checking.

V. RESULTS

A. Advantages

1. Message-Oriented Approach

Communication, specifically, means to interact with people by maintaining the rules of speaking and social norms, but generally the term refers to speaking skill as interviewees consider it into account. Compared to the previous course-book in schools of Iran i.e. grammar dominated, the available book actively challenges the speaking skills and creates a convenient environment for pupils to interact. Therefore, it has provided an area for students to practice their ability to use language. The following statement of Reza supports the fact:

Before, students were asked to learn some rules and grammatical patterns, but the available book gives them the opportunity to use language for real communication.

Apparently, the use of language in a class is going to be fun and it is wrongly supposed that it is the most important end of learning a language. Besides, families and most teachers in Iran seem to have expectation of a tangible dominant of speaking ability for the pupils. Then, the book meets the need and plays a significant role in this field. Ali as one of our participants describes:

Nowadays communication plays an important role in the society. Our definition of learning English is to be able to speak and the book tends to sustain this skill.

It is clear that listening and speaking are not separable and closely pertinent to each other. So, one who is going to communicate, needs to be understood first. This is actually what the book focus on. Nahid explains:

In my idea using different conversation and concentrating on two important skills, listening and speaking, is a positive point to let pupils talk and is in line with the purpose of learning a second language.

Although teachers have considered the communication approach as an advantage, but it sounds as a disadvantage. It

was problematic particularly in poor settings of educational system where there is no facility to work. Teachers in these contexts were specifically complaining about the unequal level of the students' knowledge and the book. They had to even teach letters merely for some months to sort out the problem of students' unfamiliarity of new language and course.

2. Optimal Reduction of Form-focused Activities

Generally, learning a second language seems to be tough and tricky. The actual outcomes of the process depend on learner's proficiency in various numbers of elements such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and so on. But the fact shows that it is difficult to cover all aspects perfectly. Researches show students learn some of these factors with disfavor. Grammar is the commonest. The following explanations of Monireh confirm the fact:

Previously, learners just learned some rules of grammar without learning how to use them, but in this book there is no explicit approach to grammar. Therefore, students receive grammar's points subconsciously that leads to internalization of the concepts. They are happy to be free of learning those grammatical structures too.

It seems that students need to develop their grammar subconsciously during the learning process. Interviewees believed that there is no concern for teaching grammar since students are learning different patterns indirectly. Learners, then, discover the grammatical rules through an indirect way of teaching. Monireh continues:

I asked my student these questions:" who is that boy or who is that girl?" They subconsciously applied the correct pronoun for each question that I hadn't explained before. It shows they are learning grammatical forms without teaching them directly or deductively.

3. Learner-Centeredness

Interviewees clarified that the communicative approach of the text-book has provided an active environment for students to use language in an authentic way. They added that pupils are actively keen on talking and doing exercises and apparently tend to participate to complete an exercise, sing the songs and play a role. It seems clear that there is a dynamic atmosphere and plenty of fun for all students. Different types of interaction occur in the classroom atmosphere and most of the time students compete for their turn to talk. Mahmood clarifies:

We as a teacher are just a facilitator. Students shoulder the most responsibility and carry out the 90 percent of class activities. They eagerly listen to the tapes and teachers and repeat the conversation. Sometimes they utilize the new words to create and produce a novel sentence. They experience learning as an enjoyable activity.

4. Effective Activities and Exercises

Teachers' views show that activities are one of the salient aspects of instruction. They need to be effective and fruitful enough to quench students' thirst for learning. By virtue of activities, teachers would be able to monitor the process of learning as well as increasing the students' understanding and perception. Activities could be useful to facilitate instruction and make it less demanding for teachers. Activities shouldn't be monotonous and they must consider different taste to appear. According to the participants, a great majority of activities in the book are beneficial and acceptable. Mahdi comments:

As most of the exercises are practical and useful, pupils tend to do them eagerly. They voluntarily attend to role play activities, producing new words like their names or their sister or brother names, they invent dialogues and conversation and would like to produce the sentences based on their incomplete knowledge. They greet each other and have fun.

5. Effective Illustrations

In terms of pictorial information, although some teachers considered it as negative factor, but most of them believed that colorful and real photograph of people, places and things provided a motivational atmosphere for pupils. They stated that availability of a picture dictionary at the end of the book helps students to practice and figure out the meaning of new words. Pictures are important source especially for beginners to receive the message mentally and internalize the meaning easily. Following explanations of Fateme support the idea:

Students have good opportunity to connect to pictures to figure out the meaning. Using the picture dictionary, they would be able to develop the knowledge of words based on building a picture in their mind. Students like to learn based on pictures, so ignoring a few unclear pictures, the rest are useful.

Among interviewees, four of them mentioned the weak clarity and obviousness of pictures. They explained that pictures in isolation do not play an effective role in learning. They also suggested that pictures are meaningful when used to contextualize the language.

B. Disadvantages

In this part, teachers castigate the text-book for different reasons which fail to contribute to use language in an authentic way. Due to the nature of learning a second language, they enumerate a various factors which affect the process of monitoring a learning environment and minimize the amount of useful achievement. In what follows we have presented those findings based on participants' complaints.

1. Ignoring Time-Constraints

Students' sketchy knowledge about English caused a demanding role for teachers. More than 90 percent of participants complain that they have no enough time to present materials and contents of the book. Allocating just two-hour a week is not useful enough to cover all concepts of the book especially when there is no homogenous knowledge environment. They also believed that this will make perplex problems to deal with. Ali explains the situation:

It sounds that the assumption is that students have enough background knowledge, but the fact is there is no equal

level of knowledge and understanding for learners especially those who live and study in villages, so two-hour a week decreases the efficiency and makes it tough and difficult for us as teachers to build a balance between multi-leveled students.

Reza criticizes that:

Two-hour a week! It is not enough at all. We have no time to work on student book let alone the work book.

Some parts of the result which is related to poor environment of the education in above mentioned context show more problems. Sadegh who teaches in a village shows his dissatisfaction in this way:

...That's awful. I can't work on the book at all. My students are not knowledgeable enough to deal with the book. I have closed the book, put it aside and work on my own way. I have no choice...

Teachers' comments in these types of areas clearly show the lack of practicality of the book for specific settings. The contents of the book apparently demand a large amount of knowledge for students to be able to use the book.

2. Ineffective Teachers' Guide

Changing a material and a course book needs to be gradual and it should take several steps. As teachers are mostly exposed to text books, they need to be aware of changes earlier and receive informative and practical tips to monitor the classes. According to interviewees, in-service program seems not to be effective enough to cover new schedule. Marzieh comments:

It is essential to have a fruitful and clear plan for teachers and make them aware of the changes. As we have worked in a GTM approach for many years in our local schools, this sudden change in the curriculum has been made many problems for us to deal with. There is no teacher-guide available as well to show us a clear and bright way to pass. We have to inform and convince students' family and they are not ready to accept the changes.

Results show that teachers' need is in line with designing the course book specially those which are related to local school. They believed that their experiences and information of being in the educational system could act as a key factor to ameliorate the process of designing a book.

3. Ignoring Reading and Writing

"A second language is a language studied in a setting where that language is the main vehicle of everyday communication and where abundant input exists in that language. A foreign language is a language studied in an environment where it is not the primary vehicle for daily interaction and where input in that language is restricted." (Oxford, R. 2003). Based on this definition, students in a foreign environment have no enough access to language, but they need to receive useful information and expose to different skills to acquire the new language. It means that skills are at the same level of importance especially for EFL. According to interviewees, the most limiting aspect of the book is ignoring two important skills, writing and reading. It has left no room for working on these skills .It may be possible to consider this one as most problematic area according teachers' point of view. Take the following comments from Hasan:

We are limited on writing and reading. The book leaves no room for writing home work or dictation and students' family are asking about the problem. Think about people who know their mother tongue perfectly and are illiterate. They believe that they are blind. If you ask them you know the language and interact with people and speak perfectly, but you consider yourselves as an illiterate person, they will answer because we are not able to write and read.

Furthermore, the results show that parents' expectations are different in comparison with studying English in Institutes. Local schools are the means to make students ready for the entrance exam of the university as the long-term goal for family. Maryam's comments clarify better:

Reading considers as the most important skill for parents and students in Iran because the need to pass the entrance exam of university, but the available book mainly focuses on speaking and listening which is not in line with students' need.

4. Impaired Audio Materials

Due to the nature of the book and the emphasis on listening, there is a need to provide useful audio material for schools. Participants claim that students are complaining about CD. Different aspects are mentioned. Taking the rate of speech and accent as examples, they mention that school facilities are not always available.

In my class all students are complaining about the speed of audio CD. They always lose the point and I myself have to repeat the utterances for them. If it was like software to let them use it and play some games, they learned more and had fun in the class and at home.

The big problem arises in poor setting where no facility is found to use. Teachers dissatisfied and have no chance to read the dialogues and texts themselves. Samaneh explain the situation:

Here I have nothing, no computer, no CD, even a cassette. How's it possible to work on the exercises and the book. If I can teach some letters and words, I have done a lot.

C. Suggestions

In the local school of an EFL environment, learning a new language comes to be a difficult task. It apparently challenges different areas such as teachers, teachers' trainers, materials, course books, and course book designers as well. Therefore, it is actually an integrative process which calls the effective co-operation of all groups. Interviewees in this research come to this conclusion that the book is in a dire need of change especially based on poor environments of education system. Unequal facilities for education in different environments make it difficult for teachers to use the

book properly. In other words, although they believe in a change of traditional course book, but they mainly believe that it needs to be a gradual change. Confirming the ideas, Zahra suggests that:

My main concern is limited time. The changes of the book call for more time to work on. Furthermore, students need to take an entrance exam of university which is the main goal for students in Iran, to this end; they need to learn the related materials which are mostly reading and vocabulary.

Participants were also worry about the outcomes and parents' expectations. They should be responsive and it seems that even families are confused. This sudden change even makes it difficult for teachers to explain for families and clarify the new approach to them. Ali suggests:

It was better for teacher to be aware of the change. There is a gap between the previous book and this one. I think we need a balance between the traditional one and the new one. Families are asking why their children have nothing to write at home and some say that the level of the book is higher than their ability to help their children.

In sum, a gradual change, taking teachers' point of views into account, considering all four skills, paying attention to poor settings and unequal level of knowledge and facilities were the most factors to be asked to consider as important elements while designing a book. However, it demands a big challenge to design a book, it sounds there is a need to bridge the traditional approach to the new one more scientifically.

VI. DISCUSSION

As the results clearly show the textbook introduces a shift away from form-focused instruction which aimed mainly at developing students' reading comprehension towards a message-oriented textbook which aims developing students' conversational skills. The shift seems to reflect an analysis of the learners' needs. Since the previous book did not improve learners' conversational skills, they went to schools to pass and get a degree and when it came to language development they supposed that they should go to private language schools. Since the textbook fills in this gap, it is welcomed by both teachers and learners because: (1) it is message-oriented rather than medium-oriented; (2) minimizes form-focused activities and maximizes meaning-focused activates; (3) reflects learners' needs, i.e., their willingness to develop their conversational skills rather than memorize useless facts and language forms; (4) contains goal-oriented activities and exercises rather than aimless practice of some forms; and (5) illustrations effectively help learners pictures the situations of language use. Despite these merits, the textbook suffers from many pitfalls. Taking the participants' perspectives into account, syllabus designers can greatly improve the quality of the textbook by:

- (1) improving the teachers' guide which is taken to be ineffective at the time being;
- (2) justifying the materials in terms of actual teaching time or time constraints which make teachers' shift-way from teaching to covering the textbook;
- (3) adding remedial materials for deprived students who had no language background;
- (4) accommodating reading and writing skills, at least minimally, to account for construct-underrepresentation, i.e., proficiency covers all four skills rather than just listening and speaking;
- (5) improving the quality of audiotapes which are taken to be deficient by the participants; and
- (6) adding formative and summative tests, flash-cards and visual information.

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