

# General English Textbook Evaluation: A Closer Look at “Four Corners”

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**Abstract**—There is no doubt choosing specific language teaching materials can influence the quality of teaching and learning procedures. The textbooks can often play an essential role in students' success or failure as a part of the materials used in the language classrooms. Consequently, special care should be taken in evaluating educational materials based on dependable and valid instruments. Some of the usual instruments to evaluate the English Language Teaching materials are the checklists. An evaluation checklist is an instrument that allows the evaluator with a number of features of successful teaching and learning materials. Regarding this, the present study is an attempt to evaluate the recent general English textbook by Richards and Bohlke (2012) titled “Four Corners” using Daoud and Celce-Murcia's (1979) evaluation checklist. The finding of the study supports the strengths of the aforementioned textbook putting it in one of the reliable available textbooks.

**Index Terms**—evaluation checklist, four corners, general English textbook evaluation

## I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays in language classrooms, general English textbooks play a very significant role in the realm of language teaching and learning. And there is no exaggeration that they are considered the next important factor in the second or foreign language teaching classrooms after the language teachers. As Riazi (2002) states, textbooks have an important role in language teaching classrooms. The teacher should know how to select a suitable textbook based on standard or reliable checklists (Hamidi & Montazeri, 2015). It still remains controversial whether or not the teacher should have the freedom to choose the materials for evaluation and adaptation. One thing is obvious, however, and that is evaluations are commonly done by evaluators and no one may be able to deny its importance and necessity.

## II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

There are some situations that we need to evaluate materials as McDonough and Shaw (2003) mention. The situations vary based on the teachers' and classroom needs. In the first situation, the teachers might be given the choice to adopt or develop their materials and in the second situation the teachers are considered just the consumers of other peoples' products (McDonough & Shaw, 2003). In both of these situations, some degree of evaluation seems necessary. Undoubtedly, what reflects the principles and ideas of a teaching method which were fashionable in that time is the materials and textbooks of each period in the history of English language teaching practice? It should be taken into account that we are living in a ‘post-method’ condition whereas Kumaravadivelu (2006) states no single and unique method can guarantee success in all language classrooms and for all learners worldwide. Therefore, making evaluation and assessment on the different learning materials at hand seems quite essential.

Evaluators like teachers, researchers as well as students can rate the quality of the material (Soori, Kafipour, & Soury, 2011). And what helps them in this regard is the evaluation checklist which, based on Sarem, Hamidi, and Mahmoudie (2013), is an instrument that provides the teachers and evaluators with a list of features associated with successful learning/ teaching materials and techniques. Textbook evaluation appears to be under the area of research in English language teaching with a great amount of related theories and literature. Some practical checklists have been designed in English language by different scholars which are more frequently used than others especially by famous researchers such as Cunningsworth (1995), Daoud and Celce-Murcia (1979), Ellis (1997), McDonough and Shaw (2003), Tomlinson (2003, 2008), and Ur (1996) have utilized the checklist based approach in helping teachers evaluate ELT textbooks (as cited in Hamidi et al., 2016).

The questionable theoretical basis of checklists and the subjectivity of judgments have often been the origin of disappointment. Perhaps, that is why over the years the relative merits of such checklists and their criteria would fall and new checklists would be developed (as cited in Ansary & Babaii, 2002). Of course, care should be taken that not all the checklists would be able to benefit the practitioners. However, Daoud and Celce-Murcia (1979) have offered an evaluation checklist which is much more frequently used for the evaluation of general English textbooks consisting of five major sections including: (1) subject matter, (2) vocabulary and structures, (3) exercises, (4) illustrations, and (5) physical make-up. For evaluating and analyzing every textbook, each section is composed of several detailed strategies (see appendix).

Covering good organization and format is a characteristic of an excellent textbook. This book should provide useful table of aims and scopes, vocabulary, contents, and index for readers to learn English which can make readers easier to find the required materials. The entire context in textbook should be up-to-date and no mistake is accepted. The activities should be emphasized to the concepts at the end of each chapter. Another requirement is the size and format of print appropriate for the textbook. The textbook, as far as possible, should be the latest edition. Below, the authors try to evaluate the "*Four Corners*" written by Richards and Bohlke (2012).

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### Materials

The material used for the evaluation purposes in this study was the textbook titled "*Four Corners*" written by Richards and Bohlke (2012) for basic to intermediate students of EFL or ESL learners in four series. This book is published in USA by Cambridge University Press. This new book which is very similar to New Interchange series in its contents and subject matters consists of 12 units. Each unit includes 4 lessons and hence this book consists of 48 lessons altogether (for each level). Something which is very obvious in this book is that the order of learning materials and skills are all the same throughout the book and across the 4 series. This book, which is altogether 150 pages, consists of 12 units containing activities, exercises and tasks related to the four major language skills as well as pronunciation and some vocabulary exercises.

#### Instrument

The authors used Daoud and Celce-Murcia's (1979) checklist which is commonly used and much cited in analyzing and evaluating textbooks. The mentioned checklist comprises the following sections: exercises, vocabulary and structures, physical make-up, illustrations, and subject matter. Each section has specific detailed strategies which can be applied as the criteria based on which the characteristics of the present general English book can be approximately evaluated (Hamidi et al., 2016).

#### Analysis of Data

The present work is a case study concentrating on evaluating a series of general English book titled "*Four Corners*" by Richards and Bohlke (2012) for basic to intermediate students of EFL or ESL, using a checklist proposed by Daoud and Celce-Murcia (1979). The authors analyzed and evaluated the aforementioned textbook qualitatively using the criteria of the Daoud and Celce-Murcia's (1979) checklist.

### IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### Subject matter

The subject matter is presented topically in an organized manner. The subject matter of the "*Four Corners*" covers many topics of interest to the learners for whom the textbook is intended (urban or rural environment; child or adult learners; male and/or female students, international figures). The ordering of materials done by topics or themes is arranged appropriately but not in a logical fashion (Hamidi et al., 2016). Apparently more attention was given to the level of the available materials.

The content of the book is also graded based on the needs of the students or the requirements of the existing syllabus, apparently structural syllabus, because in the whole text of a simple unit, that grammatical point is quite visible. In general, the materials seem to be accurate and up-to-date, especially because this book "*Four Corners*" is 2012 edition.

Regarding the skills, improving learner's language skills is frequently the main purpose of ESL/EFL programs and is quite visible in their textbooks. The skills include listening, speaking, reading and writing. The learning opportunities of these skills should be supplied in the textbook. For example, students practice by doing activities and exercises. During learners practicing, teacher can find their problems of learning situation and add the interaction between learners. It also gives learners the chance to extend their experience with the language. A sense of humor and creativity within a textbook is another key point for learners. However, enough activities and exercises for learning different skills will keep students interesting in learning different language.

#### Vocabulary and Structures

The common vocabularies should be functional for students and learners to use in their daily conversations without thinking. Simultaneously, the vocabulary would conform to the subject matter and topic of each unit which the book talks about. On the other hand, the grammar should be laid out independently and analyzed clearly to make students get

the major point. What is more, the related vocabularies and grammars in the lessons of the book should provide the related activities for learners that they could practice directly.

The vocabulary load of the “Four Corners” seems to be reasonable for the students of that level to handle and learn. Besides, the vocabulary items, like the grammatical points, are controlled to ensure systematic gradation from simple to complex items. The new vocabularies are repeated in later lessons for better internalization, reinforcement and practice. One important point is that the length of the sentence seems appropriate for the level of students to understand the meaning. Furthermore, the structural points and the order of presentation seem to be very much pertinent to teach and learn. On the other hand, another advantage is that the structures gradually increase in complexity to fit the growing reading ability of the learners. As a matter of fact, this actually what can be seen throughout the whole series of the Four Corners?

The authors and developers of the book use everyday language and sentence structures that follow normal word category order and real language needs of the learners. The cohesion and coherence in sentences and paragraphs, especially in reading comprehensions are really magnificent in that they follow one another in a logical succession. To facilitate understanding and ensure assimilation and integration, the linguistic items are introduced at appropriate levels and in meaningful situations.

Both vocabulary and grammatical points are abided by a clear line of progression. It seems that the grammatical points and the sequence of demonstration are properly arranged and the order of difficulty throughout all series of the book can be seen. The grammatical points also progressively increase in complexity to fit the different proficiency level of the students.

### **Exercises**

The exercises of the “Four Corners” develop comprehension and test knowledge of main ideas, details, and sequence of ideas; however, the book lacks task-based or task-enhanced grammar activities which the present decade books advocate. The exercises of the book take in structures and vocabularies which build up the learner's repertoire which have already been taught/ learned in previous series. The exercises in fact provide practice in different types of written work (sentence completion, spelling and dictation, guided composition), but there is no sign of parrot or rote-learning, since the book is reportedly a communicative one. One advantage of the book, on the one hand, is that it provides a pattern of review within lessons and cumulatively tests new material in each unit right after they have been presented. On the other hand, the exercises promote meaningful communication by referring to realistic activities and situations.

In general, the activities and tasks available in each unit to a great extent evolve around listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills and this balance in Four Corners is seemingly suitable to the learners and learning situation, specifically for EFL learners. Writing tasks are rare but exercises are more. Clearly, there should be more tasks of writing aimed at improving writing ability of the learners as well as practicing the grammatical structures which are presented in each lesson. The present series incorporate some actual activities and tasks for example writing a complaint, writing experiences or a diary, writing a letter to a friend etc. Gradation and selection of vocabulary items are on the surface primarily on the basis of simplicity and frequency of occurrence, which seems to be appropriate for the learners.

### **Illustrations**

Graphics, illustrations and interest include in our checklist because a good textbook should be eye-catching, colorful and interesting pictures are essential elements for a successful textbook. Otherwise, users may not be that interested to continue to read it. Also, for students and children to use colorful pictures is easy to learn and remember the real work information. Teacher can use the pictures to ask students question and make the class more interesting. Therefore, pictures can attracts students' attention, help students understand the meaning, and it makes them feel fun to learn English.

Depicting realism and action, the illustrations of the “Four Corners” provides good opportunity for more practice in reading and spelling. Moreover, the clarity and the simplicity of the illustrations absorb the learners.

Furthermore, to help the learner understand the printed text, the illustrations are printed close enough to the text and are directly related to the content

### **Physical Make-up**

Approximately, as supported by Sarem et al. (2013), all the existing evaluation checklists include this section sometimes titled differently, for example Lay-out or Physical Appearance, which reveals the fact that it is a crucial factor to be considered in designing every textbook. In fact, students make their first impression of every book based on its physical appearance regardless of its content (Sarem et al., 2013). The cover of the book for “Four Corners” is not that much durable enough to withstand wear, and apparently it needs not be.

The text used in this book seems to be quite attractive (i.e., cover, page appearance, binding). Texts and colors and graphic actually match in “Four Corners”. The size of the book is good and seems convenient for the students to handle and take care of. It's very easy to carry. Font and the type size are quite appropriate and eye-catching for the intended learners. Sarem et al. (2013) also confirm that the good printing, size, and type of the fonts used in this book undoubtedly guarantee the smooth readability of the texts. The layout is clear and well-organized. The topic of each unit is written in bold type. Reading passages are of normal font size that is just right for the first graders. All the letters unanimously are in black color. As to the font size for topic and exercises, the top, bottom, left and right margins, the

space between words, sentences, lines and paragraphs, the quality and color of writing, there are apparently no traces of weak points (Sarem et al., 2013).

## V. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

As it has been mentioned before, a suitable book for teaching/learning needs to have a fundamental instructional philosophy, approach, method and also technique which fit the students and their needs. Selecting an appropriate textbook is not an unchallenging job for sure and may take a lot of time and energy. To make up for such complexity and make the process a little simpler, textbook evaluation checklists have been mentioned as a good strategy for choosing and adopting suitable textbooks. These evaluation procedures or checklists can lead to a more systematic and thorough scrutiny of potential textbooks and to increased results for learners, instructors, and administrators. The available checklists are generally considered as the groundwork not only for choosing general EFL books but also for selecting specialized/technical books designed for those students who are majoring in EAP/ESP courses (Sarem et al., 2013).

The textbook, *Four Corners*, by Richards and Bohlke (2012), is a very wonderful textbook. The authors of this paper carried out the evaluation through the Daoud and Celce-Murcia's (1979) checklist. High marks were given for nearly each item of the checklist as a result of the evaluation. The use of this book is strongly recommended specifically for Iranian Language Institutes, because it's a well-organized textbook and is worth working on. It provides useful, up-to-date, interesting and accurate information such as the influence of media, computer and technology upon our busy life today.

"Four Corners" has succeeded to introduce, like many other general English textbooks, how to use real life and authentic language in order to survive in real life and make oneself understood. The *Four Corners* book by Richards and Bohlke offers many opportunities for students to practice the skills of speaking, writing, listening and reading in pairs. On the face of it, the book is well-arranged, the size and format of the print is appropriate for learners to read, and every activity is emphasized and supported the characteristic of the main topic. Among other advantages of the current book, the Review Units, one quiz for each unit, the audio CD, the listening scripts as well as the self-study units with answers and grammar glossary presented at the end of the book are detectable. *Four Corners* follows successful multi-skills syllabus that incorporates themes, functions, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Varying exercises make students arrive at a lot of knowledge.

What is more, learners can have mobile access and download the MP3 files for conversation also for self-study plus the CD ROM which are highly useful and can promote learner autonomy. *Four Corners* is handy and very easy-to-use for learners to practice everywhere, home and in the classroom. There are many colorful pictures in the book. As a matter of fact, the graphics and cartoons should be used to assist student to understand the meaning. Learners would surely be interested in the colorful pictures and cartoons.

*Four Corners* with lots of good points is definitely a favorable textbook for elementary to intermediate learners and will benefit students in learning process to be sure. *Four Corners* will for sure remain as a series that practitioners, teachers and students worldwide will be most likely very eager to use.

In the end, the authors believe that findings of this study bear substantial implications for practitioners, material developers and both general and specialized EFL/ESL teachers and learners. It is hoped that the present textbook analysis allows for the necessary insight for all language teachers and material developers to conduct such a procedure in their own exercise of textbook selection. Teachers for sure will find the information that there are various evaluation checklists which can serve them in analyzing various instructional and language books. Teachers and material developers should notice that a variety of factors should be taken into account in designing, selecting and grading a book which needs mutual cooperation among the practitioners of the field (Sarem et al., 2013).

## APPENDIX. SAMPLE CHECKLIST FOR TEXTBOOK EVALUATION

Source: Daoud, A.-M., and Celce-Murcia, M. 1979. Selecting and evaluating a textbook. In M. Celce-Murcia and McIntosh, eds. *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language* (pp. 302-307). New York: Newbury House.

### The Checklist

#### The Textbook

##### a. Subject matter

1. Does the subject matter cover a variety of topics appropriate to the interests of the learners for whom the textbook is intended (urban or rural environment; child or adult learners; male and/or female students)?
2. Is the ordering of materials done by topics or themes that are arranged in a logical fashion?
3. Is the content graded according to the needs of the students or the requirements of the existing syllabus (if there is one)?
4. Is the material accurate and up-to-date?

##### b. Vocabulary and structures

1. Does the vocabulary load (i.e., the number of new words introduced every lesson) seem to be reasonable for the students of that level?

2. Are the vocabulary items controlled to ensure systematic gradation from simple to complex items?
3. Is the new vocabulary repeated in subsequent lessons for reinforcement?
4. Does the sentence length seem reasonable for the students of that level?
5. Is the number of grammatical points as well as their sequence appropriate?
6. Do the structures gradually increase in complexity to suit the growing reading ability of the students?
7. Does the writer use current everyday language, and sentence structures that follow normal word order?
8. Do the sentences and paragraphs follow one another in a logical sequence?
9. Are linguistic items introduced in meaningful situations to facilitate understanding and ensure assimilation and consolidation?

#### **c. Exercises**

1. Do the exercises develop comprehension and test knowledge of main ideas, details, and sequence of ideas?
2. Do the exercises involve vocabulary and structures which build up the learner's repertoire?
3. Do the exercises provide practice in different types of written work (sentence completion, spelling and dictation, guided composition)?
4. Does the book provide a pattern of review within lessons and cumulatively test new material?
5. Do the exercises promote meaningful communication by referring to realistic activities and situations?

#### **d. Illustrations**

1. Do illustrations create a favorable atmosphere for practice in reading and spelling by depicting realism and action?
2. Are the illustrations clear, simple, and free of unnecessary details that may confuse the learner?
3. Are the illustrations printed close enough to the text and directly related to the content to help the learner understand the printed text?

#### **e. Physical make-up**

1. Is the cover of the book durable enough to withstand wear?
2. Is the text attractive (i.e., cover, page appearance, binding)?
3. Does the size of the book seem convenient for the students to handle?
4. Is the type size appropriate for the intended learners?

### **The Teacher's Manual**

#### **a. General features**

1. Does the manual help the teacher understand the rationale of the Textbook (objectives, methodology)?
2. Does the manual guide the teacher to any set syllabus for that level?
3. Does the index of the manual guide the teacher to the vocabulary, structures, and topics found in the Textbook?
4. Are correct or suggested answers provided for all of the exercises in the textbook?
5. Is the rationale for the given sequence of grammar points clearly stated?

#### **b. Type and amount of supplementary exercises for each language skill**

1. Does the Manual provide material for training the students in listening and understanding the spoken language?
2. Does the Manual provide material for training the students in oral expression?
3. Does the Manual suggest adequate and varied oral exercises for reinforcing points of grammar presented in the textbook?
4. Does the Manual provide drills and exercises that enable the teacher to help the students build up their vocabulary?
5. Does the Manual provide questions to help the teacher test the students' reading comprehension?
6. Does the Manual provide adequate graded material for additional writing practice?

#### **c. Methodological/pedagogical guidance**

1. Does the Manual help the teacher with each new type of lesson introduced?
2. Does the Manual provide suggestions to help the teacher review old lessons and introduce new lessons?
3. Does the Manual provide practical suggestions for teaching pronunciation and intonation?
4. Does the manual provide suggestions to help the teacher introduce new reading passages?
5. Does the Manual provide guidance to the teacher for introducing various types of written work?
6. Does the Manual provide guidance to the teacher for evaluating written work and identifying the students' most serious mistakes?
7. Does the Manual advise the teacher on the use of audiovisual aids?

#### **d. Linguistic background information**

1. Does the Manual provide contrastive information for the teacher on likely pronunciation problems?
2. Are English vocabulary items and English structures well explained?
3. Are lists of cognate words (true and false cognates) provided for the teacher?
4. Does the Manual provide information on grammar to help the teacher explain grammatical patterns presented in the lessons and anticipate likely problems (i.e., data from contrastive analysis and error analysis)?

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