

Meta-analysis of the Researchers on Evaluating English Textbooks in Iran

Reza Kheirabadi *

A Faculty member of Organization for Educational Research and Planning (OERP), North Iranshahr ave. Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran.

Seyyed Behnam Alavi Moghaddam

A Faculty member of Organization for Educational Research and Planning (OERP), North Iranshahr ave. Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran.

*Corresponding author: rkheirabadi@gmail.com

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Abstract

Having a totally centralized educational system and a population of over 12 million students, Iran is among those countries which has recently finalized and ratified the National Curriculum and consequently the educational system of the country went through an outstanding overhaul if not a complete revolution. The role of textbooks in such centralized system is indispensable by any definitions, and in this paper we will represent a meta-analysis on the researches, including master thesis and Ph.D. dissertations carried out on English textbooks of Iran since its earliest days about seven decades ago up until recent years. The data of this research is gathered from above 50 papers and academic publications written in criticism of English textbooks of Iran and we took benefit both from library and online resources. One aspect of prominence of this research is due to the fact that the ministry of education of Islamic Republic of Iran has introduced a new series of English textbooks called "English for Schools" series consisting of two three-volume series named Prospect 1-3 (for junior high school students of grades 7-9) and Vision 1-3 (for senior high school students of grades (10-12) This paper aims to report the meta-analysis of the leading and most important researches done criticizing the pitfalls of previous English textbook series and represents an inventory list of suggestions for material developers and policy makers of education system of Iran. The findings of this meta-analysis show that the most frequently quoted and mentioned pitfall of previous series of English textbooks is overlooking the "communication" as the most basic element of language teaching-learning process. Although this paper reports the facts within Iranian context, many findings and suggestions may be interesting for other foreign/second language situations and countries.

1. Introduction

As Foroozandeh (2011) mentions: "The history of formal teaching of English in Iran dates from 1939 (1318) when the high school English series was published and put to use in high school classes. The series included 6 books for the 6 years of the compulsory high school education at the time. The series developers were Iranian and English speaking educators who launched and implemented this joint project under the sponsorship of the then Ministry of Culture (Vezerat-e Farhang)."

She continues her overview by listing the weak points of the 1939 series and mentions some of the pitfalls as following:

- not following the same design and procedure in all the lessons
- lacking work book
- lacking teachers' guide
- sticking to Direct Method and Reading Method principles and ignoring the communicative skills

Apparently the 1939 series lasted for about 25 years and the second phase of preparing English textbooks goes back to 1964 when a new and well-known series known as "Graded English Series" was introduced to the educational system of Iran and was in education circle for approximately fifteen years, up until the Islamic revolution in 1979. Foroozandeh (2011) writes: "The Iranian high school English course books during 1964-1978 (1343-1357) 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."

The Graded English series includes 6 books each containing a clear set of aims and objectives, clear syllabus, defined activities, and procedures with a step-by step explanation in the teacher's manual provided for each book and available to teachers for free. The Manual provides further information including:

1. An overview of the whole book including structural patterns, new words, etc.;
2. List of references in Linguistics and Methodology (from 1954 to 1965) that the authors used in writing the book(s); and
3. The procedures that should be followed in teaching the whole book in general and teaching each lesson in particular. Details on this part are presented in the Preface.

Teaching English in post-revolutionary Iran has been the subject of study for some researchers and Borjian (2013) is only one of them. Borjian (2013:64) in her socio-politically driven analysis of the history of English education in post-revolutionary Iran demarcates 4 phases:

- "Phase 1: The Revolutionary Period (1979-1988)
- Phase 2: The Period of Reconstruction and Privatization (1989-1997)
- Phase 3: The Period of Global Outlook (1997-2005)
- Phase 4: Returning to Revolutionary Roots (2005-Present)"

Kheirabadi and Alavi Moghaddam (2013) summarize the situation of English textbooks in Iran after the Islamic revolution and conclude: "The Graded English series stayed in circulation of formal education system up until the Islamic revolution of 1979, when it was completely removed from the schools and replaced by other series, the most well-known one is "Right path to English" which is still serving the education system and is planned to be replaced by the newly designed "English for School" series in the coming academic year commencing October 2013.

A brief survey of English textbooks taught in formal k-12 education system of Iran shows that they were mostly and generally developed under the influence of structural and formal camps such as RM and DM and suffered from the lack of a national curriculum and roadmap which encompasses the overall process of formal teaching of English in Iran. It also seems that the pros and cons of teaching English in post-revolutionary Iran considerably corresponds to different historical and socio-political periods in a way during the first years of the revolution victory, the English teaching underwent some consecutive reforms and early after the revolution, teaching English in the first grade of junior high school (known as guidance school) was stopped for a while and teaching English postponed to the second grade of guidance schools." In this paper we aim to classify, summarize and report the most commonly mentioned shortcomings of English textbooks taught in Iran before the newly published "English for School series" with an eye to suggest a list of recommendations to textbook developers.

2. Methodology

In this meta-analysis, we went through some of the most prominent researches carried out criticizing and evaluating English textbooks in Iran. We studied about 50 academic papers and dissertations published from 2000 to 2010. The data is gathered from both library and online resources evaluating internal factors (content) and external criteria (physical and publication features) of the books to extract the most common pitfalls of previous series. As the final step of the paper, we will analyze the newly published English textbooks (Prospect 1 and 2) from ongoing series of "English for Schools" to see if the situation is improving or not.

3. Analysis and discussion:

In this section of the article, we categorize and summarize the main pitfalls reported in researches conducted prior to the new series of "English for Schools" mainly from internal and factor perspective.

4. Evaluation of Internal factors

4.1. authenticity

Dahmarde (2011) is a comprehensive three-year cross sectional investigation into English Language Teaching (ELT) in secondary schools in Iran which benefits from varieties of research instruments in order to collect valid and reliable data. These instruments were mainly composed of a review of literature, a desk based analysis of the curriculum, administering questionnaires as well as conducting interview sessions. The questionnaires were mainly distributed among English language teachers and the interviews were conducted with some authors of the curriculum, textbooks and English language teachers in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The gist of the research in Dahmardeh (2011) is studying the "authenticity" factor in formal English education system of Iran and main questions address below question:

To what extent does the Iranian ELT curriculum include a communicative pedagogy?

Dahmardeh (2011) after a comprehensive, detailed and multi-level analysis comes to this result:

"The purpose of this article was looking at one aspect of the study which is the role of authenticity in English language teaching in Iran. While the issue of authenticity has been addressed and considered within the newly designed national curriculum in Iran, this issue appears to play no role in either the textbooks or the ELT programme. Having said that, it could be postulated that changes have to be made if we want to prepare the students to communicate in the multicultural world of English and if we want to use the nationally developed textbooks for the optimum benefit.

The participants in this study were enthusiastic and serious language teachers as well as university lecturers who were willing to devote considerable private time to become better teachers as well as helping their society to gain a better understanding towards the role of English language and how vital it is these days. All of the teachers mostly put the blame for their lack of success as well as the current difficulties and flaws that they and students face on the shoulder of textbooks, the educational system and on top of that the governments of Iran. It should be underlined, that what is advocated here is not a total rejection of the textbooks in the teaching of English in Iranian schools, but rather that authentic materials should be introduced in the classroom as additional material; authentic texts can provide the students with original language." As mentioned above, after evaluating textbooks and programme, Dahmardeh and some other scholars such as Abdollahi-Guilani et al. (2011) believe that lack of authenticity is a serious problem which should be taken into account while compiling new English textbooks. The latter research, done within Dougills' textbook evaluation checklist framework showed that "the home-made textbooks lack the authenticity of natural English in terms of content and presentation. They are short in the variety and attractiveness in the passages. The materials are not generally presented from the easy to hard order and they are mainly void of cultural and communicative points."

4.2 Gender parity

Abbas-Nejad-Konjin (2012) in her MA thesis addresses the gender inequity in three Iranian middle school textbooks including grade 7 English textbook along with Farsi/Persian language and natural sciences textbooks of different grades. she summarizes her thesis as: "The findings of the content analysis reveal that sexist indications permeate Iranian textbooks. Compared to men, women have a pale presence in the books. Women and girls are depicted, for the most part, in the domestic sphere, and their role as mothers and nurturers are stressed in stories, poems, and illustrations." And this finding is to some extent in accordance with findings of the following researchers.

Gharbavi and Mousavi (2012 a,b,c) in a three complementary series of papers all using the same corpus of data but different methodology have paid attention to social factor of gender parity and sex bias in English textbooks of Iran. They studied three elements of male and female visibility in illustrations, texts and the male/female occupational roles in English textbooks through content analysis method and the frequency of each item was calculated and compared with one another. They came to an interesting end and the finding of their research showed that:

The results of study revealed that:

- 1) Women were less visible than males both in written texts and photos.
- 2) Men work in more diverse occupational roles than women.

As pedagogical implication level of their study, they suggest: "The result of this research will be of great interest to syllabus designers who are interested in improving the quality of sex equality in the content and pictures of the textbooks. It is essential for syllabus designers to take into account the learners' sex equality in all forms. Indeed, the instructional objectives of an educational program are not achieved unless syllabus designers take into account the sex equality, human right and social justice. In this regard, syllabus designers can take advantage of this study as it reveals the points that the content contains strong discrimination against females, and the pictures are gender biased pictures.

Thus, a considerate syllabus designer should pay close attention to the issues of gender and equality. In brief, syllabus designers are advised to keep a balance between male and female characters, occupational roles, social activities, and the frequency of males and females' pictures." (Gharbavi and Mousavi, 2012a).

4.3 Cohesion and coherence (discourse markers)

One commonly reported linguistic weak point of previous "Right Path to English" series was about linguistic feature of cohesion and some researches show that Discourse Markers (DMs) as affective factors to connect sentences and make a text coherent are almost absent in reading comprehension section of "Right Path to English" series comparing with authentic materials. In one of these researches for example, Talebinejad and Namdar (2011) analyzed the reading sections of high school English books from Discourse Markers point of view within Fraser's (1999) categorization of Discourse Markers. They interestingly compared the body of data gathered from high Scholl English textbooks of Iran (30 reading passages of grade 1 to grade 4 of high school) with the same amount of linguistic data from 14 passages chosen authentic materials taught and available in Iran.

1. Steps to Understanding by L.A. Hill, (1980)
2. Start Reading 4 and 5 by Derek Strange (1989)
3. New Headway English Course by Liza John Soars (2000a)
4. Developing Reading Skills by Linda Markstein and Louise Hirasawa (1981)
5. Expanding Reading Skill by Linda Markstein and Louise Hirasawa (1982)
6. New American Streamline by Bernard Hartley and Peter Viney (1995)
7. Interchange 3 Students Book by Jack C. Richards, Jonathan Hull, and Susan Proctor (2005)
8. Marvin's Woolly Mammoth by Jill Eggleton (n.d.) (see Talebinejad and Namdar (2011) for references)

The findings of this comprehensive study showed that "the frequencies of the DMs in the reading comprehension sections in IHSETs are not sufficient. It means that the learners comprehend the texts better when the texts included enough number of DMs. DMs in a text increase the coherence of a text.

... The findings of the present study revealed that DMs are not used sufficiently in reading comprehension texts in English Books 1, 2, and 3 in comparison to the texts in internationally developed books. But the DMs in the reading comprehension texts in English Book 4 in Iranian high schools are taken into consideration and are used sufficiently. According to the results of this study, the structure of English Book 4 is different from the structure of English Books 1, 2, and 3.

The results also showed that _contrastive markers' are the most frequent kinds of DMs used in English Books 1, 2 and 3. These three books include 38.21% _contrastive markers, '34.95% _elaborative markers, '26.82% _inferential markers' of the total DMS, and _topic change markers' are not used at all. English Book 4 considered DMs as an important topic, so it was studied separately regarding the kinds of DMs used. _Elaborative markers' are used more than other three categories of DMs. This book includes 37.83% _contrastive markers, '45.94% _elaborative markers, '14.86% _inferential markers, ' and just 1.35% _topic change markers." (Talebinejad and Namdar, 2011)

Lack of coherence was also reported as a serious problem of English textbooks in Dahmardeh (2009) and Jahangard (2007)

4.4 Cultural issues

The cultural trait of English textbooks in Iran is another subject which poses different questions and for both those group of scholars who believe in so-called linguistic imperialism and the thinkers who believe that textbooks should not necessarily mirror the target culture but should mainly focus on source target.

Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012) is a paper scrutinizing the cultural issues of TEFL in Iran with a source culture priority trend. In a part of their paper, we read: "language learning for Iranians cannot be something simply found in Western-produced textbooks but should be nationally and culturally accomplished and struggled over. It was therefore suggested that we take greater control of what takes place in the Iranian context of English language teaching. Though it is the fashion of Western countries to denigrate other, not prestigious, English varieties, the progress of the Iranian TEFL, i.e. the successful assertion of Iranian local culture against the cultural and ideological domination of the Core countries, can be an antidote to the harshness of all marginalization Iranians have suffered for centuries. A crucial part of our argument was thus the attempt to show the significance of going beyond the simple representation of Western cultural values in an Iranian context."

On the contrary, some other researchers think that English textbooks should see the situation from a more globalized sight and let the western or more specifically Anglo-American culture play more active role in the materials prepared by the ministry of education. Borjian (2013:74) is a work which implicitly (and in some cases very directly) insinuate that TEFL in Iran in general and national textbooks in specific have been put under an indigenization process. She exemplifies her discussion with excerpting a page of previously taught junior high school books and over generalizes the topic to all aspects of TEFL in Iran and writes: "A page of an English lesson in a homegrown English textbook for the sixth grade, in which all the cultural aspects of the English language are removed. Not only do the characters have Iranian names, but they all follow strict top-down, government issued dress codes."

In general, it seems that the discussions about the cultural aspects of English textbooks in Iran is mainly under the influence of the view point and scholastic camp of the researcher(s).

5. Conclusion

In this article, we reported the findings of a meta-analysis carried out in the field of English text books of Iran from an internal evaluation perspective. This analysis scrutinized various content aspects of the previously taught English series in Iran and the main pitfalls and shortcomings can be summarize as following:

- In the field of material, lack of authenticity is a serious problem of "Right Path to English" series. Decontextualized conversations speaking about unidentified personas in unknown places and locations have made these texts contextually free from any real life equivalents.
- In the section of supplementary materials, the series suffers from lack of Work books, relevant teacher's guides, officially prepared audio and video CDs and other standard educational aids.
- From a cultural perspective, these books are prepared in a way that the least reference to target culture is visible and almost all texts and sentences are totally free from so-called western cultural instances.

It is good to mention that currently, the ministry of education of the Islamic Republic of Iran is engaged with a fundamental revolution in education of the country and consequently a reform in teaching English. .for further information about this ongoing overhaul see Kheirabadi and Alavi Moghaddam (2014).



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