

EVALUATION OF ENGLISH RESULTS COURSE BOOKS AT UPPER-INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

By

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ABSTRACT

The importance of the course books in language teaching leads the way to the evaluation of them. Evaluating the teaching materials specially course books can help teachers to understand more about language learning. The purpose of the present study is to evaluate English Results course books which are widely used at Iranian institutes. The focus of the study is on the course books used at advanced lined and evaluating their physical make-up, practical concerns and different sections of them namely vocabulary, reading, grammar, language functions and pronunciation practice. 100 teachers from six different institutes participated in the study and completed the questionnaire which was prepared by Hashemi and Rahimpour (2011) for textbook selection and evaluation in EFL context. Results revealed that the course books were generally regarded as appropriate materials. Finally, several suggestions were mentioned for adding to the quality of the course books.

Keywords: Course Books, Evaluation, Physical Make-up, Practical Concerns, Sections.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays the use of course books in English Language Teaching (ELT) is more popular than ever before and the course books have gradually become the most pervasive tools for language instruction. Most of the teachers prefer to use a course book because it helps them to regulate and program the time. Furthermore, most of the learners also prefer to have a course book since it gives them a clear goal in language learning. Many researches have cited the usefulness of course books. As Richards and Rodgers (2001) stated course books are unavoidable elements of the curriculum because they specify content and define coverage for syllabus items. Moreover, some scholars argued that course books are a magical tool, they give learners a sense of system, cohesion and progress, and they help to achieve consistency and continuation (Allwright, 1981; O'Neil, 1982; Littlejohn, 1998). Furthermore, course books are seen to have a tendency to dictate what is taught, in an intentional order, and they have a serious impact on how teachers use them (McGrath, 2006).

While developing materials for a class is a thorny job, now with a variety of course books available on the market each with a different methodology and syllabus, it can be much more difficult to choose the best suitable book for a

particular teaching situation. Hence, in this situation the importance of book evaluation is clear. As a key area in English Language Teaching (ELT), the significance of material design and evaluation has grown steadily since materials, especially authentic materials are not simply the everyday tools of the language teachers; they are an embodiment of the aims and methods of a particular teaching/learning situation (Zhang, 2007). According to Ajayi (2005) although course books are seen as an indispensable tool of the language arts instruction, they are hardly evaluated for their appropriateness to meet teachers' and learners' needs and interests. In formal educational settings, especially for language teaching, the necessity of course books leads the way to the exploration of the course book evaluation by teachers. A thorough evaluation pave the way for teaching staff of each organization and policy makers to have this ability to discriminate amongst all the available books in the market and considering weak, as well as strong points of each book, and educators can choose the most appropriate book. Thus, through identifying strengths and weaknesses in textbooks, optimum use can be made of strong points, and weaker points can be substituted from other books (Cunningsworth, 1995).

With this respect, this study focuses on the teachers' views on the English Result book series which is widely used as course books in institutes of Iran. The books of this series can be used for four different levels of students' proficiency which are as follows: elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate and upper-intermediate. The aim of this paper is to evaluate the course books at upper-intermediate level. For gathering data the author chose a questionnaire which was recently used by Hashemi and Rahimpour (2011) for textbook selection and evaluation in EFL context. It consisted of 46 items and had seven parts. Five parts were about different sections of the text book namely vocabulary, reading, grammar, language functions and pronunciation practice. The other two parts were about physical make-up and practical concerns of the text book.

The questionnaires were distributed among teachers of six different institutes in which this series of books were used as course books for adult level students. After gathering, for each section of the questionnaire the percentage of the total answers to each scale were also calculated to clarify the teachers' ideas better.

Research questions

The present study aims at answering the following questions:

- To what extent are the course books acceptable in terms of vocabulary presentation and practice?
- To what extent are the reading sections acceptable in presentation and practice?
- To what extent are the course books acceptable in terms of grammar presentation and practice?
- To what extent are the course books acceptable in terms of presentation and practice of language functions?
- To what extent are the course books acceptable in terms of pronunciation practice?
- To what extent are the course books acceptable in terms of physical make-up?
- To what extent are the course books acceptable considering practical concerns?

Review of Related Literature

To do book evaluation in a correct way, first defining characteristics and giving a good definition about the course book is necessary. Ur (1996) gave a simple but a useful definition as follows: "The term 'course book' means, a text book of which the teacher and each student has a copy and which is in principle to be followed systematically as the basis for a language course" (p.183). From the above definition it is obvious that a course book should be available for the students and teachers, and used systematically in a course of study.

As Ur (1996) stated in some places course books are taken for granted while in others they may not be used at all in which case the teacher works according to a syllabus or according to their own program, and uses text book or supplementary materials as the need arises. Ur also explained that a third situation is where a course book is used selectively, not necessarily in sequence, extensively supplemented by other materials. However; the problem arises when selecting the course book, a book which must be used in a homogeneous class or in the worst situation for a heterogeneous class in a course of study. Therefore the main question is that what qualities must a course book have to meet the needs of every single individual member of the class? Or is it at all necessary to use a course book? Of course answering the last mentioned question depends on some other factors such as, style of teaching and accepted way of teaching in the related institution. However, considering the first question it should be mentioned that some are against using a course book for one of the possible following reasons (Ur, 1996):

Inadequacy: Every class or better to say every learner has their own learning needs and no one course book can supply these satisfactorily.

Irrelevance: The topics dealt within the course book may not necessarily be interesting for the class.

Limitation: A course book is confining and it may lead to boredom and lack of motivation on the part of the learners.

Homogeneity: Course books have their own rational and they do not cater for variety of levels of ability and knowledge that exist in most classes.

Over-easiness: It may be too easy to follow, and teachers

may find themselves as mediator of its content. It seems that the possession of a course book may carry a certain prestige (Ur 1996).

Grant (1987) mentioned that course books try to solve the problem by creating opportunities for learners to use the target language in the classroom, as a sort of "halfway house" before using it in real life. The following advantages of using a course book in the class, also add to its importance: having a framework and syllabus, ready-made texts and tasks, economy, convenience, guidance and, autonomy. It is said that a learner without a course book is more teacher-dependent.

As stated by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), Evaluation is basically a matching process, which concerns matching learners' needs to available solutions. Low (1987) mentioned that in order to predict the suitability of materials for particular classes the teachers should screen them

Evaluation is considered to function as a kind of educational judgment. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) gave this definition, "Evaluation is a matter of judging the fitness of something for a particular purpose" (p.96). Moreover, Cunningsworth (1984) put forward the idea "...that the process of evaluation could not be a purely mechanical one and that professional judgment was involved at every stage" (p.64). And also said that, "Professional judgment, founded on understanding of the rationale of language teaching and learning and backed up by practical experience, lies at the base of evaluation procedure" (p.74). Therefore, materials evaluation helps us make decision in selecting textbooks, from professional judgments as well as raise awareness of or reflect on our teaching and learning experience.

The idea of evaluating textbooks is seen by some to be closely linked to the selection of textbooks. The evaluation helps the selection, which serves as an important decision-making process, as Sheldon (1988) put it,

"The selection of a particular core volume signals an executive educational decision in which there is considerable professional, financial and even political investment. This high profile means that the definition and application of systematic criteria for assessing course books are vital" (p.237).

Hutchinson (1987) suggested an interactive view of materials evaluation and emphasized the deeper level of materials evaluation by asking the question why materials are the way they are. The author claims that,

"...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" (pp. 37-38).

Methodology

Participants

Participants of this study were 100 teachers, 57 females and 43 males, and of different institutes of Rasht. They voluntarily completed the questionnaire according to their experience of teaching English Result series of books. They were about 24 to 30 years old and had experience of teaching the books for more than five years.

Materials

The materials used in this study included the English Results course books at upper-intermediate level which are taught at English institutes in Iran.

Instrument

The data collection instrument used in this study was a questionnaire prepared by Hashemi and Rahimpour (2011) for textbook selection and evaluation in EFL context. It consisted of 46 items. The questionnaire consisted of seven parts. Five parts were about different sections of the text book namely vocabulary, reading, grammar, language functions and pronunciation practice. The other two parts were about physical make-up and practical concerns of the text book.

Data collection procedures

The questionnaires were distributed among teachers of six different Iranian English institutes. In these institutes English Result text books were used as the main course books for adult learners. By the allowance of the manager of institutes, the questionnaires were given to the teachers. Among the teachers who were asked to cooperate, 100 teachers accepted to participate and completed the

questionnaire. These teachers had one week time to give the completed questionnaire back, in order to give them enough time to reflect on the questions. Later the results were analyzed in order to answer the research questions.

Data Analysis

There are seven sections in the questionnaire namely vocabulary, reading, grammar, language functions, pronunciation practice, physical make-up and practical concerns. Each of these sections has several items and there are four scales available for each item which are to a great extent, to some extent, not satisfactorily and not at all. For each section, the researcher calculated the percentages of answers to the scales of each item first. Then, the percentages of the means of answers to each scale of that section were presented in a figure. Therefore, the seven Figures (1-7) presented in this study show the general ideas of the teachers about the seven sections of the questionnaire separately.

Results and Discussion

The results of the seven sections of the questionnaire are presented through figures separately. Figure 1 shows the ideas of teachers about the vocabulary section in general. The vocabulary part aimed at measuring to what extent the course books pay attention to the following points: having enough vocabulary loads, systematically grade the vocabularies, making the vocabularies repeated in subsequent lessons for reinforcement, presenting them in a variety of ways, introducing them in motivating and realistic contexts, helping students to internalize them, etc. As it is obvious from Figure 1, most of the teachers selected from the first two scales. The first scale received around 25 % of

answers and the second scale received around 33% of total answers. Therefore, it can be indicated that most of the teachers believed that English Results course books have the mentioned good points. However; if we compare the first two scales with the last two one, we can reach to the conclusion that the difference is only 8% which is not a big difference to make us sure that the course books are very successful in vocabulary parts. Therefore, it can be said that although many teachers believe that the course books are acceptable, still the vocabularies of the course books should be improved.

The items in the reading section aimed at measuring to what extent the course books pay attention to the following points: having interesting reading parts for the students, having reading sections which are authentic pieces of language, covering a variety of topics and themes, having reading sections which meet local and national standards, having up-to-date reading sections, the reading sections serve as a window into learning about the target language culture, presenting reading texts in an understandable way, having reading sections with age-appropriate content, having enough exercises and activities accompanying the texts. Again, the results show that the first two scales received the highest percentages of answers. As it is presented in Figure 2, these scales together received around 58 % of total answers. Therefore, the teachers agreed that the reading sections of course books are generally acceptable. However; since the percentages of the last two scales which show the weakness of the course books from the teachers' view is once more 8% lower than the two first scales. Therefore, the course books still need to

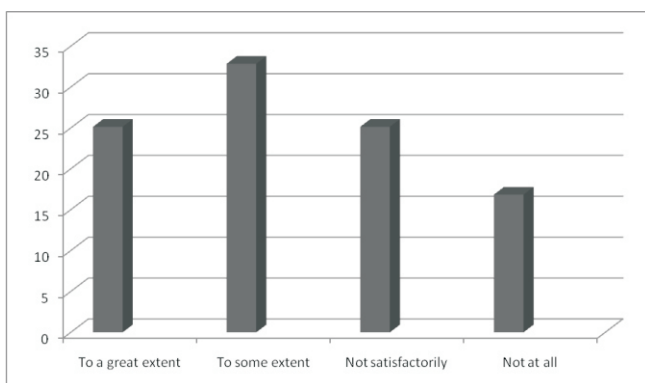


Figure 1. The percentages of the means of answers to each scale of vocabulary section

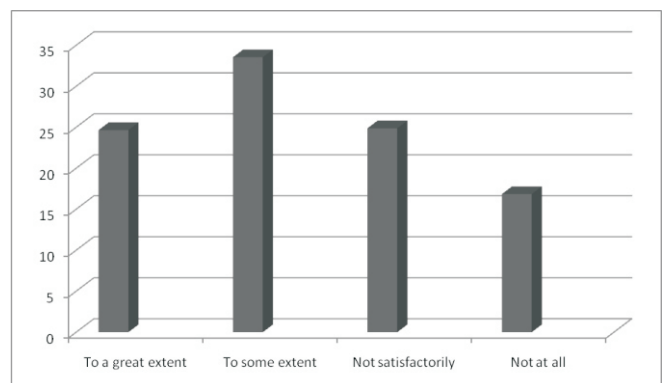


Figure 2. The percentages of the means of answers to each scale of reading section

be improved for this part.

The next section of the questionnaire aimed at measuring to what extent the course books pay attention to the following points: Introducing appropriate number of grammatical points, presenting them systematically, presenting them in a meaningful contexts, having enough explanations to make them understandable, having enough examples for each grammatical points, having enough exercises and activities for practicing them, repeating and reinforcing them in subsequent lessons. As it is shown in Figure 3, the total answers to the first two scales is around 60% which is a good percentage for claiming that the grammar parts of the course books are generally acceptable from the teachers point of view.

The language functions part of the questionnaire aimed at measuring to what extent the course books pay attention to the following points: Introducing appropriate number of language functions, presenting language functions in meaningful contexts, having different ways of practicing them, repeating and reinforcing them in subsequent lessons, exemplifying them through authentic use. As it is obvious from Figure 4, once more the percentages of the first two scales are higher than the last two ones and is around 57%. However; when compared with the percentage of the first two scales of all other six sections this section is weaker than all other parts from the teachers point of view and therefore the course books need to be improved for this section.

The pronunciation part aimed at measuring to what extent the course books pay attention to the following points: presenting them in meaningful contexts, making them

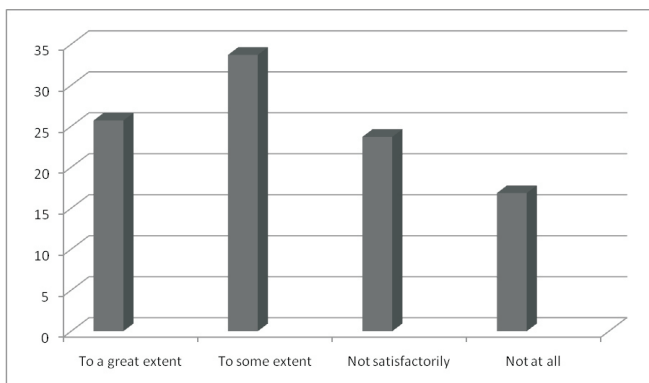


Figure 3. The percentages of the means of answers to each scale of grammar section

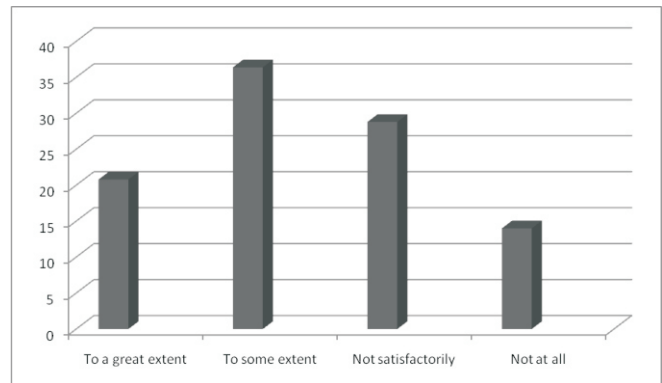


Figure 4. The percentages of the means of answers to each scale of language functions section

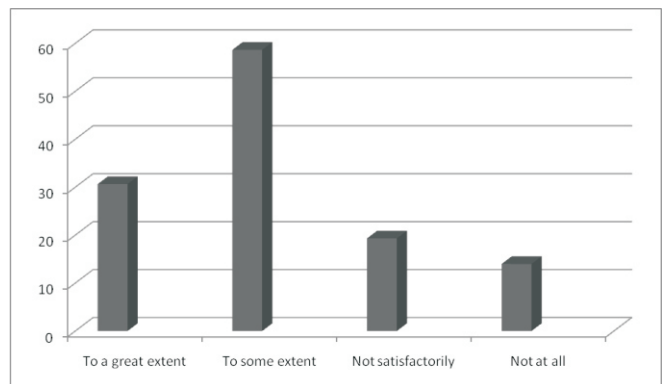


Figure 5. The percentages of the means of answers to each scale of pronunciation practice section

practiced, repeating and reinforcing them in subsequent lessons. According to Figure 5, the first two scales received around 89% of answers and therefore it can be said that almost all teachers agreed that the course books were successful in pronunciation parts. Therefore, it can be claimed that the course books are very successful considering the pronunciations parts.

The physical make-up part aimed at measuring to what extent the course books pay attention to the following points: having attractive covers, having papers of good quality, having appropriate font and size of writing, having enough illustrations, having colorful and attractive illustrations, having informative and functional illustrations, having illustrations which provide appropriate representations of local and national standard, having appropriate size and weight. The results show that the course books are generally acceptable from the teachers' view since as it is presented in Figure 6, the first two scales received around 61% of total answers.

The practical part aimed at measuring to what extent the

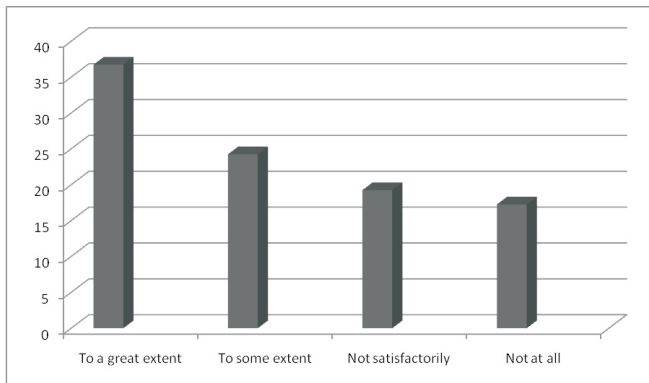


Figure 6. The percentages of the means of answers to each scale of physical make-up section

course books pay attention to the following points: having objectives which are mentioned explicitly, supporting the goals and objectives of the program, being challenging for the students, raising the students' interests in further language study, being coherent internally and externally with other books in the series, having review sections, introducing appropriate methodology for teaching. As it is shown in Figure 7, the first two scales received more than 72% of total answers. It can be claimed that after pronunciation section this section received the highest percentages of answers for the first two scales and therefore the course books are very successful from the teachers' view for the practical concerns.

5. Conclusion and Suggestions

The purpose of this study was to evaluate English Results course books at upper-intermediate level. For checking whether these course books are appropriate materials, a questionnaire with seven different sections was used. Five parts were about different sections of the course books namely vocabulary, reading, grammar, language

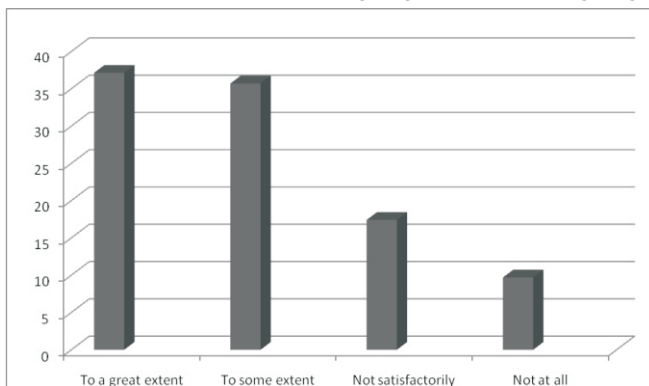


Figure 7. The percentages of the means of answers to each scale of practical concerns section

functions and pronunciation practice. The other two parts were about physical make-up and practical concerns of the course books.

According to the results of the questionnaire the course books were acceptable from the teachers' view since for all sections more than half of the teachers agreed on the usefulness of the course books. The results revealed that the course books were very successful in the pronunciation part and physical make-up. However; more specifically most of the parts need to be improved since there was not a big difference between the percentages of the teachers who considered the course books as useful materials and who had a negative view about them. Therefore, it is suggested that some parts of the course books are to be improved. First of all, the language function is the part which is the weakest one, comparing to other ones, and needs more attention. Next, the vocabulary and reading sections need to be more improved since the difference between the teachers who had a positive view and who had a negative view about these two sections was only 8%.

The findings of this study offer convincing evidence that the English Result course books at upper-intermediate level that are currently taught in many institutes meet the teachers' expectations. Although these books are recently used in different institutes; they could receive the attention from the teachers. From the teachers point of view the physical make-up and practical concerns of the book are very good. However other parts of the books still needs to be developed in order to satisfy the teachers completely. The results expand the existing research in the area of course book selection and evaluation. However; in order to be able to make more sound judgments, more research needs to be conducted. Finally, concluding with the remark of Cunningsworth (1989): "No course book will be totally suited to a particular teaching situation. The teacher will have to find the own way of using it and adopting it if necessary. So one should not be looking for the perfect course book which meets our entire requirement, but rather for the best possible fit between what the course book offers and what the teachers and students need."(p.89)

Implications

The course book evaluation of English teachers may prove

to be just a beginning for resource development process. Evaluating the teaching materials specially course books can help teachers to understand more about language learning. Moreover, findings of this study may offer insights for those involved in educational administration, syllabus design, curriculum planning, and materials development.

Appendix

The questionnaire

Please read each sentence carefully and then choose the scale which best suits your answer. Thank you so much for your cooperation.

Gender: Male: Female:

Age:

Items of the questionnaire	To a great extent "f"	To some extent "f"	Not satisfactorily "f"	Not at all "f"
Vocabulary				
1) Does the vocabulary load throughout the textbooks seem to be reasonable for the students?				
2) Are the vocabulary items systematically graded from simple to complex items?				
3) Are the vocabulary items repeated in subsequent lessons for reinforcement?				
4) Are the vocabulary items presented in a variety of ways?				
5) Are the vocabulary items introduced in motivating and realistic contexts?				
6) Do the new items receive sufficient practice through different kinds of exercises?				
7) Do the vocabulary exercises promote internalization of the previously and newly introduced items?				
Reading				
8) Are the texts interesting for the students?				
9) Are the texts authentic pieces of language?				
10) Do the texts cover a variety of topics and themes?				
11) Do the topics dealt with meet local and national standards?				
12) Are the topics up-to-date?				
13) Do the texts serve as a window into learning about the target language culture?				
14) Do the texts present information in a way that the students will understand?				
15) Is the content age-appropriate?				
16) Are there enough exercises and activities accompanying the texts?				
Grammar				
17) Is the number of grammatical points introduced in the textbooks appropriate?				
18) Are the grammatical points presented in an increasing level of difficulty?				
19) Are the new grammatical points presented in a meaningful context to facilitate understanding				
20) Are the explanations easy to understand?				
21) Are there enough examples accompanying the explanations?				
22) Do the grammatical points receive sufficient practice through exercises and activities?				
23) Are the grammatical points repeated and reinforced in subsequent lessons?				
Language functions				
24) Is the number of language functions introduced in the textbooks appropriate?				
25) Are the language functions presented in meaningful contexts?				

(Conti...)

Items of the questionnaire	To a great extent “f”	To some extent “f”	Not satisfactorily “f”	Not at all “f”
26) Do the language functions introduced accompany practice of different kinds? (E.g. in pairs, in groups)				
27) Are the language functions repeated and reinforced in subsequent lessons?				
28) Do the language functions exemplify English in its authentic use?				
Pronunciation Practice				
29) Are the pronunciation points presented in meaningful contexts?				
30) Is there enough practice accompanying each pronunciation point introduced?				
31) Are the pronunciation points repeated and reinforced in subsequent lessons?				
Physical make-up				
32) Are the textbook covers attractive?				
33) Is the paper utilized of satisfactory quality?				
34) Are the type size and font appropriate for the learners?				
35) Are there enough illustrations accompanying texts in the textbooks?				
36) Are the illustrations colorful and attractive?				
37) Are the illustrations informative and functional?				
38) Do the illustrations provide appropriate representations of local and national standards?				
39) Do the size and weight of the textbooks seem convenient for the students to handle?				
Practical Concerns				
40) Are the objectives explicitly laid out in the introduction part?				
41) Do the textbooks support the goals and objectives of the program and the curriculum?				
42) Are the textbooks sufficiently challenging for the students?				
43) Do the textbooks raise the students' interests in further language study?				
44) Does each textbook cohere both internally and externally with the other ones in the series?				
45) Do the textbooks contain periodical review sections and exercises throughout lessons?				
46) Is the methodology proposed to the teachers appropriate for the teaching/learning situation and the students?				

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