

## A Comparative Study of American English File and New Headway English Course

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**ABSTRACT:** Textbooks play an essential role in the language learning process. The difficulty is that among a wide range of textbooks in the market, there are a lot of options which make the process of book selection even harder. Therefore, book evaluation is a vital process, and it has great impact on the process of learning and teaching. In order to evaluate ELT textbooks, theorists and writers have offered different kinds of evaluative frameworks based on a number of principles and criteria. To this end, two EFL textbooks namely New Headway English Course and American English File which are commonly taught in language institutes in Iran were selected for evaluation by seeking the teachers' viewpoints on the effectiveness of the two textbooks. Twenty ELT teachers helped the researcher rate the evaluative checklists. A modified version of [1] teacher textbook evaluation form was used to collect data. The results indicated that the differences between the two textbooks were not significant in four features including practical considerations, layout and design, activities, and skills, but they proved to be different in some other features including language type as well as subject and content.

**KEYWORDS:** *Textbook evaluation, Litz's framework, American English File, New Headway English Course*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Textbooks play a crucial role in both teaching and learning processes. In other words, there may be different opinions among teachers and learners regarding role of textbooks. [2] in their article asked the reason why teachers and learners use textbooks. The result for the learners showed that they saw the textbooks as a guide that aids them to organize their learning in both outside and inside the classrooms. In other words, textbooks help learners to find their way in the learning process. Since most class activities are done by the utilization of textbook, selecting an appropriate basis for teaching is one of the most important decisions a teacher is liable to make in shaping the content and nature of teaching and learning. [3] investigated a research study to examine the practicality of a number of prevalent English course books in the Iranian context. The result for the teachers showed that teachers consider textbooks as a classroom directorship instrument for communication that exists between teachers and students. Based on teacher perceptions, a textbook retains time and give orientation to the teachers' program. They also pointed out that a textbook not only gives direction to the class but also gives confidence and security to the teachers. [4] explains the role of a textbook as a main resource, supplement materials or even a map for a course. [5] also defined a textbook as what is available for both students and teachers to use. [6] mentioned the psychological effect of a textbook on students. He believed that using textbooks leads students to assess their achievement concretely. Therefore, it can be realized that textbook selection is of great importance. And, evaluating textbooks can result in even better learning and teaching.

### II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Most of the textbook evaluation studies that were carried out in Iran focused on three main goals. The first group has mostly tried to develop some criteria to contribute to more successful textbook evaluation studies [7], the second group has evaluated certain textbooks for their strength and weakness to find their advantages and shortcomings [8], [9], [10], [11], [12], and the third group has studied discourse features and the representation of discourse elements in the textbooks [13], [14]

[7] study is an example of the first group. They analyzed a corpus of 10 EFL/ESL textbook reviews plus 10 EFL/ESL textbook evaluation checklists and outlined what they perceived to be the common core features of standard EFL/ESL textbooks. The major categories are comprised of approach, content presentation, physical make-up, and administration concerns. Each set of major features of EFL/ESL textbooks, and they consist

of a number of subcategories. They concluded their article by mentioning that not all of these characteristics would be present in each and every textbook.

In another study which was conducted by [15] the analysis of English high school textbooks and EFL institute textbooks were investigated. Therefore, he did a comparative study regarding the Interchange Series and high school books to find out to what extent they were different in representing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principles. The analysis of the data showed that although high school textbooks are not conducive to CLT implementation, private institute textbooks represent the CLT principles to a large extent.

The second group in textbook evaluation concentrated on the strengths and weaknesses of the textbooks. For example, [8] modified the Tucker's model and applied it to the five volumes of Teaching Persian to Speakers of Other Languages (TPSOL) textbooks. She claimed that the philosophy behind the changes is due to the recent developments in language teaching. The results indicated that the books follow the Grammar Translation Method which considers the least attention to role-playing, different kinds of tasks, or language skills such as speaking. [9] also analyzed one of the leading texts in TPSOL and mentioned that in these series, not enough attention has been drawn to the four skills of the language. Moreover, the manner and the amount of the presentation of vocabulary and pronunciation are not in harmony with language learners' proficiency levels.

Finally, the third group of textbook evaluation studies in Iran has focused on discourse features such as speech acts, intersexuality and so on. [13] examined the presentation of social factors in three types of textbooks, including junior and senior high school textbooks, based on [16]. According to the results, in general, the textbooks demonstrated a different representation of social factors that tended to portray females as those who belong to a home context and have limited job opportunities in the society. In particular, junior and senior high school textbooks tended to shape normative views of gender and class relations in which a middleclass urban male was considered to be the norm.

Similarly, [14] studied the important features of new English textbooks such as the Spectrum series to see how cultural pragmatic knowledge of the language is included in the lessons. The results of the study showed that the series provided a variety of language functions, but the most frequent ones in daily speech were not focused on as much as other functions. Although the textbooks provided valuable metalinguistic information, they lacked explanations on the use of different forms in the same situation. There was also lack of explicit descriptions regarding appropriateness, paralinguistic information and contextual information.

In other contexts, textbook evaluation studies have also attracted the researchers' attention. For instance, [17] evaluated IELTS preparation materials and showed that there is a need for more materials that aim beyond test-taking practice, and we have to try to develop the language competencies that the learners need for their work or study goals. Morgan stated that in the books, IELTS candidates were expected to be highly motivated and therefore, there is not any attempt to make the books visually attractive as other books are. This was found to be a disadvantage of the books.

In his study, [18] wonders why students' and teachers' enthusiasm towards a new textbook are likely to get less and less by the end of the school year. The answer he provided is that textbooks that are at first interesting can get too familiar and unexciting. He admired course books that give the readers new ideas and perspectives.

In another study, [19] had a critical look at the practicality of the third edition of the New Interchange series. The results of their evaluation made them believe that despite its positive aspects, the course book has a number of disadvantages, including the insufficiency of attention toward the role of the learners' sensory experiences in the process of learning. [20]

In a survey over the usefulness of two ELT textbooks entitled Opportunities and New English File, [21] had a survey on the 134 teachers' views concerning the mentioned textbooks. The final analysis of the gathered data indicated the instructors' discontent with these two course books which were mainly in terms of their lack of adequacy for meeting the learners' needs and interests.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 participants

Twenty Iranian EFL teachers, having at least one year teaching experience of the books under study from different language institutes in Iran took part in this study. The participants were selected based on purposeful non-random sampling including both male and female teachers. Their age ranged from 22 to 35. The checklist was administered to the participants directly and via e-mail. It was believed that the sampled teachers had a good command of the content, design, and objectives of the books.

### 3.2 Instrumentation

#### a. Textbooks

The materials selected for evaluation were *New Headway English Course1* [22] and *American English File 1* [23]. Each unit of these books consists of a topic and different sections to practice grammar points, functions, vocabularies, four skills, and pronunciation. The books, as stated in the blurb, follow a communicative paradigm emphasizing the role of context and learners' engagement in the process of learning.

The authors of the two books claim that the topics are motivating enough to raise the students' interest, and their books can prepare the learners for meaningful communication in English. They also pointed out that integration of the skills has been taken into account. The textbooks are supported by resources such as workbook, CDs, and a teacher's manual.

#### b. Evaluation Checklist

The textbook evaluation checklist developed by [1] was used. In this study, three criteria (i.e., subject and content: items 1-5; activities: items 6-12; and skills: items 13-17) from the Litz's checklist were considered. The researchers chose these criteria because of the convenience of statistically defining and coding, instead of 10-point Likert scale in Litz's study, the 5-point Likert scale (Completely Disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Moderately Agree = 3, Agree = 4, Completely Agree = 5) was used. The checklist was composed of 36 items and had subcategories including practical consideration (1-5), layout and design (6-13), activities (14-20), skills (21-25), language type (26-31), subject and content (32-36). The validity of the instrument was established by some EFL experts including Ph.D. professors of EFL at different universities in Iran. Participation in this study was entirely voluntary. The time required to complete the checklist was approximately 25 minutes.

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The importance and the role of the textbook in teaching and learning process are certainly recognized by both teachers and learners. In other words, there seems to be a general agreement among teachers and students in relation to the primary role of the textbooks. Despite of its great importance, materials evaluation has been a new trend in the process of language teaching. It does not have a long history. [24] explains that the study of materials development had not received enough attention until the 1990s when books regarding this notion started to be published. Therefore, there is always the need to evaluate textbooks in different contexts to assess its practicality. As mentioned before, the main aim of the present research was exploring the quality of the two popular textbooks in the language institutes of Iran.

Analysis of the obtained data showed the high means for the features under study. The mean for the practical consideration, was 8.09 for *New Headway English Course* and 8.24 for *American English File*. It shows that the teachers are satisfied with the price of the textbooks, their availability, regency of publication, providing supplementary supports and resources, and the authors' view on language methodology. Of course, the difference between the two textbooks is not significant in this section.

The second section of the checklist evaluated the layout and design of the two textbooks. The layout and design of a textbook refer to its organization and presentation of language items and activities. Questions regarding the organization of the textbook, functions, structures, and vocabularies taught in each unit as well as those considering the availability of adequate quizzes and also the clarity of the objectives of the materials for teachers and students are included in this section. The high means of both the textbooks indicated the satisfaction of the teachers with the organization and layout of the books. The difference between the two books in this feature is not significant like the previous feature. Of course, most of the teachers were not satisfied with the glossary and vocabulary list of both textbooks.

The next section of the checklist aimed to explore the activities and tasks in the textbooks. Exercises and activities are nearly indispensable part of every textbook. They give students opportunities to practice and develop their language skills. For instance, activities that require students to negotiate meaning in English (e.g., information gaps, jigsaw activities, role plays) can assist the oral skill and help students be prepared for the tasks in real-life contexts.

Items in this section asked the respondents to evaluate the two books regarding the balance, flexibility, and variety of the activities and also their stimulating power to engage students in sufficient communicative and meaningful practices. The authors of the two books advertise that their book has the aforementioned characteristics. The teachers also seem happy with the activities of the two materials. High means of them for this section (7.99 for *New Headway English Course* and 8.16 for *American English File*) have led us to this conclusion. Again the difference between the two materials is not significant.

The fourth section examined the skills in each textbook. Balance of four language skills, paying attention to sub skills (e.g. skimming and note taking) and pronunciation, integration of skills, and the conformity between the learners' needs and focus on the skills in the materials are the items included in this part. The difference

between the two textbooks is not significant, but the high means of the textbooks indicate the satisfaction of the teachers with the representation of the skills in these textbooks.

The next part was used to investigate the language type used in the two textbooks. The language type component encompasses some items that largely evaluate the view of the raters on the authenticity of the language of the textbook, the appropriateness of the language of the textbook for the target learners, the appropriateness of the progression of the grammatical points and vocabulary items, the presentation of grammatical points in conjunction with brief and easy examples, the match between the functions presented in the textbooks and those that the teachers and the learners will probably use, and finally the representation of the variety of the registers and accents in the language of the textbook.

In this section, the difference between the two textbooks is significant. Taken into account the higher mean of *American English* (8.2) in comparison with *New Headway English Course* (6.87), it can be concluded that it is believed that the language type used in the former is better than the latter.

The last part of the checklist examined the subject and content of the two textbooks. If students are not interested in topics of the textbook, learning will be futile. By learning new and challenging topics students should broaden their horizons and enrich their life experiences. Regarding the subject and content, being relevant to the student's needs, being realistic, being challenging and motivating, having variety and not being culturally biased are included in the items of this section. The difference between the two books with respect to this section is significant and the higher mean of *American English File* (8.27) in comparison with *New Headway English Course* (7.34) indicates the appropriateness of the former. Of course, the high mean of the latter can be the sign of the satisfaction of the teachers with the subject and content of this book, too.

Overall, the research questions raised for the study can be answered well now. Regarding the first research question, the answer is somehow "Yes". Considering the high means (more than the median) of the two textbooks in all of the features being investigated, it can be realized that the EFL teachers in our study are happy with these materials. Of course, this satisfaction is variable with respect to different features and textbooks. The second research question is also answered in this way that the difference between the two textbooks in two criteria including language type as well as subject and content was statistically significant. The respondents were more satisfied with *American English File* in two mentioned criteria. However, this difference was not significant in other criteria including practical considerations, layout and design, activities, and skills. In other words, the level of satisfaction with the materials on the part of teachers was somehow similar in these four criteria.

## V. CONCLUSION

Due to the popularity of two commonly practiced textbooks used in Iranian language institutes, the present study intended to examine the views of teachers teaching the textbooks. Using a formerly administered Likert scale checklist with different subcategories consistent with the research questions, it was revealed that the teachers participated in the study were pleased with the two popular textbooks taught in the private language institutes. Moreover, the teachers' responses implied their more satisfaction with *American English File* than *New Headway English Course* in two components, namely language type as well as subject and content. The major limitation of the study can be the limited number of the participants. Other researchers can evaluate other EFL textbooks using more participants in order to find the suitable EFL textbook for their educational context. Findings of this study may offer insights for the authors of the textbooks as well as those involved in educational administrations, syllabus design, curriculum planning, and materials development and also the learners who are interested in learning EFL. Different sections of the textbooks can be modified by the textbook developers in order to improve their quality. Teachers may also get insights from the findings and employ different strategies to compensate for the weak points of the textbooks.

Finally, the findings of the current study are expected to assist all instructional stakeholders such as teachers, textbook developers and institutional/academic administrators to come into closer terms with the vitality of conducting ongoing textbook evaluation and needs analysis surveys.

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