

Coursebook Evaluation by English Teachers

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to reveal the teachers' views on the quality of foreign coursebook packages (from beginner to intermediate level) widely used in the teaching process of English preparatory classes in twenty-five different high schools. In the study, widely used (best selling) coursebooks with the same sub-domains are chosen to be evaluated by teachers. The data were gathered from the questionnaire results of ninety-four teachers and standard open-ended interview results of forty teachers who teach in English preparatory classes and use particular coursebook packages in the classroom environment (n=134). The views reveal that teachers do not have positive impressions about the coursebook packages used in general. Moreover, the general conceptions of the teachers suggest that coursebooks should be developed and used to meet the needs of the learners in the national context.

Keywords: English teachers' views, coursebook, quality, evaluation.

The use of coursebooks in ELT is more popular than ever before, especially after innumerable ELT preparatory classes have been established for a large number of departments at universities, private schools, and some state schools. Moreover, the school administrations and circles of English teachers prefer ready-made coursebooks because they possibly provide ready-made syllabi to be followed by teachers. Thus, the coursebooks have gradually become the most pervasive tool for language instruction. As Richards and Rodgers (2001) state, coursebooks are an unavoidable element of the curriculum because they specify content and define coverage for syllabus items.

Grant (1987) mentions that coursebooks 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. Because of this possible vitality, Ur (1996) states the advantages of coursebooks as follows: a) they provide a clear framework which the teacher and the students know where they are going and what is coming next, b) mostly, they serve as a syllabus which includes a carefully planned and balanced selection of language content if it is followed systematically, c) they provide ready-made texts and tasks with possible appropriate level for most of the class, which save time for the teacher, d) they are the cheapest way of providing learning material for each student, e) they are convenient packages whose components are bound in order, f) they are useful guides especially for inexperienced teachers who are occasionally unsure of their language knowledge, g) They provide autonomy that the students can use them to learn new material, review and monitor progress in order to be less teacher-dependent. Besides, coursebooks as preplanned teaching materials have some possible disadvantages (Richards and Renandya, 2002): a) they fail to present appropriate and

realistic language models, b) They propose subordinate learner roles, c) they fail to contextualise language activities, d) they foster inadequate cultural understanding, e) they fail to address discourse competence, f) they fail to teach idioms, g) they have lack of equity in gender representation.

Some argue that coursebooks 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). On the other hand, some state that coursebooks are inevitably superficial and reductionist in their coverage of language items and they impose uniformity of syllabus and remove initiative from teachers (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994; Tomlinson, 1998; Basturkman, 1999; Byrd, 2001). At the other extreme, coursebooks 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). Although coursebooks 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 (Ajayi, 2005).

In formal educational settings, especially for language teaching, the necessity of coursebooks leads the way to the exploration of the coursebook evaluation by teachers. With this respect, this study focuses on the teachers' views on the coursebook evaluation they use in furtherance of an awareness to be a spur for a state of undifferentiated consciousness and professional development.

METHOD

Participants

The purpose of this study is to reveal new findings and information about the coursebook evaluation of English teachers. For this reason, a randomly chosen study group from which the data were supplied can be defined as 134 English teachers in Mersin.

Data Gathering Tools

In order to gather data, two foreign coursebook packages (*Opportunities and New English File*) used in 2006-2007 academic year were evaluated. The coursebook packages were used in 25 high schools in Mersin city center. One of the coursebook packages was used in 14 high schools and the other one was used in 11 of them.

A five-point Likert type questionnaire which includes seventy six questions about coursebook evaluation was prepared by the researcher with an inquiry in the literature (Brown, 1995; Finocchiaro and Bonomo, 1973; Sezer, 2003; Ur, 1996) and the judgements of nine experts from the departments of curriculum development, measurement and evaluation, and foreign language education in Mersin University. The questionnaire responded by ninety four English teachers tries to reveal teachers' views on coursebook quality. It includes the sub-titles of subject matter, unit design, structure, vocabulary, pronunciation, exercises, illustrations, and physical make-up.

Moreover, general conceptions of the teachers were determined by using standardized open-ended interviews (Patton, 2002) with forty volunteer English teachers determined on the basis of convenience by open sampling technique (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in order to compare with questionnaire results and to explore the coursebook evaluation in greater depth. Besides, the strategy of probing was used to get the respondents to achieve depth in terms of penetration, exploration, and explanation (Patton, 2002; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Lichtman, 2006). For example, further questions such as “Can you tell me some more about that?”, “What do you mean by ...?”, and “Can you explain more fully?” were asked.

Data Analysis

The percentage ratio values of the data gathered from the questionnaire were computed by using Microsoft Office Excel and SPSS 12.0. The interview transcripts were analyzed line by line and memos were written (Glesne, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Categories or labels were reviewed and recurring themes, core consistencies and meanings were identified by using pattern codes. Then those explanatory pattern codes were identified as smaller sets, themes or constructs with content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). The process is as follows (Yanpar Şahin, 2003): a) underlying key terms in the responses, b) restating key phrases, c) coding key terms, d) pattern coding, e) constructing themes, f) summarizing themes, g) integrating theories in an explanatory framework

FINDINGS & RESULTS

This section includes coursebook evaluation of teachers according to questionnaire and interview results.

Coursebook Evaluation from Questionnaire Results

The questionnaire results are presented with the highest percentage scores according to the responses under the titles of subject matter, unit design, structure, vocabulary, pronunciation, exercises, illustrations, and physical make-up. The teachers’ responses on the first question set which is about the appropriateness of the subject matter according to age, syllabus, culture of the students, culture of the target language, and needs of the students are given in Table 1.

Table 1
Teachers’ Views on Subject Matter Indicators

	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Age		35	39		
Syllabus		47	31		
Culture (Students’)				62	23
Culture (Target Language)	39	39			
Needs		42	35		

Table 1 indicates 35% of the teachers state that the contents of the books are usually appropriate according to the age of the students. 42% of the teachers also mention the content of the books is usually graded according to the needs of the students. They also state the content is usually graded according to the requirements of the existing syllabus. 39% of the teachers mention that the books always present samples from the culture of the target language but they rarely have samples from the students' culture (62%).

Table 2
Teachers' Views on Unit Design Indicators

	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Motivating Warmup		35	27		
Motivation		42	31		
Objectives		35	31		
Instructions		39	23		
Language Content			46	27	
Teacher Initiative			46	23	

Table 2 shows that 77% of the teachers in total (motivating warm up + motivation in general) state the warm up sections and unit designs of the books are usually motivating. 35% of them also mention that the objectives are clear most of the time but the instructions in the target language at the beginner books are problematic for the students. Moreover, the teachers state the selection of language content is sometimes systematic in a planned and balanced manner. The way of the unit design of the books sometimes makes the teacher mediator of the content and most of the teachers (69% in total) state it sometimes and rarely leads to the teacher's initiative.

Table 3
Teachers' Views on Structure Indicators

	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Presentation			39	31	
Level		54	23		
Unnecessary information load				38	35
Authenticity		50	19		
Guide&Support				38	31

In Table 3, teachers state the book they evaluate usually provides a formal presentation of grammatical rules; however, they say it does not have enough drills for acquiring structural proficiency. Besides, 54% of the teachers state the texts and tasks in the book are usually in appropriate levels for the students. 38% of them also declare unnecessary grammatical information at each level of the books is rarely included. The structures presented in the book usually appear in authentic contexts in teachers' views. They also state the books are not useful as guide and support for the students to understand the target language by themselves mostly. The structural items in the books are not sufficiently introduced in meaningful situations to facilitate understanding. And

a good structure presentation with a good structure practice is said to be presented occasionally.

Table 4
Teachers' Views on Vocabulary Indicators

	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Vocabulary load		53	15		
Level		30	38		
Reinforcement			23	27	
Negotiation		31	50		
Presentation			34	27	

When the vocabulary indicators are taken into consideration in Table 4, the teachers state the vocabulary load usually seems to be reasonable for the students of particular level but new vocabulary is not sufficiently repeated for reinforcement. Moreover, the vocabulary explanations and illustrations are sometimes given in meaningful situations (50%) and they are not usually appropriate for a better understanding in teachers' views.

Table 5
Teachers' Views on Pronunciation Indicators

	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Presentation			31		31
Reinforcement			30	30	
Problematic sounds		27	27		
Accuracy		34	27	27	

In Table 5, it is seen that the presentation of pronunciation is not systematic. They also state there are few pronunciation drills to cope with the target language, and there is not enough emphasis on problematic sounds for the target language. However, they say the correct pronunciation is usually emphasized.

Table 6
Percentages of Teachers' Views on Exercise Indicators

	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Structural development		46	30		
Unnecessary load of exercises		23	50		
Authenticity		30	19		
Individual study		23	54		
Periodic testing		23	34		

Table 6 indicates 46% of the teachers state the books usually give a chance to students to develop structural proficiency and 30% of them mention the exercises are usually presented in authentic language. They also mention that the books include unnecessary load of exercises partly, and the exercises occasionally involve vocabulary

and structures which can monitor progress for self-study. Moreover, 23% of the teachers state the books usually provide periodic test sections and test material cumulatively.

Table 7
Teachers' Views on Illustration Indicators

	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Unnecessary load			26	30	
Content relation		42	23		
Contribution to use of content		34	30		

The coursebook evaluation on illustrations presented in the books reveals that unnecessary load of illustrations are rarely included in the books. They also state that the illustrations usually include unnecessary details that may confuse the learners. Besides, 42% of the teachers say illustrations are usually related to the content when 34% of them state the illustrations usually contribute to the use of the content to help the learners understand the text.

Table 8
Teachers' Views on Physical Make-Up Indicators

	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Page design		39	23		
Attractiveness	34	30			
Unnecessary color use				26	38

The responses according to the physical make-up of the books express the books are usually attractive considering its cover, page design, and binding but it includes blown-up illustrations that only fill pages and increase the cost. Additionally, the teachers mention the prices of the books are not reasonable.

Coursebook Evaluation from Interview Results

Standardized open ended interviewing was used for the instrumentation. It includes the same questions –the same stimuli- in the same way and the same order determined in advance (Patton, 2002). Seven questions asked during the interviews (Appendix). The interview transcripts were analyzed line by line and memos were written (Glesne, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Categories or labels were reviewed and recurring themes, core consistencies and meanings were identified by using pattern codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). The themes were found as follows: a) the use of teacher initiative, b) specialization of coursebook authors, c) independent use of books by the students, d) transfer to other contexts, e) meeting learner needs, f) developing teaching repertoire

What is immediately apparent from interview transcripts is that teacher' initiatory step toward the books carries on the whole syllabus because the teachers state that they cannot stay out of the books during the teaching learning process and

they should follow them in a page-by-page manner. They sometimes decide in English circles to supplement the books with workbooks but they hardly do it in the classroom because they should do it in a rush or leave some of the exercises. Taken the importance of content, unnecessary load of exercises and mechanical drills may have a reverse effect on the learning process.

They state surprisingly that they sometimes think that the authors of the books are not ELT specialists or language teachers. Especially one of the teachers state that he thinks the so-called authors are “just writers in dark rooms with internet connections”. They also mention that the books cannot be used as a reference or sourcebook independently by the learners. The books are organized in terms of class use with the help of a teacher although they may be helpful for the learners to develop language skills. This can indicate that the books do not have a complete consistency of content.

Moreover, the teachers complain about the books because the language items in the books cannot be transferred into other contexts. For example, detailed dialogues about going to church, the Halloween celebrations, or other national festivals in the countries of foreign coursebook authors are not related to the culture and environment of learners. Then those examples do not lead the way to transfer into other contexts and motivation.

Another theme which can mean that the books do not meet the needs and expectations in the teaching learning process is impressing. The teachers state that another coursebook package can contribute to the learning environment in a more positive way. Especially all of the teachers state that coursebook packages which are developed by experts in national universities could be more helpful and successful in the teaching and learning process. Besides, they state the particular coursebooks do not expand their teaching repertoire. On the contrary, they narrow down their teaching repertoire because there is almost nothing to do except for following the books.

We can infer from these results that teachers are in agreement with the inadequacy of the books. In this way, the selection and the use of coursebook packages could be discussed in educational environments and new ways for coursebook development could be found out in the national context meeting the needs of the learners.

CONCLUSIONS & DISCUSSIONS

The purpose of this research is to reveal language teachers' views on the quality of coursebook packages used in ELT classes in Mersin. In general, the results may reveal that the coursebook packages do not represent the teachers' expectations and they do not meet the needs of learners in the teaching process. This can primarily lead the outcomes that:

- The materials evaluation process should continue while they are being used, as well as after each implementation period so that they do not become stale with regard to the particular curriculum involved (Brown, 1995).
- The content and structure of a syllabus is related to the objectives of the learner or of society (Corder, 1973) and these can be better determined by the teachers instructing the particular classes and authorities at universities rather than dark room authors who serve “international ELT publishing industry” (Ranalli, 2003).
- With both advantages and disadvantages, the coursebook figure should not be seen as an international industry because it can never represent the guarantee of a complete uniformity at school in an authentic context.
- The coursebook evaluation of English teachers may prove to be just a beginning for resource development process.
- The process of resource and coursebook development could support and facilitate teaching and learning process by meeting the needs of the learners and developing the teaching repertoire of the teachers.
- In this respect, the successful use of coursebook packages could be realized in a creative and flexible manner instead of dominating the teaching and learning process.

The study attempts to identify the views of English teachers on the quality of coursebook packages used in language classes. Further studies may carry out in different samples for different coursebook packages on a vast scale.

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APPENDIX
Interview Questions

1. What do you think about the teaching method used in the books?
2. What do you think about the page-by-page manner in the books?
3. What do you think about the authors of the books?
4. Do you think the books can be used as references independently by the students?
5. Do you think the books can be helpful for the students to develop skills which can be transferred to other contexts?
6. Does the book provide self-assessment tasks which require the students to reflect on their progress?
7. Do you think the book expands your teaching repertoire?