AN EVALUATION OF THE IRANIAN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS "PROSPECT 1" AND ITS OLD VERSION "RIGHT PATH TO ENGLISH 1" FROM TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

With the advent of communicative language teaching, textbook evaluation has received a considerable attention over the last two decades. However, only a few studies have been conducted on the evaluation of newly-developed textbooks for junior high schools in Iran; therefore, this paper aimed to evaluate the Iranian junior high school new textbook "Prospect" and its old version Right Path to English1 (RPE1) in order to find out to what extent these textbooks are based on communicative purposes based on teachers’ perceptions. To do so, One hundred male and female English junior high school teachers ranging from 2 to 30 years of teaching experience took part in this study. The textbooks were analyzed based on Razmjoo (2010) questionnaire including 41-items which includes six criteria, namely language components, task, activities, exercises, language skills, teacher’s manual, general consideration and critical discourse analysis features. The findings of the research revealed that Prospect1 followed the communicative language teaching approach and fulfills students' needs. Conversely, the old version did not follow communicative language teaching approach because speaking and listening skills are neglected. In the light of the results gained, some practical implications are presented might be of use to the teachers, syllabus designers and materials developers.

Keywords: Textbook, Prospect1, RPE1, Textbook evaluation.

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This study is one of very few studies which have investigated the teachers’ viewpoints to document to what extent the newly-published English textbook “Prospect 1” developed for Iranian junior high schools is communicative.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sheldon (1988) considers a textbook as the "visible heart of any ELT program" (p. 237). In this process, students use textbooks to supply their learning process and get source of information; moreover, teachers use textbooks to perform their teaching process and facilitate learning.

Nunan (1987) claims that teachers can be responsible for designing and evaluating their own curriculum. Some of them feel that experts and government authorities should carry out these tasks and believe that they are not well trained and should follow the experts. Alternatively, Bhanegaonkar and Mahfoodh (2013) state that "teachers are a key factor in the successful implementation of curriculum changes and particularly in textbook" (p. 2).

Moreover, Cunningsworth (1995) considers that the evaluation of the textbooks needs the most successful and effective procedures to discuss the textbook users’ views. Since the major users of the textbooks are the students and teachers; therefore, their opinions toward textbooks should be collected and analyzed. Similarly, teachers in any language classroom need to use textbook to support their teaching. Using or adapting textbooks is an important part of teachers' professional knowledge; furthermore, the textbook is provided mainly to match the teachers' instruction; evaluation of textbooks shows problems with the teaching materials, leading to the fact that textbooks should be taken into consideration.

However, many studies had focused on the previous high school and junior high school textbooks in Iran which were based on the traditional teaching methods for many years (Riaizi, 2003; Jahangard, 2007; Riazi and Aryashokouh, 2007; Azizfar, 2009; Rahimpour and Hashemi, 2011), and only a few studies have focused on the evaluation of the newly developed book in junior high schools. Alavi et al. (2013a) state that this new textbook "Prospect 1" is designed to help the students to learn English for communicative purposes using all the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing and based on communicative language teaching approach. Alternatively, it is believed that the previous textbooks suffer from lack of communicative skills, and the students were unable to use language in the real situation, so we were interested to find out the teachers' perceptions in this regard.

Alemi and Hesami (2013) indicated that the previous junior high school textbooks were not acceptable from the teachers’ point of view and do not meet their expectations. In the same line, Shabani and Mansoori Nejad (2013) analyzed the junior high school textbooks and support this claim that there have not been slight changes in the textbooks for many years even in the pictures. Moreover, some of the students use communicative textbooks to learn English in the foreign language institutes.
Since the previously conducted studies have not specifically focused on Prospect implementing Razmjoo (2010) questionnaire, this study aimed to find out whether or not the textbook "Prospect 1" taught in junior high school is based on communicative purposes and appropriate to language/learning process. The reasons why the first grade English textbook is chosen is that it was newly published in 2013 for the first time. Thus, the researchers believe the necessity of its evaluation and analysis would promote the communicative language teaching program among the learners and provide suitable and positive feedback for the educational system, textbook developers and teachers. The researchers also chose Razmjoo's checklist which is based on communicative language teaching approach. Taking these points into account, this study was carried out to evaluate the newly-written English textbook for grade 7, i.e., Prospect 1 based on six main criteria which are as follows: 1) Language components 2) Tasks, activities & exercises 3) Language skills 4) Teachers’ manual 5) General consideration 6) Critical discourse analysis (CDA) features.

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Cunningsworth (1995) points out that textbooks are a valuable resource for self-directed learning, an effective resource for presenting materials by the teachers, a source of ideas and activities, a reference source for students, and a syllabus. McGrath (2002) also proposes that coursebooks are a central element in teaching-learning encounters, and they tend to dictate what is taught, in what order and how as well as what learners learn.

Ahour et al. (2013) scrutinized the appropriateness of "English Textbook2" for Iranian EFL second grade high school students from the teachers’ perspectives. The textbook was evaluated quantitatively through an adapted checklist proposed by Litz (2005). On the basis of teachers’ perceptions, the subject and content of the textbook do not attract the students’ interest, needs, and concerns. The exercises and activities in the textbook do not involve and encourage sufficient communicative and meaningful practice. In line with the present study, Golpour (2012) analyzed RPE series and believed that there is no teacher’s guide to educate the teachers how to teach the materials. Actually, series have been written based on structural syllabus that should be taught based on audio-lingual method.

It can be seen in different schools in Iran that each teacher follows his own way of teaching. He stated that "a teacher guide is essential to help all teachers follow a suitable method and a certain way of presenting materials. All teachers approve lack of having a guidebook" (p.175). Moreover, Amerian (1987) has compared the first two books of Right Path to English series and the Graded English Series. On the basis of his finding he uttered that graded English suffers from two aspects including the content is not qualitatively appropriate and the structural drills are quantitatively inadequate. Zohrabi et al. (2014) analyzed RPE series and stated that "these textbooks are not based on the students’ and the teachers’ needs. They are structure-based and ignore the communicative role of the language". Rahimpour and Hashemi (2011) evaluated the three English language textbooks currently used at high schools in Iran from the high school
English teachers’ point of view. For this purpose, a 46-item questionnaire was developed about the five sections of the textbooks (vocabulary, reading, grammar, language functions, and pronunciation practice), their physical make-up, and practical concerns. They chose fifty high school teachers to answer the questionnaire. According to the results, generally, the textbooks are not acceptable from the teachers’ point of view considering their five sections, their physical make-up, and some practical concerns.

2.1. Research Question

In accordance with what has already been mentioned, the following research question is proposed:

1. To what extent are the materials in “Prospect 1” and Right Path to English 1 based on communicative purposes with regard to Razmjoo (2010) checklist?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

For the purpose of the present study, one hundred Iranian EFL teachers, with at least two years of teaching experience from different state and private schools in Golestan Province, Tehran, Ardebil and Shahrood in Iran participated in the study. The participants consisted of 35 male and 65 female teachers. Their age ranged from 20 to 50. Years of teachers’ experience ranged from 2 to 30 and the teachers’ range of academic degree in TEFL ranged from BA to MA.

3.2. Materials

The materials for this study are two locally produced English language textbooks used in Iranian junior high school. The researchers selected book, that is Right Path to English series “RPE1” Birjandi and Soleimani (2011) and one of Prospect series “Prospect 1” Alavi et al. (2013b) in order to attain the aim of the study.

3.3. Instruments

To conduct this study, the questionnaire containing two sections was used to investigate teachers’ point of view towards both "Prospect 1" and "RPE1" based on the types of objectives which are presented aforementioned for two textbooks.

3.3.1. Questionnaire

To achieve the purpose of the study, Razmjoo (2010) checklist was utilized. The textbook evaluation scheme consists of 6 main factors containing 41 items measured on a five point Likert scale which includes "Excellent", "Good", "Adequate", "Poor" and "Totally Lacking". The checklist including six criteria is as follows:
1) Language Components including pronunciation, vocabulary and structure 2) Tasks, Activities & Exercises 3) Language Skills 4) Teachers’ Manual 5) General aims and communicative textbook 6) Critical discourse analysis (CDA) features (see Razmjoo (2010)).

As it is shown in Razmjoo (2010) checklist and with regard to the teachers' perceptions of the two textbooks, the amount of teachers’ satisfactory is depicted in Table1. When the highest percentage of teachers' perceptions belongs to "Excellent", it means that teachers are completely satisfied with the book. The other descriptions are presented as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Adequate</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Totally Lacking</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Completely satisfactory</td>
<td>satisfactory</td>
<td>Somehow satisfactory</td>
<td>Not satisfactory</td>
<td>Completely unsatisfactory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.4. Procedure

The participants were required to fill out the 41 statements ranging from "Excellent", "Adequate", "Good", "Poor" to "Totally Lacking" for the textbook "Prospect1" and RPE1 regarding their experience they had in teaching the two textbooks. After all, the completed questionnaire was analyzed in accordance with the objectives of the two textbooks using SPSS 18.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Results from Language Components for Prospect1 and RPE1

All language components in the questionnaire are shown in Table1. In two items of pronunciation, the highest percentage (52%) belongs to "Good" for Item1 and 44% for Item 2. On the contrary, in RPE1, majority of teachers (41%) selected "Poor" for two items in pronunciation components. In line with vocabulary components in Prospect1, majority of participants marked "Good" with 33% for Item 3 in terms of correspondence between students’ levels and the new words load, but 32% of them selected "Poor" for Item 6 which considers complete and adequate practice of idioms while RPE1 is "Poor" in presenting complete and adequate practice of idioms with 59% of participants who answered the questionnaire. The textbook is "Good" in presenting systematic gradation of vocabulary from simple to complex items (Item 4) regarding 54% of respondents who answered "Good" to this Item.

According to teachers’ answers to structure components in Prospect1, the largest percentage (48%) belongs to "Good" considering logical sequence of sentence and paragraph and 43% of them declared that gradual increasing of structure complexity to suit the growing reading ability of the students marked "Good" (Item 9). Forty one teachers marked "Adequate" for appropriateness of the number of grammatical points as well as their sequence in RPE1. Most of them (48%) ticked "Good" for Item 9. The highest percentage of teachers (36%) picked up "Poor" in introducing linguistic items in meaningful situations to facilitate understanding (Item 12).
4.2. Results from Tasks, Activities and Exercises for Prospect1 and RPE1

Regarding tasks, exercises and activities, forty six percent of the participants believed that Prospect1 is "Good" in developing comprehension and test knowledge of main ideas, details, and sequence of ideas (Item13), and providing a pattern of review within lessons and cumulatively testing new materials by the book (Item15). Forty percent of the participants for Item16 selected "Good". Half of the teachers (50%) declared that the book is "Excellent" in promoting meaningful communication by referring to realistic activities and situations (Item17). In RPE1, forty teachers selected "Adequate" for Item 13 and 41% for Item 14, and the highest percentage belongs to "Poor" in presenting Item 17 with respect to teachers' answer which includes 49% of them.

Table-2. Results from Language Components

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
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<th>Totally Lacking</th>
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<td>41</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>27</td>
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</table>

Table-3. Results from Tasks, Activities and Exercises for Prospect1 and RPE1
4.3. Results from Language Skills

From the output shown in Table 4 regarding reading skill, the highest range (36%) in this section is devoted to "Poor" for Item 18; moreover, in answering Item 19, 28% of respondents selected "Good", 25% marked "Adequate", 27% checked "Poor" whereas in RPE1, 41 teachers marked "Good" for Item 18. Taking these results into consideration, this book is "Good" in presenting adequate and appropriate exercises and tasks for improving reading comprehension. For Item 19, the highest percentage belongs to "Adequate". Considering writing skill, in response to Item 20 among all the participants, 28% "Good", 25% "Adequate", 27% "Poor" and 8% "Totally lacking". In response to Item 21, twenty nine teachers chose "Poor" while in RPE1, 40% of teachers marked "Good". In addition, 6% of the teachers ticked "Excellent", 25% chose "Adequate", 20% marked "Poor" and 9% chose "Totally lacking" for Item 20. Thirty two of the respondents believe that RPE1 presents suitable patterns to improve writing. With regard to listening skill, the result illustrates that the largest number of respondents checked "Excellent" (51 teachers) for Item 22, and for Item 23, forty one teachers marked "Good" and believed that Prospect1 is completely satisfactory. On the contrary, for RPE1, a large number of teachers (47%) checked "Poor" to Item 23. In the other words, this book is "Poor" in this regard and teachers are not satisfied. Considering speaking skill, the frequencies in response to the Item 24 which asked teachers about their perceptions of appropriateness of individual and group speaking activities are 48 in Prospect1 as well as in Item 25 in terms of completeness, appropriateness and adequacy of the speaking tasks, 41 teachers checked "Excellent". For the same task, a large number of respondents answered "Poor" to Item 24 (42%) and Item 25 (47%) for RPE1.

Table 4. Results from Language Skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Prospect 1</th>
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<th></th>
<th>RPE1</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Adequate</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Totally lacking</td>
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<td>45%</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
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</table>

4.4. Results from Teacher's Manual

As Table 5 shows, in Prospect1, among all teachers, the largest number of teachers marked "Good" for Items 26, 27, 28, 29 and 30. Forty four teachers believed that Prospect1 is "Good" in
providing suggestions and information to help the teachers teach language skills and components efficiently (Item 30), and 36 teachers marked "Good" in providing extra activities and tasks for training the students in oral and written skills (Item 29).

On the basis of teachers' perceptions the highest percentage belongs to "Poor" for Items 27, 29 and 30. RPE1 is "Poor" in providing extra activities and tasks for training the students in oral and written skills and providing suggestions and information to help the teachers teach language skills and components efficiently because 44% in Items 29 and 32 % in Item 30 marked "Poor".

Table 5. Results from Teachers' Manual" in Prospect 1 and RPE1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Adequate</th>
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<td>Frequency</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Item 18 | 18 | 18% | 23 | 23% | 16 | 16% | 36 | 36% | 7 | 7% | 2.76
| Item 19 | 12 | 12% | 28 | 28% | 27 | 27% | 25 | 25% | 27 | 27% | 8 | 8% | 2.91
| Item 20 | 12 | 12% | 28 | 28% | 25 | 25% | 27 | 27% | 29 | 29% | 8 | 8% | 2.91
| Item 21 | 13 | 13% | 27 | 27% | 23 | 23% | 29 | 29% | 29 | 29% | 8 | 8% | 2.92
| Item 22 | 25 | 25% | 25 | 25% | 21 | 21% | 2 | 2% | 1 | 1% | 1.77
| Item 23 | 41 | 41% | 41 | 41% | 18 | 18% | 12 | 12% | 1 | 1% | 2.24
| Item 24 | 48 | 48% | 31 | 31% | 17 | 17% | 4 | 4% | 0 | 0 | 1.77
| Item 25 | 41 | 41% | 36 | 36% | 19 | 19% | 3 | 3% | 1 | 1% | 1.87

4.5. The Results from General Consideration

As it is shown in Table 6, the largest percentage belongs to "Good" for Items 32, 34, 35 and 36 for Prospect 1. The data gathered from teachers about the focus on the latest FLT approaches and methodology in Prospect 1 showed that 31% of the participants picked up "Excellent", 49% of them chose "Good", and 17% marked "Adequate", only 3% checked "Poor" and none ticked "Totally lacking". It means that this book is based on CLT approaches because of the emphasis is on communicative skills. Considering the highest percentage which is for "Excellent" in Item 33 means that Prospect 1 is completely satisfactory with presenting clear statement of the objectives of the course and of each textbook.

In another view, teachers believed that RPE1 is not based on the latest FLT approaches with regard to 52 teachers who gave "Poor" to this Item 34. This can lead us to the claim that they are not satisfied with this book in terms of its methodology and approach.
Table 6. Results from General Consideration in Prospect 1 and RPE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Adequate</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Totally lacking</th>
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Table 7. Results from CDA Features in Prospect 1 and RPE 1

4.6. Results from CDA Features

Table 7, shows that the largest percentage among teachers belongs to "Good" in Items 37, 38, 40 and 41 for Prospect 1. Item 38 refers to providing a situation so that students think and act critically. In addition, for Item 39 in terms of relation between the content of the textbook and real life situation, 44 teachers selected "Excellent" while in RPE1, 54 teachers marked "Poor". In reality RPE1 is not satisfactory with showing relationship between the content of the textbook (text) and real-life situations (society). The highest numbers of teachers refers to "Poor" regarding Item 38, 39 and 41.

Table 7. Results from CDA Features in Prospect 1 and RPE 1

5. DISCUSSION

In order to answer the research question, to what extent are the materials in "Prospect 1" and RPE1 based on communicative purposes? Each section of questionnaire was analyzed and interpreted in details.
Considering these points, Guilani et al. (2011) emphasized that in the previous Iranian English textbooks, the amount of practice given to grammar not only lacks uniformity, but it also supersedes the focus on vocabulary which is the heart of language. The researchers found that it is obvious teachers are satisfied with Prospect1 and believed that the textbook follows communicative language approach while the previous book RPE1 does not follow CLT approach because speaking and listening are neglected. In addition, RPE1 is somehow satisfactory from teachers' perceptions in terms of logical sequence of sentence and paragraph, and in presenting appropriateness of the number of grammatical points as well as their sequence. In general, on the based on the results of the present study RPE1 is not satisfactory from teachers' perceptions because teachers chose "Adequate" and "Poor" on the basis of the items in the questionnaire.

As mentioned in a similar study, Golpour (2012) stated that Junior high school English books are based on structural syllabus. In general, there is little attention on listening comprehension. There is no creative activity to develop speaking and listening skills. In addition, controlled writing never leads to learning writing, and using a reading text without creative activities, title and picture, never extend students' reading ability. At the same line, this study showed that the main attention of Prospect1 is listening and speaking skills while RPE1 does not pay attention to these skills and the emphasis is on reading and writing skills.

Another major finding related to the tasks, activities and exercises illustrated that developing comprehension and test knowledge of main ideas, details, and sequence of ideas is satisfactory in Prospect1 and somehow satisfactory RPE1. The study also found that the new book is completely satisfactory in promoting meaningful communication by referring to realistic activities and situations, while RPE1 is unsatisfactory. Alongside with this, Azizfar (2009) introduced drills in three types in RPE which includes oral, speak out and write it down drills to help the students discern the exercises, drills models are adequate and the drills are clarified by explanations written in English.

Regarding teachers' manual, it seems that teachers are satisfied with the new book because it introduces suggestions and information to help the teachers teach language components effectively while RPE1 is not completely satisfactory in this regard and teachers believe that teacher's book does not attract them. In the same line, Golpour (2012) analyzed RPE series and believed that there is no teacher's guide to educate the teachers how to teach the materials.

The findings are in line with Khajavi and Abbasian (2011) who maintained that "Iranian high school textbooks have not been successful in familiarizing students with cultural matters of other countries. The authors of these textbooks have avoided cultural materials and have tried to be neutral in terms of culture"(p.184). In reality RPE 1 is not satisfactory with showing relationship between the content of the textbook (text) and real-life situations (society), but teachers are completely satisfied with Prospect1 in this regard.
6. CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

According to the results of the questionnaire, it can be concluded that Prospect1 is satisfactory from teachers' perceptions, and it is appropriate and successful in most elements which is defined in this study except for complete and adequate practice of idioms and devising appropriate tasks for improving reading techniques as well as in the component of writing skill.

In another view, teachers had the same idea and are satisfied with the new book "Prospect1" which is based on communicative language teaching approach. Prospect1 is satisfactory in presenting listening and speaking skills. Speaking and listening are paid more attention than others while RPE1 is not satisfactory in these domains.

Considering the relationship between content of the textbook and real life situation, teachers are completely satisfied with Prospect1, while they are not satisfied with Right Path to English in this regard.

The findings of the present study may be fruitful for teachers’ development and professional growth; moreover, the findings of this investigation will help teachers and students who are teaching and learning this new book, ELT administrators, experts, and even textbook writers and materials developers in Iran.

REFERENCES


