A Critical Evaluation of Visual Elements in Iranian Junior High School English Textbooks

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Abstract
Researchers and teachers are provided with a large pool of literature concerning textbooks evaluation in EFL contexts such as Iran, but there is still a gap regarding the evaluation of textbooks prepared by the Ministry of Education since teachers seem to be under duress to use the textbooks in their classes with no chance to adapt their materials. Considering the widespread use of images in instructional materials, it is important to scrutinize their effects on language learners’ understanding. Due to paucity of the studies on evaluating visual materials (i.e., images) in English textbooks in Iran, the current researchers attempted to evaluate the visual materials included in the junior high school English textbooks to see if they were effective to meet the Iranian learners’ needs and English language teaching objectives. The findings obtained from two semi-structured interviews with 35 Iranian English teachers and 49 English students indicated that the teacher participants had positive views towards the connectivity of the visual materials in the textbooks and the objectives of the course. Also, they believed that providing the visual materials which are culturally and religiously appropriate could facilitate the process of teaching. In contrast, the student participants did not demonstrate such positive views towards the visual materials.

Keywords: Evaluation; Learners; Teachers; Textbooks; Visual Materials

1. Introduction

In language teaching programs, textbooks can have the same crucial role for the teachers as the pharos for sailors on a ship. Sheldon (1988) believes that "textbooks represent the visible heart of any ELT program" (p. 237).
According to Cunningsworth (1995), textbooks are also regarded as an efficient source of self-directed learning materials, ideas and support for teachers and learners. He, further, states that "the materials selected closely reflect the aims, methods, and values of the teaching program" (p. 7). Without a textbook available, it is really difficult, if not impossible, for a teacher to deliver his or her teaching to the language learners. In the same vein, Hutchinson and Torres (1994, cited in Litz, 2005) suggest that instructional textbooks are "an almost universal element of teaching" (p. 4).

In addition, according to Nunan (1988), good materials provide models for teachers to map out their own materials. Consequently, selecting an appropriate and suitable textbook for a class has been one of the most important tasks for teachers. According to Richards (2001), learning how to select and manipulate textbooks in different contexts might be a part of teachers' professional knowledge.

According to Tomlinson (2001), the significance attached to textbooks has generated a great deal of debates and research studies. A good number of textbooks have been evaluated from a variety of aspects in both English as a second/foreign language (EFL/ESL) contexts. Concerning the salient and essential role of textbook evaluation in different courses, McDonough and Shaw (1993) indicate that teachers and course designers are under duress concerning their decision to choose a textbook for an English language teaching (ELT) course as it might be used perpetually for many years. Besides, there might be situations in which teachers have no chance to choose among the textbooks provided by the material designers and policy makers to work in a predetermined and rigid framework, so teachers should evaluate the materials to unearth the hidden assumptions embedded in the textbooks to see if they meet the aims of teaching and learners' needs. The present study has taken this issue and focused on the visual type of ELT materials.

One of the basic constituents of textbooks utilized for teaching is visual elements, including pictures and photos. Mayer, Bove, Bryman, Mars, and Tapango (1996) state that illustrations are considered as the basis for learning as it can promote the understanding of knowledge and improve the retention of presented ideas. Illustrations are generally believed to have a motivational role in the context of instructional texts (Peck, 1993). Pettersson (2002) states that instructional images are available almost in all the instructional materials for a long period of time, especially in the printed media like textbooks, so including images in the textbooks is one of the most fundamental constituents of textbooks in EFL/ESL courses. Stanley (1996)
also believes that the amount of information learned through visual means such as illustrations augments the ability to understand, evaluate and produce visual messages. Also, Mayer (1993) evinces that illustrations with a verbal explanation elicit the highest level of cognitive processing. Lemke (1998, p. 110) goes further and claims that “our visual discrimination is far better than our linguistic system at dealing with complex ratios and continuous variations in space, line, shape, and color.”

On the negative sides, Thompson (1994, p. 25) considers thoughtfully designed illustrations as “instructional obstacles” or devices that create a cognitive “hurdle” in the learners' mind; they might be useless among some students either as a result of their learning styles (Ollerenshaw, Aidman, & Kidd, 1997), or due to their low cognitive processing (Weidenmann, 1989). Similarly, Sweller (1990) claims that illustrations accompanied with texts might be harmful since attention is split between the two forms of information which have to be integrated. In addition, not all illustrations are pedagogically effective (Thomas, 1978). Boling, Eccarius, Smith, and Frick (2004) also assert that learners do not always interpret illustrations based on the designers' intended meanings. Thus, visual images might not provide meaning through a predetermined set of signs as it is done within the text itself (Elkins, 1998).

In summary, textbook evaluation is still considered as a Cinderella term among many Iranian scholars. In spite of great improvement in the quality of ESL/EFL textbooks and some research concerning textbooks evaluations, there is still some knottiness to adopt an appropriate ELT textbook. None of the available ELT textbooks meet all the students' needs. Therefore, as Tomlinson (2001) states, "an effective classroom teacher needs to be able to evaluate, adapt and produce materials so as to ensure a match between the learners and the materials they use" (p. 77). In many cases, Iranian EFL learners should use the ELT textbooks based on the policy dictated by language institutes or the Ministry of Education. These ELT textbooks need to be evaluated based on well-defined criteria to see if they meet the aims of language teaching, learners' needs, and stake-holders' policies to improve their effectiveness. To move further, while there is a bulk of research on different ELT textbooks used in schools, including language schools, there is a gap concerning evaluation of visual elements in ELT textbooks used in Iran. Thus, this study intends to investigate visual elements in three English textbooks, titled as Right Path to English 1, 2 and 3 (Birjandi & Soheili, 2011), taught in Iranian junior high schools.
2. Literature Review

According to Tomlinson (2001), just a few books were dealing with the phenomenon of materials development in 1980s, till some articles sparked off the need for textbook evaluation. It was in 1990s that some courses were offered to highlight the importance of materials development and evaluation. Since then, there has been a great amount of literature on textbook evaluation, emphasizing its importance in materials development. In additional, investigating human beings' perception towards images from different perspectives is the rationale to scrutinize the efficacy of instructional images presented in textbooks (Anglin, Cunningham, & Vaez, 1996). According to Anglin et al. (1996), what kinds of meaning and how they are unfolded through images have “provoked conjecture from philosophers, psychologists, art historians, semioticians, and computer scientists” (p. 866). Hence, they consider different roles for visual materials. For instance, Levie and Lenz (1982) believe that visual elements have attentive, affective, cognitive, and compensatory roles. Levin (1981) gives the features of decoration, representation, organization, interpretation, and transformation for illustrations. Moreover, Rieber (1994) classifies the role of images into the affective and cognitive.

Most of the research on the visual materials (e.g., Alamri, 2008, Ollerenshaw, Aidman, & Kidd, 1997; Schnitz, 2002; Weidenmann, 1989) has suggested that pictures have a positive influence on learning and retention, with texts being remembered better when they are illustrated. Clark and Lyons (2004) mention that images can support attention, activate or build prior knowledge, minimize cognitive load, build mental models, support transfer of learning, and support motivation. Mourão (2009) in two action research projects analyzed two picture books, each representing parallel and interdependent storytelling models. Audio taped scripts of the picture book read-alouds were categorized according to the utterances prompted by the verbal and visual texts. Results showed that foreign language learning was fostered when both the verbal and visual texts of a picture book were used for language input and students were more actively involved in meaning making.

Alamri (2008) evaluated the 6th grade English language textbooks used in the schools in Saudi Arabia. He considered seven criteria to investigate the appropriateness and effectiveness of design and illustrations of the textbooks. The majority of the participants involved in the study were in dispute concerning the views on the attractiveness and variety of the illustrations used in their textbooks. However, most of the participants
indicated that in spite of the fact that the illustrations in their textbooks were not being varied and attractive, illustrations, in general, could be functional and useful.

Also, Abour and Ahmadi (2012) evaluated the suitability of the Summit 2B textbook (Saslow & Ascher, 2006), written for EFL undergraduate students. Considering clarity, simplicity and appropriateness of illustrations for an effective learning and teaching, both participant instructors and students expressed their high satisfaction with the illustrations in the textbook even though they were dissatisfied with other areas of investigation such as subject matter and type of exercises.

By reviewing literature concerning the evaluation of images embedded in the textbooks, it is found out that most scholars consider the advantages of visual materials in an ELT textbook. For instances, Clark and Lyons (2004) believe that memory and recall for the images in textbooks are much better than memory and recall for words; Mayer and Moreno (1998) state that images might stimulate learners’ interest, curiosity, and motivation; Mayer (2001) and Peeck (1993) claim that learners’ text comprehension is also heightened by visual materials. Despite these statements on the merits of visual materials, there is still a gap on the effectiveness of visual materials in ELT textbooks in the literature, particularly in an EFL context where students have great enthusiasm for learning English. Different textbooks have been analyzed from different perspectives, but quite a few of them have been concerned with the evaluation of visual materials embedded therein, especially those provided by the Ministry of Education to be used in public schools. In addition, few studies, to the best of the researchers’ knowledge, have been specifically concerned with the evaluation of images embedded in the junior high school English textbooks, prepared by Ministry of Education in Iran even though some claims might be made by a few scholars on the role of illustrations used in the Iranian high school English textbooks. For instance, Abdollahi-Guilani, Subakir Mohd Yasin, and Huia (2011) state that "in the case of the Iranian English textbooks, there is nothing but pages with faded gray and clumsy drawings on the recycle-quality paper" (p. 28). In light of the above issues, this study seeks to evaluate the visual materials in the three English textbooks (i.e., Right Path to English 1, 2, & 3) used in the Iranian junior high schools to see if they meet their objectives and to which extent cultural values are delineated through visual materials. To these ends, the following question has been developed:
3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Using stratified sampling technique to collect the data, 35 TEFL (teaching English as a foreign language) teachers from some junior high schools scattered in different districts of Isfahan, Iran, took part in the current study. They included 20 males and 15 females with an age range of 32-54. Meanwhile, Isfahan includes five educational districts and care was taken to select the participants from each educational district. In addition, 49 EFL (English as a foreign language) students were randomly selected from some junior high schools in three grades from different districts of Isfahan to participate in the current study.

3.2. Instruments

As there was no valid checklist to meet the aims and scopes of the current research, one way to provide the present researchers with ample reliable and detailed feedback was to conduct interviews with teachers and students. This study made use of two semi-structured interviews with TEFL teachers, and EFL students. According to David and Sutton (2004), providing “key themes and sub-questions in advance lie in giving the researcher a sense of order from which to draw questions from unplanned encounters” (p. 87). This suggest that the interview should not be highly structured, consisting of all closed-ended questions, nor should it be unstructured such that the interviewee is simply given a license to talk freely about whatever comes up. Thus, semi-structured interviews offer topics and questions to interviewees, but, at the same time, they are carefully designed to elicit the interviewees' ideas and views on the topics of interests, not leading them towards preconceived choices. To establish the validity of the test, the questions were selected based on experts’ judgments, pilot-testing, and an intensive revision process. In addition, the oral interview was recorded during each individual administration of the test. Meanwhile, the interrater reliability of the speaking test was calculated to be 0.87 in the present study.
3.3. **Procedure**

All the questions that might help the present researchers to come up with the creditable results were developed prior to the interviews. Considering previous studies on evaluation of textbooks both in second/foreign (L2) contexts, and consulting with two experts on L2 material development, some of the questions were revised. (The final version of the questions is provided in the Appendix). Each interview lasted for 10-15 min. The teacher and student participants were ensured that the information provided would be confidential as each interview with the participants was recorded. Having taken more than one month to collect data, the present researchers transcribed the recorded data from the interviews to come up with some general ideas and common views about the visual materials in the aforementioned textbooks.

4. **Results and Discussion**

With regard to the relationship between visual materials and objectives of each unit, 88% of the teacher participants indicated that most of visual materials (i.e., images), were exactly describing the point taught in the units/lessons. For instance, almost 90% of the teachers expressed satisfaction with the illustrations in Figures 1, 2 and 3. Figure 1 shows an Iranian family having food (i.e., lunch) at the table. According to them, this figure helps the English teachers in teaching countable nouns and using/teaching "how many/how much" structure. Figure 2 demonstrates several boys swimming in a pool. One of them is swimming well and one of them is not swimming very well. This figure also helps Iranian EFL teachers in teaching adjectives and the adverbs of manner. Furthermore, Figure 3 delineates a student and teacher in a class. The teacher makes a request. According to most of the teacher participants, this image is useful in teaching imperative mood and request speech act (i.e., making requests). Referring to them, the teachers considered these visual materials useful in meeting the objectives of the lessons/units.
Figure 1. Teaching how many & how much (adopted from Right Path to English 3, Birjandi & Soheili, 2011, p. 25).

Figure 2. Teaching adjectives & adverbs (adopted from Right Path to English 3, Birjandi & Soheili, 2011, p. 63).
The analysis of data from the interview revealed that more than half of the teachers (above 50%) believe that in the preparatory years of learning English, students were supposed to learn the basic rules of English grammar as no palpable communication would happen in the classes. They asserted that in most American and European countries, these preparatory years of education would be considered as the basis for students’ future, so everything would be organized to help them learn as much as possible and spark off the flare of criticality and creativity in their minds. In Iran which is a foreign context for teaching and learning English, there are not many opportunities for a real communication with native speakers of English. The tests which are usually developed by the officials in the Ministry of Education do not measure the productive ability of EFL learners. Thus, students memorize grammatical rules in their textbooks and teachers rely on the explicit explanation of the rules and patterns at issue. However, considering all these obstacles, they unanimously concluded that the visual elements were of great importance for our students to learn the basic grammatical rules of English. For example, one of the teachers, Maryam (45 years-old), stated:

I don’t have time to teach everything in these classes. On the other hand, as there’s no real communication not only in the class, but also in the society and outside the class, students show no enthusiasm to speak English in their classes. They have to learn those grammatical rules if they want to pass the
course!!! So, I think these books are specifically designed for Iranian EFL learners! You might say "Why?!" :) The answer is that students are supposed to repeat basic rule in different types over and over one to memorize that specific rule. Most of my colleagues ask their students to memorize as much as possible the samples provided in the texts... So, I think providing these images work as a compass for students to engrave the rules on their minds.

Most of EFL teachers (above 80%) provided positive feedback concerning visual materials in the textbooks. However, the EFL teachers were not satisfied with the whole textbooks, in general. About 12% of them were totally regretful and disgruntled concerning their ELT textbooks taught in the public schools as there believed there was no creativity and criticality in the visual materials. They believe that some of them were not authentic. For instances, one of them stated that the Iranian family would usually have lunch or dinner at the table as depicted in the illustration, displayed in Figure

To have a better picture of the story, semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain the student participants' feedback and give them the chance to voice their ideas and beliefs concerning visual materials of their textbooks. Based on the analysis of the data, the most common and recurring idea was related to the issue of criticality and creativity. About 82% of the students (n = 40) lamented what they were studying in their classes. They stated that all the visual materials would be useless, as there was no adaption and modification in most of the texts for more than 10 years. Some of them were talking about the digital era and globalization to accentuate the role of providing them with more recent materials such as CDs, DVDs, Internet sources and better visual materials. About 19% of the student participants (n = 9) were somehow neutral or expressed negative views towards visual materials in the textbooks. They asserted that it made no difference for them to modify visual materials or not; they felt demotivated and nonchalant. Mojtaba, for example, stated:

I just want to pass the course, nothing else. OK? So it makes no difference for me to speak English in the class, or use CDs and DVDs to learn English, or memorizing these unpleasant sentences. But I hate these images. I hate them ... Please ask the teacher to give us a sample of questions for our final exam.

Cultural issues are considered as a controversial topic in most recent debates among different scholars as since the learners' culture of first language (L1) and L2 might be quite distinct, resulting in different attitudes in L2 teaching/learning. In the present study, most of the participant teachers of English (about 91%) confirmed that L1 culture (i.e. Persian) should be
taken into consideration in ELT materials. They asserted that L1 cultural issues and values were thoroughly considered in the visual materials in the junior high school English textbooks. Some specifically referred to the illustrations displayed in Figures 4 and 5, to highlight the role of cultural and religious elements in the visual materials. Figure 4 depicts a religious ideology with a focus on martyrdom for males and 'hijab' for females. Figure 5 emphasizes a value in Persian culture; that is, each member of family has his or her own role; females are responsible for the household chores; mothers and daughters should help each other at home and have a sense of cooperation. This might be different in some western countries where individualism is an integral part of culture.

However, the majority of teacher participants (82%) asserted that the ELT materials were not motivating for their students. This was confirmed by the data obtained from the students' interviews as regards their expectations. According to them, EFL teachers would have the chance to use the ideologies and cultural values known in Persian culture such as martyrdom, humility, respect for parents, solidarity, cooperation, etc, embedded in illustrations in the ELT textbooks to elaborate on different grammatical rules, hence meeting the objectives of lessons/units. But they acknowledged that there would be a lack of motivation among EFL students to get engaged in the class activities and make use of visual materials effectively.

*Figure 4. Religious ideologies (adopted from Right Path to English 3, Birjandi & Soheili, 2011, pp. 20-21).*
Unlike teacher participants, about 90% of the student participants expressed negative attitudes towards visual materials and did not consider them as effective as possible. They called for more values from the target culture (i.e., English). They believed that the above textbooks did not pay attention to the foreign (i.e., L2) culture. The majority of them (around 90%) thought that the L2 cultural values were not embedded in the ELT visual materials as effectively as possible, so they asked for more effective visual materials. The differences in views between the teachers and learners might be due different perception of learners’ needs, and partly because their criticisms of the teaching methods used in the Iranian high schools. Providing the feedback from one of the student participants here (Mrjdeh) can reflect the attitudes of all those students who did not have favorable views towards the visual materials in their textbooks.

Let me say: There is no energy. They are too SIMPLE. If we are supposed to learn English, everything should be like those students who are in LONDON. These images are like those on the cave walls ... They think we are kids, as I'm sure students don't like them AT ALL! It's not important who your teacher is; if you are motivated, then YOU will learn. If not, you will not ... We are all day dreaming in the classes. There's no other choice than hugging these textbooks and repeating sentences like a parrot after the TEACHER.
5. Conclusion

The results of the current study indicated that teacher participants had positive attitudes as regards the congruence between visual materials and objectives of units/lessons. They believed that almost all the grammatical rules were presented or emphasized through different illustrations in the high school instructional English textbooks. They considered the visual materials as a good source of information for Iranian junior high school EFL students. However, the student participants had totally different attitudes as they were not satisfied with the textbooks and the visual materials included in their ELT textbooks partly because they were critical of the teaching methods used in their English classes or because they perceived their needs differently. They believed that they were just memorizing and repeating sentences like a parrot in the class. Presenting cultural and religious ideologies through visual materials was also a controversial issue as the teacher and student participants expressed different views. Teachers indicated that providing specific cultural/religious ideologies in line with Persian culture was a key for EFL students’ success in learning the basic grammatical rules. Such a belief was totally unacceptable to the students as they had negative attitudes towards such visual materials. They asked for more target cultural values (i.e., English).

It is teachers’ responsibility to provide students with the most reliable sources to make them social members of future world. The findings of the current research might be of paramount interest for material developers in Iran as it represents the teachers and students’ feedback towards the ELT textbooks used in the junior high schools. Further studies can be conducted to explore the role of visual materials in ELT textbooks used in all public schools drawing on critical discourse analysis, critical thinking and critical literacy.

References


Ali Roohani & Aha Saeidfar


Appendix

سوالات مصاحبه معلم‌ان

1. ارزیابی کلی شما از کتاب‌های درسی زبان انگلیسی که درسی می‌گitez چیست؟
2. دیدگاه شما در مورد عناصر بصری (عکس‌ها و تصاویر) ارائه شده در کتاب درسی زبان انگلیسی چیست؟

الف) آیا این تصاویر و اهداف کتب درسی و نوسانه‌های آنها را بیشتر میدهد؟
ب) آیا این تصاویر باعث کاهش یا افزایش در دانش‌آموزان است؟
ج) آیا مسائل و ارزش‌های فرهنگی در آنها لحاظ شده است؟
د) آیا مسائل و عقاید منهی در آنها لحاظ شده است؟
ه) آیا بین تصاویر موجود در کتاب و اهداف هر درس هم‌اکنون وجود دارد؟
و) آیا تکرار محور در باره تصاویر چیست؟
ژ) آیا یکی‌سانی در باره تصاویر دارد؟

سوالات مصاحبه دانش آموزان

1. نظرتان درباره کتاب زبان انگلیسی نام به طور کلی چیست؟
2. دیدگاه شما در مورد تصاویر موجود در کتاب زبان انگلیسی نام چیست؟
الف) آیا این تصاویر به‌طوری‌ای دانش‌آموزی شما را بیشتر میدهد؟
ب) نظر شما درباره توجه به عقاید و ارزش‌های دینی و فرهنگی در تصاویر کتاب آموزش زبان انگلیسی چیست؟
ج) آیا یکی‌سانی در باره تصاویر دارد؟