

EFL Textbook Evaluation: A case Study into the Suitability of “Communicative English Skills” Course Book

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Abstract

Teaching materials are instruments used by instructors or/and learners to facilitate the teaching learning process. “Communicative English Skills” course book is used to teach “Communicative English Skills course” for all first year students of Bahir Dar University, including agriculture students. While the students are from different field of studies with different needs, the material is used commonly with less consideration of learners’ specific needs. In addition, the researcher’s teaching experience also shows that most students were disinterested with the teaching material. Therefore, this study was designed to evaluate the suitability of Communicative English Skills course book specifically in its layout and design, subjects and contents, language skills, and activities with respect to agriculture students’ needs, English language teachers’ perspective, and fitness to the current syllabus / curriculum. In the study, descriptive research design was employed. Among 336 first year Agriculture students in eight departments, 40 of them were selected using stratified sampling method. Two English language teachers in the college were also participated using comprehensive sampling technique. As a data gathering instrument twenty close-ended, five scales Likert Type items and five open ended questions were compiled from different textbook evaluation checklists and used. In addition, content analysis was used to evaluate the fitness of the course book with the existing syllabus /curriculum. The data were analysed qualitatively using thematic data analysis method. The findings show that though layout and design of the course book are mostly suitable to students’ needs, most of the subjects and contents are not compatible to students’ language learning needs. The material comprises appropriate balance of language skills though they are inadequate and mostly unable to help learners communicate on their future working environment. Most activities consider students’ level of achievement, but did not consider their’ needs and styles. Mostly, it does not fit to the current syllabus /curriculum. The material is intended for all freshman students of the university, but failed to address the needs of agriculture students. It is mostly not preferable to teach because it is far from students’ needs and their field of study. Based on the conclusions, it is suggested that teachers should replace the current course book with a new teaching material which comprises various interesting communicative activities that address the needs of agriculture students so as to enhance their communicative competence.

Key Words: ESP, communicative English, course book evaluation, agriculture, suitability

Introduction

Teaching English language is worth as far as it is the main language of international communication. The teaching-learning process can be influenced by different factors including related to teaching materials, students and teachers. Teaching materials are instruments that serve teachers and students to complete courses. They are the most tangible and visible aspects of curriculum and syllabus because they put the specific and practical elements of a syllabus. As Tomlinson (1998) notes, instructional materials are anything used by instructors or/and learners to facilitate the teaching learning process.

In many developing countries, like Ethiopia, where English is a foreign language, schools and colleges use both commercially and institutionally prepared materials (Ecker, 2001). Commercial English Language Teaching (ELT) materials are prepared for world-wide learners of English language, and are mostly produced by publishers abroad including Longman, Oxford, Cambridge, MC-Graw-Hill and others; whereas, institutionally prepared materials are produced by local educational institutions, local colleges and universities.

Local material developers need to think of the current teaching methodology, learners' needs, syllabus /curriculum, and teachers teaching style, and develop instructional materials accordingly so as to help students learn the language they need, and teachers can teach with their own teaching style. Hayes (1995, in Gooch, 1998) suggests that materials development should be classroom centred to achieve the learners' needs. When Tomlinson (1998) strengthened that course book preparation becomes effective when it achieves the needs of a particular group of learners. To assure whether a material achieves the intended goal or not, evaluating the material is needed. As Cunningsworth (1984) stated material evaluation helps to examine the strengths and weaknesses the material based on a certain point of view. Adugna (2010) and Ali (2008) note that some teacher-produced teaching materials or course books are criticized for being unnatural, inauthentic, lacking qualities in their layout, graphics and pictures. In addition, the materials can be appropriate to the culture and level of students, but the units of the materials may lack clear progression or overall coherence, and are often not well organized.

In Ethiopia, materials development started in 1955 with the establishment of a textbook committee by Ministry of Education and Fine Arts (MEFA) and Peter Wingard so that new textbooks could be produced in the Ethiopian context (Bender, 1976). In 1964, MEFA signed an agreement with Oxford University Press to prepare and publish revised English language

instructional materials in Ethiopia. Furthermore, in 1966, the editorial team prepared New Oxford English Course Ethiopia (NOEC) for Ethiopia, and it was approved by a committee of administrators in MEFA. However, Bender (1976) suggests, the materials that were prepared with the team were American oriented and the selection of language-matter was not built systematically for the intended learning context.

Apart from it, to be able to communicate successfully in English, students of different professions who have the sense of purpose and vocation are taught ESP for they focused on what students will need in their future working environments. Students studying for different professions, who were taught more or less General English, were not effective in communication when applied in real-life situations of different areas of specialization, such as engineering, agriculture, tourism, science and technology, and medicine. (Vičič, n.d). Communicative English Skills course book is used to teach a common course which is entitled “Communicative English Skills” for most first year students of Bahir Dar University, including agriculture students. That means, while the students are from different field of studies with different needs, the material is used commonly with less consideration of learners’ specific language learning needs.

This research stressed that unless students learn or practice the language which is related to their field of studies, they could not effectively communicate in their future real work place. Therefore, the researcher was interested to evaluate the suitability of Communicative English Skills course book with respect to agriculture students’ needs, teachers’ perspective, and fitness to the syllabus /curriculum.

The Problem

As long as English is spoken all over the world and serves as a medium of instruction, providing students with appropriate teaching materials is important so that they can learn English better. Developing course books involves matching the material to the context where it is going to be used so as to help students learn in their specific needs. Material development and evaluation experts such as Tomlinson (1998) stipulate that a textbook which is designed for a wider context would not be appropriate and ideal for one's particular group of learners.

Compared to English for Specific Purpose course, students studying for different professions like engineering, agriculture, and tourism, who were taught General English, were not effective in communication when applied in real-life situations (Vičič, n.d). A study that assess the suitability of the literature textbooks assigned to the Sudanese secondary school students shows

that the selection of the textbooks do not meet the students' needs, L2 language competence, culture, and literary background. In other words, the teaching materials did not consider students' actual needs (Ibrahim, 2014).

In Ethiopian context, some complaints are raised on the quality teaching materials for the teaching and learning process due to their inappropriateness to the learners' and teachers' current and changing needs (Tadesse Bizaga, 2014). For instance, a study that evaluates English for Ethiopia Grade 11 Students' Books revealed that the text book is not in a good level of quality. It shows that some of the exercises are not designed for genuine communications; some of the skills are not presented in the way the learners' need to practice; and significant numbers of topics and contents are mismatched with the learners' interest and culture (Hailu, 2008).

In addition, as an evaluative study conducted on the effectiveness of English for Ethiopian Grade 12 Students' Textbook in cultivating students' paragraph writing with particular emphasis on cohesion and coherence indicates the occurrences of “cohesive devices” with their functions in Grade 12 Students' English Textbook were not sufficient. It has inadequate cohesive devices to help students write coherent paragraphs (Tulu, 2015). Perfect course book does not exist due to various factors like differences in learners' and teachers' needs, yet the question is to design the best material that can fit and be appropriate to a particular learner group. The most effective materials are those which are based on a thorough understanding of learners' needs, their language difficulties, learning objectives, and styles (Tomlinson, 1998).

In Bahir Dar University, “Communicative English Skills” course book is used to teach a common course that is called “Communicative English Skills” course for *most* first year students including Agriculture students. In other terms, though the students are from different field of studies where their language learning needs are also different, the material is used commonly with less consideration the learners' specific language learning needs. In addition, the researchers' teaching experience on teaching the stated course with the same course book at Woldia University also shows that most students were disinterested with the material, may be due to the fact that they were from different field of studies having different learning needs.

The researcher believes that unless students gain field related language input, and practice it accordingly during their college time, they could not communicate effectively in their future real work place. As far as the learners' learning needs are different across field of studies or colleges, the teaching material would be prepared separately to each college so as to enable students relate the language input to their respective field of study, and communicate better in their future work

place. Similarly, the teachers' perspective towards the course book also determines the achievement of the course objectives on students. At the same time, the fitness of the course book to the existing syllabus /curriculum affects the general quality of the teaching material.

Therefore, the study was to evaluate the suitability of Communicative English Skills course book in its layout and design, subjects and contents, language skills, and activities with respect to agriculture students' needs, English language teachers' perspective, and fitness to the existing syllabus or/and curriculum. In order to achieve this objective, the following research questions were formulated.

- To what extent does Communicative English Skills course book is suitable to students' needs?
- How Communicative English Skills course book is suitable from teachers' perspective?
- Does Communicative English Skills course book fit to the syllabus or/and curriculum?

Review of Related Literature

The Roles of Course books?

Textbooks are key resources for the students to learn the necessary contents which are expected on a given program. For teachers, textbooks are most important resources to achieve objectives of a course. They also support less experienced teachers as a source of ideas and tasks. Therefore, textbooks help to save time, to direct and present a lesson properly and easily, to guide discussion and to make learning better organized and faster (Tok, 2010). Teaching materials are the most practicable features of course's syllabus /curriculum. Graves (1996) and Tomlinson (1998) stated that instructional materials are tools that can be figuratively cut up into component pieces and then rearranged to suit the needs, abilities, and interests of the students in the course (Vulić, n.d). In a general expression, they are anything used by instructors and students to facilitate a teaching learning process. That means, teaching materials can be both printed ones, like textbooks, workbook, and teacher's guide; and non-printed ones, such as audio-videotapes and computer-based materials.

As far as teachers use teaching materials to their teaching learning process, they are expected to evaluate the material in order to provide better instructional material for their specific learners. Thus, their views on the usefulness and effectiveness of a certain teaching material are relevant to identify the merits and demerits of the material (Tok, 2010).

Why Course book Evaluation?

Evaluating EFL materials is essential for teachers and material writers to modify existing teaching material to plan courses, and manage learning activities. As Cunningsworth (1984) emphasized material evaluation is needed to identify particular strengths and weaknesses of course books which are already in use. Such activities also permit teachers to make optimum use of their strong points and strengthen the weaker areas by adapting and substituting materials from other materials (Tok, 2010). Tomlinson (1998) also stated course book evaluation is relevant in ESP because it helps to collect students' and teachers' feedback on the effectiveness of a given material. Material evaluation is used to examine the strengths and weaknesses of materials based on a certain point of view. Teaching materials should be evaluated to assess if they are in unacceptable level of quality, usefulness and appropriateness for the given context and user whether one assumes they are helpful or not. Textbook evaluation includes layout and organization of the material; feasibility, aim; fitness with teacher's approach; appropriateness of subjects and contents students' culture, needs, and interests (Cunningsworth, 1984).

Cunningsworth (1995) identified three types of teaching material evaluation namely, predictive, in-use, and retrospective evaluation. Predictive evaluation which also called pre-use evaluation is used to examine the future performance of a given instructional material. On the other hand, in-use evaluation helps to examine a teaching material which is presently being used by students and teachers. Lastly, the retrospective or post-use material evaluation is implemented to assess the value of the material which has been used in before.

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Course book Suitability

Course book suitability is the appropriateness of the material to students' language learning needs, teachers' teaching approach, and existing syllabus or/and curriculum. A textbook evaluation conducted by Zahra and Borhani (2012) on a text book entitled "Touchstone Series" shows the stated material was appropriate for the teachers' and language institute's aims. Similarly, Yohannes and Mahlalela (2015) examine the extent to which integrated skills language teaching and learning approach is depicted in Ethiopian Grade 9 Students' English Textbook, and revealed that most of the language tasks of the material are designed in an integrated manner which meets the integrated skills language teaching and learning approach with the exception of some vocabulary and grammar lessons.

Fitness of Course books to Syllabus or/and Curriculum

In Ruben (2010) research, a content analysis of the textbooks used in the Dutch early childhood teacher education shows clear inconsistencies with the intended curriculum. Neither the content

standards found in the professional profile for teachers nor the content standards from the educational profile of their training courses are adequately covered in the books. To sum up, as Tomlinson (1998) stated effective instructional materials are those which are based on a thorough understanding of particular group learners' needs, language difficulties, learning objectives, and styles.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This research employed descriptive design that focused on EFL course book evaluation. According to Weiss (1998), evaluation research is “a systematic assessment of the operation and/or the outcomes of a program or policy, compared to a set of explicit or implicit standards, as a means of contributing to the improvement of the program or policy” (p. 4).

Sample and Sampling Technique

The study evaluates the suitability of the Communicative English Skills course book. Based on the information obtained from College of Agriculture, Bahir Dar University, there were 336 first year students in the college in eight departments with 40 to 45 numbers of students in each section. So for the purpose of the study, five students were selected from each section by applying the *stratified* sampling technique. Thus, five students from each department; a total of 42 students were selected. Randomization was done for each *strata* through lottery method based on the list of students' names. Besides, comprehensive sampling technique was used to select teachers because there were only two English language teachers who taught the course in the stated college. Therefore, a total of 44 participants were involved in sum.

Data Collection Instruments

The required data for this study was collected by using questionnaire and document analysis.

Questionnaire

Many scholars such as Cunningsworth (1984), Tomlinson (1998) and Richards (2001) suggested that in order to determine the relative strengths and weakness of the book and ultimately decide how well it suited the desired and attainable goals of the learners a series of textbook evaluation survey questionnaires should be used. Thus, both close ended and open ended items were compiled from different evaluation checklists for both student and teacher participants. The questionnaires items were focused on layout and design, subject and content, language skills, and activities. The items were designed in Likert five scale where SA = Strongly Agree; A =

Agree; N = Neutral; D = Disagree, and SD = Strongly Disagree. Besides, open ended items were also developed on the same issues so as to gather in depth information from research participants.

Content Analysis

In order to evaluate the fitness of the material with the existing syllabus /curriculum, a content analysis checklist was developed and used. The checklist considers the fitness of the course book with the syllabus /curriculum in its general aim, specific objectives, contents included, and mode of delivery.

Method of Data Analysis

As far as the data gathered for the purpose of this study was descriptive, qualitative data analysis method was employed. Thus, the data gained through questionnaire and content analysis were analysed qualitatively using thematic data analysis method.

Results and Discussion

Suitability of the Layout and Design

Regarding the layout and design of the course book, most students and teachers view that the layout, design, and organization of the material reflects students' preferences, but the illustrations in the course book are not related to students' field of study. According to Tomlinson (1998) teaching materials are expected to consider students' and teachers' needs in their layout and organization. Thus, though the illustrations of the course book are not related to students' field of study, the layout, design, and organization fit students' preferences.

Suitability of the Subjects and Contents

The subjects and contents of the course book are not compatible to students' language learning needs; are not related to students' field of study, and are not interesting, challenging and motivating to students. Although material evaluation experts like Tok (2010) notes subjects and contents of materials should be appropriate to students' needs, interests, personalities, and cultures, the subjects and contents of Communicative English Skills Course book did not consider students' socio-cultural diversity. Apart from it, most of the reading texts are not authentic, and the material is almost out-dated.

Suitability of the Language Skills

The material has appropriate balance of language skills that mostly fulfil students' language learning needs. However, it did not include adequate speaking and writing tasks that enable learners communicate on their future agricultural working environments. The listening tasks in the material are also limited and mostly not related to students' field of study. Most of the vocabulary items are introduced in a motivating and realistic way, whereas the grammar points are not presented in a less motivating and more of unrealistic manner. In line with this view, Ellis and Johnson (1994) stated, Subject-specific materials equip students with necessary skills and knowledge, rather than subject-general materials to practice a language related tasks to their specialization.

Suitability of the Activities

Most activities of the course book incorporate individual, pair and group work activities with clear instructions. In addition, most of the activities consider students' level of achievement involving low, medium, and high achievers. However, most of them did not consider most students' learning needs and styles, and did not enable learners to communicate in their future agricultural working environment. As a coping mechanism, Howard and Major (n.d) notes that activities which did not meet learners' needs should be replaced or adapted with other authentic materials.

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Students' Language Learning Needs: Students' and Teachers' Views

Regarding the topics and contents they need to learn, most student participants stated that topics and contents which are related to agricultural issues are important to associate or link their language learning with their major courses. In addition, they need language contents and activities with both American and British English to improve their language competence and enables them communicate with foreigners. The students need to learn all of the four major and the two minor language skills. Specially, they need spoken English related to agriculture to improve their field related spoken language content. The teachers also view that topics, contents, skills, and activities that have relevance with the agriculture sector, and which are related to agriculture students' needs and learning styles are highly needed to promote real communication. According to Litz (2005), some teaching materials are inappropriate for communicative or cooperative language teaching because they do not adequately prepare students for different types of pronunciation, language structures, idioms, and vocabulary that enable students to use in the real-world.

Fitness of the Course book to the Syllabus or/and Curriculum

The content analysis is designed to evaluate the fitness of the course book with the current teaching methodology and curriculum /syllabus used in the university. Thus, the general aim of the course book fit to the general aim of the syllabus /curriculum. In the same vein, the specific objectives of the course book match to specific objectives of the syllabus /curriculum. Similarly, the contents of the course book match to the specifications of the syllabus /curriculum. Finally, the modes of delivery of the course book match to the mode of delivery stated in the syllabus /curriculum.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The course book has some important aspects as some of the speaking tasks or conversation activities are helpful to improve speaking skills and confidence. In addition, as the teachers stated, as far as the material incorporates both major and minor skills, it plays a pivotal role so that students improve their language skills. Graves, (2000) also notes teaching materials provide the necessary input into classroom lessons through different activities, readings and explanations. However, the course book has solid weaknesses which can imply teachers to modify or replace it with a new teaching material. The most drawback of the course book is in its contents and activities, because they are not related to students' field of study. The material is not participatory since it lacks adequate tasks to practice the intended skills. The contents are difficult to easily understand as it has limited information on some topics, and lack of reference books in the library. The teachers also stated that the material is intended for most freshman students of the university, but failed to address the needs of agriculture students' needs. In addition, the activities are not well organized, and they are not interesting to use. In the same vein, Vulić (n.d) views that students need a good English language command, with the specific aims of getting to know specialized vocabulary and being able to use the language in the prospective profession.

Most of the students believe that the course book should be replaced with a new teaching material which considers agriculture students' needs. For instance, one of the students note: "it is best to learn using new material". The teachers also stated the material needs careful reconsideration and revision so it has more relevance to agriculture students. Thus, as to students, they view that it is better if the current material is replaced with a new teaching material which comprises various interesting communicative activities that address the needs of agriculture students so as to enhance their communicative competence. As far as the learners' learning needs are different across field of studies or colleges, the teaching material would be

prepared separately to agriculture field so as to enable students relate the language input to their respective field of study, and communicate better in their future working environment.

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