

Evaluation of EFL Coursebooks Taught in Turkey Based on Teachers' Views

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Abstract

Developing the most functional instructional materials has always been among the interests of educational specialists and researchers. While the publishers are expected to provide the most up-to-date course books, the literature on language education presents a great number of studies about developing criteria for coursebook evaluation. Thus, this study aims at finding out teacher views on English Language Teaching Coursebooks used in Turkey, in view of the coursebook evaluation criteria provided in the language learning literature. This study is a descriptive survey study and the study is conducted in Düzce/Turkey during the 2013-2014 academic year to get teacher views on English coursebooks used in Turkish state schools. 118 English language teachers attended the survey to provide views on the language textbooks they use in their classes. The “English Language Teaching Textbook Checklist” (Mukundan & Nimehchisalem, 2012) was used as the instrument of the research to obtain data throughout the study. According to the checklist, the obtained data were classified into two main categories as “general attributes” and “teaching-learning content” where totally 14 sub-dimensions and 38 items are included. Data analysis consisted of mean score distributions based on the categories in the scale. Therefore, data were analysed descriptively and teacher responses to the items of the scale were evaluated in terms of mean scores. Results of the study indicate findings in favor of the English language coursebooks used in Turkey in some categories while suggesting less favourable results in some categories as well.

Keywords: coursebook evaluation, ELT coursebooks, language instruction, language learning materials

Introduction

Coursebooks are still regarded as crucial tools for teachers in many respects among the components of language learning. As Kitao & Kitao (1997) states, language instruction is composed of 5 main components “teacher, students, materials, teaching methods and evaluation” and course books are seen among the vital materials. Certainly, the classifications and naming of the components can change, but at least we can say that coursebooks have most of the time been among the most significant tools of carrying curriculum goals into the classroom and putting them into practice. In line with the significance of coursebooks, reasons for using a coursebook, aspects of an ideal coursebook, limitations of a coursebook, and criteria for evaluating a coursebook are among the most studied topics in the literature regarding the place of coursebooks in language learning.

To begin with, reminding Tomlinson’s (2011) definition of a “coursebook” might be of great help, in that valuable clues about evaluation of an ideal course book are provided:

“A textbook which provides the core materials for a language-learning course. It aims to provide as much as possible in one book and is designed so that it could serve as the only book which the learners necessarily use during a course. Such a book usually includes work on grammar,

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vocabulary, pronunciation, functions and the skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking” (p. xi).

As can be inferred from Tomlinson’s (2011) definition above, a language coursebook can be associated with various aspects of language instruction such as the learner, the language, developing language skills, and the teacher. Teachers may have various reasons for using a course book in language classes, and a number of advantages of using course books can be observed in the relevant literature (Chou, 2010; Kayapınar, 2009; Williams, 1983). Having a set of clearly identified curriculum objectives for learners, consistency in the topics and genres in all skills, providing ready-made activities especially for the inexperienced teachers, achievement tests, teacher’s manuals for a guided instruction, and constituting the cheapest way of supplying the learning materials for the language instruction are reminded among the potential advantages of language course books in these studies. A good coursebook can make the job easier for the teachers. However, no language coursebook is free of limitations and might even be found quite disadvantageous by many. As Hutchinson & Torres (1994) warn, highly structured coursebooks may even lead to the de-skilling of teachers. Therefore, choosing the best book for a language classroom has always been a major goal for language instructors and researchers.

Relevant to attempts to decide on the best coursebook for a classroom, literature on materials development and ELT course book evaluation reveals varying methods and criteria for course book evaluation. It is worth noting here that Williams (1983) presents one of the valuable sets of guidelines for a functional course book evaluation checklist depending on the previous studies of English language teaching. He suggests a method by which teachers can develop criteria for coursebook evaluation. He presents a framework that focuses on a number of assumptions about second language teaching and a set of linguistic, pedagogical, and technical criteria related to these assumptions. Thus, an exemplary coursebook evaluation might generate criteria around the notions such as “Up-to-date methodology of L2 teaching, guidance for non-native speakers of English, needs of learners, relevance to socio-cultural environment, general criteria, speech, grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing, and technical criteria” (Williams, 1983).

Certainly, the literature on ELT course book evaluation includes many other studies concerned with obtaining a better set of criteria for an ideal language course book. One of the latest attempts for developing an ELT coursebook checklist has been Mukundan & Nimehchisalem’s (2012) study “*Evaluative Criteria of an English Language Textbook Evaluation Checklist*”. In fact this study is reported to be the result of a project that aims at developing a checklist to evaluate English language teaching course books and depended mostly on a revised version of their tentative checklist for textbook evaluation (Mukundan, Hajimohammadi, & Nimehchisalem, 2011). Depending on their needs, institutions or practitioners might apply their own evaluation processes in choosing a coursebook for their classes.

Consistent with the place of course books in language learning identified in literature, language instruction in Turkey depends on language coursebooks to a great extent. Therefore, the Ministry of Education conducts some processes to meet the need for books in language instruction in primary, secondary, and high schools. Precisely, Turkish Ministry of Education provides ELT course books (as well as other course books) for free. The books are prepared mostly by the local publishers and the books pass through a review process by the ministry. When the review and revision processes come to an end, the acceptable course books are chosen and delivered to schools. In some cases, teachers may have limited options for choosing a course book for their classes.

Basically, the review boards evaluate the books in terms of four main suitability factors depending on the declaration of Turkish Republic National Ministry of Education/ Board of Education and Discipline on January 14 2013 (Act. No. 27040):

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- A- Constitutionality: The constitutionality of the content is evaluated.
- B- Scientific Sufficiency: Scientific sufficiency of the content is questioned.
- C- Compatibility with the Curriculum: The efficiency of the content in achieving the curriculum goals is inspected.
- D- Suitability of the Visual and Content Design: Books are evaluated to make sure that their Visual and Content designs are suitable to the developmental characteristics of learners and the designs support learning.

The evaluation criteria are presented in the form of general guidelines and specific checklists are not used. It is true that such a reviewing process might include nearly all of the necessary dimensions for evaluating a course book; however, the criteria are not detailed and specifically identified. In a sense, the reviewing criteria seem to assume “that the review board members are all specialists and reminding them of no specific aspect is necessary”. Such a view and method of evaluating language course books might have value to a certain extent but may signal some limitations and disadvantages as well.

Some important details may escape the attention of reviewers and decision makers. Expecting all the reviewers to have perfect expertise at the same level may not always be possible. Providing some kind of a more detailed checklist, in addition to the current national criteria, to remind the reviewers about the vital details seems to be more meaningful. It can help the reviewers continuously stay alert and aware of the vital dimensions of language learning and of language course books.

As we aimed at obtaining teacher views from a perspective different from that of Turkish Ministry of Education, and in a more detailed form, we adopted Mukundan & Nimehchisalem’s (2012) “English Language Teaching Textbook Checklist” as an instrument to obtain data throughout the research. In a sense finding out the difference between evaluating coursebooks through a more generally outlined set of local criteria and obtaining teacher views with a more specifically defined set of criteria constituted the primary aim of this study. Therefore, this study is conducted to find out the answer to the question “What would the result be if language teachers had the opportunity to evaluate the ELT coursebooks through a more detailed coursebook checklist?”

Methodology

The current study is a descriptive survey study, conducted in Düzce/Turkey during the 2013-2014 academic year to get teacher views on English course books used in Turkish state schools. 118 English language teachers from primary, secondary, and high schools attended the survey to provide views on the language textbooks they use in their classes.

Instrument

The English Language Teaching Textbook Checklist developed by Mukundan & Nimehchisalem (2012) was used as data collection tool for this present study. It is a 5-point likert-type scale. The obtained data were classified into two main categories as “general attributes” and “teaching-learning content” where totally 14 sub-dimensions and 38 items are included.

Teachers were requested to mark (1-5) to indicate the level of the course book according to each criterion:

1: Poor 2: Below Average 3: Average 4: Good 5: Excellent

Data analysis

Data analysis consisted of mean score distributions based on the categories in the scale. Therefore, data were analysed descriptively and teacher responses to the items of the scale were evaluated in terms of mean scores.

Responses given to the 38 items according to the 14 sub-dimensions and the mean scores obtained for each category through the instrument are presented in tables.

Results

Results of the study are presented according to the dimensions identified in the instrument of the study “English Language Teaching Textbook Checklist.” The first 5 categories in the checklist are about the “General Attributes” of the coursebook. 9 categories about the “Learning-teaching content” of the coursebooks followed the first 5 categories and the results are presented in totally 14 tables.

Teachers’ views about the book in relation to “syllabus and curriculum” are surveyed in the first “General Attributes” category in table 1:

Table 1. Descriptive statistics about the book in relation to syllabus and curriculum

I. General attributes						
A. The book in relation to syllabus and curriculum				1. It matches to the specifications of the syllabus.		
N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Sd.	Variance
118	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.64	1.05	1.10

The first item of the checklist surveyed teacher views about the books in terms of compatibility with the curriculum goals. The mean score obtained in teacher views about the book in relation to syllabus and curriculum is 3.64. The highest mean score obtained about ELT coursebooks used in Turkey was the compatibility of the books with the curriculum goals.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics about the book in relation to methodology

I. General attributes						
B. Methodology				2. The activities can be exploited fully and can embrace the various methodologies in ELT.		
				3. Activities can work well with methodologies in ELT.		
N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Sd.	Variance
118	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.16	1.00	1.00

The second and the third items of the checklist focused on teacher views on methodological concerns. Teacher views on the suitability of the course books in terms of methodology suggested a 3.16 mean score just above the average level as in table 2.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics about the book in relation to suitability to learners

I. General attributes						
C. Suitability to learners				4. It is compatible to the age of the learners.		
				5. It is compatible to the needs of the learners.		
				6. It is compatible to the interests of the learners.		
N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Sd.	Variance
117	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.04	1.22	1.51

Items 4, 5, and 6 in the checklist were used to gather data on the suitability of the course books to the learners. Table 3 presents teachers' views on suitability of the coursebooks to the learners' age, needs and interests. The results reported a 3.04 mean point in teachers' views about the ELT course books.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics about the book in relation to physical and utilitarian attributes

I. General attributes						
D. Physical and utilitarian attributes				7. Its layout is attractive.		
				8. It indicates efficient use of text and visuals.		
				9. It is durable.		
				10. It is cost-effective.		
N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Sd.	Variance
118	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.08	.87	.77

Checklist items 7, 8, 9, 10 focused on the physical and utilitarian attributes of the books. Layout, efficient use of text and visuals, durability and cost-effectiveness were the features of the books evaluated in this category. As shown in table 4, language teachers expressed their views on the physical and utilitarian attributes of the books they use in their classes with a mean score 3.08.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics about the book in relation to efficient outlay of supplementary materials

I. General attributes						
E. Efficient outlay of supplementary materials				11. The book is supported efficiently by essentials like audio-materials.		
N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Sd.	Variance
118	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.86	1.24	1.55

As shown in table 5, the 11th item in the checklist was about the efficient outlay of supplementary materials. According to the teachers' responses, ELT course books received a mean point less than average. To be precise, teachers expressed views with a mean point 2.86.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics about the book in relation to general learning-teaching content

II. Learning-teaching content						
A. General				12. Most of the tasks in the book are interesting.		
				13. Tasks move from simple to complex.		
				14. Task objectives are achievable.		
				15. Cultural sensitivities have been considered.		
				16. The language in the course book is natural and real.		
				17. The situations created in the dialogues sound natural and real.		
N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Sd.	Variance
114	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.17	.89	.79

In addition to the first main category about the “general attributes” of course books, the second category in our data collection was about “learning-teaching content” presented in ELT course books. Tables 6 to 14 show the results obtained about the learning-teaching content. Table 6 presents information about learning-teaching content in general while the following tables present views on more specific aspects of language and language learning such as skills, grammar, vocabulary, and exercises.

6 statements from 12 to 17 in the checklist constituted the considerations about learning-teaching content in general. Teacher views on interestingness of tasks, principle of progressivity, achievability of tasks, cultural sensitivities, authenticity of language and dialogues in the book are obtained within this category. Views on general learning-teaching content reflected a mean score 3.17.

Table 7. Descriptive statistics about the book in relation to listening

II. Learning-teaching content						
B. Listening		18. The book has appropriate listening tasks with well-defined goals.				
		19. Tasks are efficiently graded according to complexity.				
		20. Tasks are authentic or close to real language situations.				
N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Sd.	Variance
118	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.98	1.11	1.23

Second category in learning-teaching content evaluation consists of views on listening skills. Items 18, 19, 20 in the checklist asked views about goal-orientedness, authenticity, and complexity of listening tasks throughout the ELT course books. Responses suggested a mean score 2.98, a score just below average point 3.

Table 8. Descriptive statistics about the book in relation to speaking

II. Learning-teaching content						
C. Speaking		21. Activities are developed to initiate meaningful communication.				
		22. Activities are balanced between individual response, pair work and group work.				
N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Sd.	Variance
118	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.99	.96	.92

Checklist items 21, and 22 were about speaking skills. Teachers reflected their views on the course books they use in terms of speaking activities. The balance between individual response, pair work, and group work in activities are questioned as well as the development of activities to initiate meaningful communication. The data obtained reflects a mean score of 2.99 in table 8.

Table 9. Descriptive statistics about the book in relation to reading

II. Learning-teaching content						
D. Reading						
				23. Texts are graded.		
				24. Texts are interesting.		
N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Sd.	Variance
118	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.03	1.01	1.03

Results given in table 9 reflect teacher views on reading skills in course books. Items 23 and 24 in the checklist were about the grading and interestingness of the reading texts. Calculations of the obtained data, resulted in a mean score 3.03. That is to say, teachers' views on reading texts suggests that course books are seen to be around average in terms of their relation to reading skills.

Table 10. Descriptive statistics about the book in relation to writing

II. Learning-teaching content						
E. Writing						
				25. Tasks have achievable goals and take into consideration learner capabilities.		
				26. Tasks are interesting.		
N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Sd.	Variance
117	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.93	1.01	1.03

As can be figured out from table 10, items 25 and 26 in the checklist pointed to writing skills. Whether the writing tasks have achievable goals and take learner capabilities into consideration was questioned with the interestingness of the tasks. The teachers graded the writing dimension of their course books with a mean score of 2.93.

Table 11. Descriptive statistics about the book in relation to vocabulary

II. Learning-teaching content						
F. Vocabulary						
				27. The load (number of new words in each lesson) is appropriate to the level.		
				28. There is a good distribution (simple to complex) of vocabulary load across chapters and the whole book.		
				29. Words are efficiently repeated and recycled across the book.		
N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Sd.	Variance
118	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.14	.98	.975

Table 12. Descriptive statistics about the book in relation to grammar

II. Learning-teaching content						
G. Grammar						
				30. The spread of grammar is achievable.		
				31. The grammar is contextualized.		
				32. Examples are interesting.		
				33. Grammar is introduced explicitly and reworked incidentally throughout the book.		
N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Sd.	Variance
115	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.95	.98	.97

Table 11 reflects teacher views regarding vocabulary. The 3 items, 27, 28, and 29 focused on evaluating course books in terms of vocabulary. Specifically, the number of new words in each lesson is assessed from different perspectives. Mean score given to vocabulary was found 3.14.

Not surprisingly, another dimension included in ELT coursebook evaluation is grammar. Items 30, 31, 32, 33 referred to grammatical issues in language coursebooks. Presentation of grammar, contextualization of grammar and examples were among the grammatical aspects investigated. Analysis of teacher views resulted in a mean score 2.95.

Table 13. Descriptive statistics about the book in relation to pronunciation

II. Learning-teaching content						
H. Pronunciation		34. It is contextualized. 35. It is learner-friendly with no complex charts.				
N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Sd.	Variance
116	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.87	.98	.96

Apart from speaking and listening, pronunciation is also reminded in course book evaluation. Items 34 and 35 investigated teacher responses about pronunciation goals. Views on presentation of pronunciation were evaluated through these items. Teachers graded pronunciation in ELT course books with a mean score 2.87.

Table 14. Descriptive statistics about the book in relation to exercises

II. Learning-teaching content						
I. Exercises		36. They are learner friendly. 37. They are adequate. 38. They help students who are under/over-achievers.				
N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Sd.	Variance
116	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.92	1.04	1.09

Last part of evaluating learning-teaching content included obtaining teacher views on exercises. Items 36, 37, and 38 in the checklist seek for teacher views on exercises provided in course books. Teachers were asked to evaluate exercises in terms of being learner friendly, and adequacy. As shown in table 14, teachers evaluated exercises with a mean score of 2.92.

Discussion and conclusion

Results of the study indicate findings slightly in favor of the English language coursebooks used in Turkey in some categories while suggesting less favourable results in some categories as well. It seems that, ELT course books were found to be around the average level as they received approximately 3 mean scores in general.

Theoretically a mean score of 3 may be claimed to be enough for a coursebook to be chosen; however, ideally a course book is expected to get 4 or higher points from such an evaluation checklist to be used in class. Everyone wants “the best” coursebook, or at least a “good” one in the classroom.

Precisely, ELT coursebooks used by the participants of this study received mean scores less than 3 (below average) in the areas “Speaking, Listening, Grammar, Writing, Exercises,

Pronunciation, and Efficient outlay of supplementary materials”. Thus, according to the results of this study, ELT coursebooks in Turkey seem to be in need of some kind of revision primarily in these areas for a better contribution to language learning.

Table 15 below presents the mean scores from the highest to the lowest, which gives us the opportunity to observe and compare teacher views on each feature of the coursebooks:

Table 15. Descriptive statistics about the book as mean scores in order (from the highest to the lowest)

Main Categories	Sub-categories	Mean
I. General attributes	A. The book in relation to syllabus and curriculum	3.64
II. Learning-teaching content	A. General	3.17
I. General attributes	B. Methodology	3.16
II. Learning-teaching content	F. Vocabulary	3.14
I. General attributes	D. Physical and utilitarian attributes	3.08
I. General attributes	C. Suitability to learners	3.04
II. Learning-teaching content	D. Reading	3.03
II. Learning-teaching content	C. Speaking	2.99
II. Learning-teaching content	B. Listening	2.98
II. Learning-teaching content	G. Grammar	2.95
II. Learning-teaching content	E. Writing	2.93
II. Learning-teaching content	I. Exercises	2.92
II. Learning-teaching content	H. Pronunciation	2.87
I. General attributes	E. Efficient outlay of supplementary materials	2.86

However, reevaluation of the other dimensions of coursebooks would also be greatly beneficial because coursebooks couldn't receive any 4 or 5 point mean score from any specific dimensions of the checklist. The books received the highest mean score of 3.64 in relation to syllabus and the curriculum. Mean scores received in ‘Learning and teaching content in general, Methodology, Vocabulary, Physical and utilitarian attributes, Suitability to learners, and Reading’ have been just above 3 (average) and seemingly the coursebooks need to be improved in these areas as well.

In a sense, the coursebook stays just in the middle of the classroom, between the teacher and the student. A good coursebook needs to be appealing both to the teacher and the students. It must bring the teacher and student closer, if not, the coursebook is likely to break the ties between the teacher and the students.

Arising from the results of this study, seemingly, teachers viewed the coursebooks as “average” but not “good” or “excellent”. While the decision makers find the coursebooks suitable enough for language classes, the teachers view the books “average”. This situation points out a gap between the teacher views on coursebooks and the views of decision makers or producers of the books. Not only reviewers and decision makers but also coursebook authors and publishers might benefit from checklists with clearly identified dimensions of language learning and skills to be developed. Coursebook producers need to know about teachers' needs and teachers need to know about coursebooks (Hutchinson & Torris, 1994; Kitao & Kitao, 1997). To fill in the gap between the teachers and coursebook producers or decision makers, arranging some kind of pilot studies before

publication, to make sure the coursebooks will be welcomed by the students and teachers after publication can be one of the solutions to be offered.

If a coursebook is prepared with enough clarity and quality, training the teacher on how, when, or why to use the books will also contribute to the quality of the book while leading to better results in achieving the curriculum goals. In other words, teachers need to be informed about the strengths of the course books. Not surprisingly, every teacher may not be experienced to the same degree with others and taking some precautions might be necessary. For example, if the teacher is not aware of the underlying philosophy or methodology of the book, he/she might stay distant to the coursebook.

On the other hand, attracting and keeping the learners' attention is becoming harder day by day for many teachers. Coursebook authors and publishers need to take this into consideration and have closer ties with the teachers. Looking for ways to get feedback from teachers and students about the coursebooks they are using (or the ones they are expected to use in the future) will certainly lead to better coursebooks. Just at this point, it is also worth reminding McGrath's (2006) findings and observations that coursebooks are very significant for many learners and teachers, especially in formal educational settings, and "inherent unsuitability of materials" may result in strong negative feelings. Thus, besides the advantages of using a course book, the literature reminds the language teachers to be careful about motivational issues as well. It is likely to claim that course books with carefully arranged set of interesting activities that help student motivation need to be chosen in order to prevent potential motivation problems among students.

However, this study has some limitations and it couldn't be possible to unveil and explain many other factors that might be connected with coursebooks and coursebook evaluation. Language teachers teaching at different educational levels (primary, secondary, and high schools) at state schools attended our research but the data obtained throughout the study was not enough for detailed analysis on single coursebooks. Another issue that could not be identified in this study and might be of interest to researchers is the relationship between teachers' experience level and coursebook evaluation. Furthermore, conducting further studies with larger groups of participants, from different perspectives and regarding the various aspects of coursebooks seems to be a need for better results in language learning.

Consequently, coursebooks may change form in a rapidly developing world, but they are still crucial tools in language learning. Ideally, coursebooks are expected to address all the students, and individual differences should be taken into consideration well. Books might even be expected to include varying types of exercises, and activities in the same unit for students with different characteristics. This study is never a final, certain result but should be seen just as a signal of a need for further study.

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