Evaluation of Cambridge English for Schools textbook series

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Abstract

Most of English teachers and material developers are aware of the importance of the textbook selection and evaluation. Textbooks play a pivotal role in language classrooms in all types of educational institutions - state schools, colleges, language schools – all over the world. This study aims to evaluate the Cambridge English for School series by Andrew Littlejohn & Diana Hicks (1996) based on Cunningworth (1995) and Hajimohammadi, Mukundan & Nimehchisalem (2011) checklists. After preparing the checklists the items in them were answered, then the features of the two checklists that were overlapped classified in the same categories namely: aims and approaches (learning and teaching content), design and organization, language content (different skills), topic (suitability to learners), methodology, teacher’s book (supplementary materials), practical considerations (physical and utilitarian attributes).

Key words: Textbook Evaluation, Cambridge English for School series, Cunningworth checklist, Hajimohammadi, Mukundan & Nimehchisalem checklist

Background and purpose

Most of English teachers and material developers are aware of the importance of the textbook selection and evaluation. Textbooks play a pivotal role in language classrooms in all types of educational institutions - state schools, colleges, language schools – all over the world. According to Lamie (1999), that is why despite the development of new technologies that allow for higher quality teacher-generated materials, demand for textbooks continues to grow, and the publishing industry responds with new series and textbooks every year. According to Razmjoo (2007) many students working with a textbook feel secure and have a sense of progress and achievement. Cuuingsworth (1995) also argues that textbooks are an effective 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, a syllabus that reflects pre-determined learning objectives, and support for less experienced teachers who have yet to gain in confidence.

According to Daoud and Celce-Murcia (1979), information on textbook selection is useful since it is sometimes part of the ESL/EFL teacher's responsibility to select the textbook she/he will use in a given class. Such a decision should be made carefully and systematically, not arbitrarily. They add that even in countries where the choice of the textbook does not directly involve the teacher, teachers may be asked to submit reports on the usefulness of the textbooks they are already making use of. Several possible criteria and procedures for carrying out a sound selection of appropriate textbooks have been suggested. However, selecting an appropriate textbook is not a wholly objective process. While many guidelines are suggested, the individual subjective judgments of the teachers are central to it.

Tomlinson (2001) contends that textbook evaluation, on the other hand, is an applied linguistic activity through which teachers, supervisors, administrators and materials developers can make sound judgments about the efficiency of the materials for the people using them. Cunningsworth (1995) and Ellis (1997) declare that textbook evaluation helps teachers move

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beyond impressionistic assessments and it helps them to acquire useful, accurate, systematic, and contextual insights into the overall nature of textbook material. Cambridge English for School series by Andrew Littlejohn & Diana Hicks (1996) include five-level course for young students. These series have been used in different countries all of over the world as a course text book in state and private institutes. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the mentioned textbooks based on Cunningworth (1995) and Hajimohammadi, Mukundan & Nimechisalem (2011) checklists. After preparing the checklists the items in them were answered, then the features of the two checklists that were overlapped classified in the same categories namely: aims and approaches (learning and teaching content), design and organization, language content (different skills), topic (suitability to learners), methodology, teacher’s book (supplementary materials), practical considerations (physical and utilitarian attributes).

Aims and approaches (learning and teaching content)

The aims of the course book correspond closely with the aims of the teaching program and with the needs of the learners; also, it is suited to the learning/teaching situation. It is comprehensive and covers most or all of what is needed. Moreover, it is a good resource for students and teachers. It is flexible and allows different teaching and learning styles. It matches to the specifications of the syllabus.

Task objectives are achievable. It covers a variety of topics from different fields. The book contains fun elements. The language in the textbook is natural and real.

Design and organization

Students’ books, teachers’ books, workbooks, cassettes, and video make up the total course package. The content is organized according to communicative, task based approach, functions, clearly-structured, and active approach to grammar. Its layout is attractive, clear and indicates efficient use of text and visuals. It is durable and cost-effective. Its size is appropriate; also, its printing quality is high. The content is sequenced on the basis of complexity, learn-ability and usefulness. The grading and progression is suitable for the learners and allows them to complete the work needed to meet any external syllabus requirements. Some of the materials are suitable for individual study.

Language content (different skills)

The course book covers the main grammar items appropriate to each level, and taking learners’ needs into account. Material for vocabulary teaching is adequate in terms of quantity and range of vocabulary, emphasis is placed on vocabulary development, strategies for individual learning. The course book includes material for pronunciation work consisting of individual sounds, word stress, sentence, stress, intonation. It deals with the structuring and conventions of language use above sentence level, for example, how to take part in conversations, how to structure a piece of extended writing, how to identify the main points in a reading passage. Pronunciation is contextualized and easy to learn.

Its language style is matched to social situation. All four skills are adequately covered, and materials are integrated in skills work. The book has appropriate listening tasks with well-defined goals.

Instructions are clear and tasks are efficiently graded according to complexity; besides, they are authentic and close to real language situations. Listening material well recorded, as authentic as possible, accompanied by background information, questions, and activities which help comprehension. Reading passages and associated activities are suitable for students’ levels, interests, and there is sufficient reading material. Their length is appropriate and texts are interesting. The material for spoken English (dialogues, role-plays, are well designed to equip learners for real-life interactions. Activities are developed to initiate meaningful communication and are balanced between individual response, pair work and group work. They motivate students to talk. Writing activities are suitable in terms of amount of guidance/control, degree of accuracy, organization of longer pieces of writing (e.g., paragraphing) and use of appropriate styles. Tasks have achievable goals and take into consideration learner capabilities, models are provided for different genres. Tasks are interesting.

The load (number of new words in each lesson) is appropriate to the level of students. There is a good distribution (simple to complex) of vocabulary load across chapters and the whole book. Words are efficiently repeated and recycled across the book, and they are contextualized. There is a list of vocabulary items tagged at the end of each textbook, and presented alphabetically. Different activities such as vocabulary games, word puzzles, and vocabulary quizzes are incorporated in the book.
The spread of grammar is achievable and it is contextualized. Examples are interesting. Grammar is introduced explicitly and reworked implicitly throughout the book.

**Topic (suitability to learners)**

There is sufficient material of genuine interest to learners. There is enough variety and range to topic. The topics help expand students’ awareness and enrich their experience.

It is compatible to background knowledge and level of students, socio-economic context. It is culturally accessible to the learners. It is compatible to the needs of the learners and the interests of the learners. The topics are sophisticated enough in content, yet within the learners' language level. The students will be able to relate to the social and cultural contexts presented in the course book. Women are portrayed and represented equally with men in the book. Different groups are represented, with reference to ethnic origin, occupation, disability.

**Methodology**

The communicative approach taken in the book is appropriate to the learning/teaching situation. A good interactive learner involvement can be expected. This matches the students' learning styles and expectations.

Various methodologies are used for presenting/practicing new language items that are suitable for learners. Different skills are taught by different techniques. Communicative abilities are developed. The materials include some advice/help to students on study skills and learning strategies e.g. taking notes, and outlining. Students are expected to take a degree of responsibility for their own learning (e.g., by setting their own individual learning targets).

**Teacher’s book (supplementary materials)**

There is adequate guidance for the teachers who will be using the course book and its supporting materials. The textbook is accompanied by a teachers’ guide to aid him/her. The teachers’ books are comprehensive and supportive. They adequately cover teaching techniques, language items such as grammar rules and culture-specific information. The writers set out and justify the basic premises and principles underlying the material. Keys to exercises are given. The book is supported efficiently by essentials like audio- video materials.

**Practical considerations (physical and utilitarian attributes)**

The whole package is cost-effective. The books are strong and long-lasting, and attractive in appearance. They are easy to obtain. Further supplies can be obtained at short notice. The textbook has sufficient number of pictures, color photographs and drawings in it to make the situation more life-like. The paper used for the textbooks is of good quality; each sheet is quite thick and ensures durability of the texts. Binding is so strong, and the physical appearance is interesting and attractive. Good printing not only makes a book attractive but also motivates the learners to read. The printing, size and type of the fonts used in this book undoubtedly guarantee the smooth readability of the texts. The layout is clear and well-organized. The topic of each unit is written in bold type. Reading passages are of various font size and color.

There are no traces of weak points in the font size for topic and exercises, the top, bottom, left and right margins, the space between words, sentences, lines and paragraphs, the quality and color of ink used, etc. The instructions are exclusively in English. On the whole, in terms of practical considerations the book is good.

**Conclusion**

Cambridge English for Schools features a communicative, task-based approach where the content and concepts reflect students' own lives and interests. There is a clearly-structured, active approach to grammar with regular revision and evaluation. This course is effective with mixed-ability classes and emphasizes learner choice, decision-making and autonomy. Regarding the obtained information based on those two checklists, the Cambridge English for schools textbooks are good and
appropriate to be used.

References


