

ESP Textbooks Criteria: A Case Study of Iranian Universities

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Abstract: *Having outstanding importance in educational situations, textbooks are recognized as one of the most important issues in ESP classrooms. In fact, to a considerable degree the performance of the teachers and students depends on textbooks. As a result, the acts of textbook selection and evaluation require a prominent scrutiny. Therefore, the current study aims at evaluating ESP books, which are taught in Iranian universities recently. To meet this aim, the viewpoints of 30 ESP teachers all over Iran were collected through questionnaire. The result of the study manifests that the opinions of the ESP teachers toward ESP textbooks are not positive. This study is very useful for textbooks designers to change the current ESP textbooks according to learners' needs.*

Keywords: *ESP, Textbook Evaluation, Iranian Universities*

1. INTRODUCTION

Among different crucial ingredients of educational environments such as teachers, learners, and materials, textbooks are the most important elements that are used by teachers and learners. Similarly, Hutchinson and Torres (1994) suggest that "the textbook is an almost universal element of [English language] teaching. Millions of copies are sold every year, and numerous aid projects have been set up to produce them in [various] countries.... No teaching-learning situation, it seems, is complete until it has its relevant textbook" (p. 315). According to Richards and Renandya (2002) textbooks are important as they provide a specific framework that both teachers and learners can follow. According to Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) when we refer to English as a foreign language, the only way to expose learners to English language is through textbooks. Also, Riazi (2003) indicated that, after teachers, the role of textbooks in academic situations is the most important one. Because of the fundamental role of textbooks in the process of learning and teaching in ELT, it is necessary to work on different textbooks and find out their shortcomings.

On the other hand, textbooks provide educational support for general English learners and specially ESP learners. English for specific purposes (ESP) started in 1960s, and it is a branch of ELT. There are different aims of learning English such as educational, occupational, etc., and ESP textbooks focus on these aims and are designed in a way to fulfill the learners' needs (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). In Iran, where the English language is mainly for academic purposes, ESP has gained a vital role. As ESP textbooks should be based on the learners' needs, in this research, the researcher tried to find out whether the ESP textbooks are satisfying according to teachers' point of view.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. Definition of ESP

Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) look a brief glance at different definitions of ESP that were proposed by other researchers. At first they mention that Hutchinson and Waters (1987) see ESP

as an approach rather than a product, in other words they mean that ESP does not have a specific methodology, instructional materials, or instruction. They believe that the foundation of ESP is on the need of learners; as a result, the instruction and materials should be provided according to learners' needs.

Stevens' (1988) definition of ESP includes a number of characteristics. He believes that ESP is

- A. Designed to satisfy specific learners' needs;
- B. Related to specific activities,
- C. On the basis of the language of doing those activities;
- D. In opposition of General English
- E. Can be limited to specific skills
- F. Not according to pre-prepared methodology

Robinson (1991) accepts the vital importance of needs in ESP, as well. She defines ESP as goal directed, and believes that ESP courses should be based on needs analysis. Another key element in Robinson's (1991) definition is limited time period, that is, we have a restricted time in ESP instruction to make the learners reach their needs and aims.

Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) conclude that each definition has its own weaknesses, but the most comprehensive one is Stevens'. Furthermore, Rosemary Varghese (2012) defines ESP as "an approach to course design which is based on learner's needs" (p.107). On the other hand, Jesús GarcíaLaborda (2011) argues that "student's needs can be understood as the language knowledge that the learner requires for professional development, the language and content knowledge that needs to be added or reincorporated to the learner's knowledge and the learner's desires of language or content" (p.103).

In addition, Mounir Triki (2002) gives this definition that "the term English for Specific Purposes belongs to a system of oppositions where it is contrasted with other Englishes such as English for Academic Purposes, English as a Second Language, and English as a Foreign Language."

2.2. The Origins of ESP

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), the origin of ESP roots back in three events: the demands of a brave new world, a revolution in linguistics, and the focus on learners. The demands of brave new world demonstrate that the end of Second World War resulted in an enormous expansion in sciences, technology, and economic in an international scale. As a result, peoples for communication needed a similar language among all; so, English became an international language. The second reason for establishing ESP was a revolution in linguistics. At that time communication became important for all, as a result, they tried to find out some versions of languages which were specific for each occasion. So language which was specific to each context became crucial for successful communication. The third origin of ESP was a focus on learners' needs. They tried to gear language learning to the variety of needs and motivation the learners had.

2.3. The Importance of Textbook Evaluation

Evaluation is beneficial for selection of textbooks, which is the most important decision to make in the process of teaching ESP. Sheldon (1988) relates the textbook evaluation to selection of materials in this way,

"The selection of a particular core volume signals an executive educational decision in which there is considerable professional, financial, and even political investment. This high profile means that the definition and application of systematic criteria for assessing course books are vital" (p.238).

Furthermore, textbook evaluation can be regarded as an academic judgment. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) define evaluation as "a matter of judging the fitness of something for particular purposes" (p.96).

To avert the risk of letting subjective elements affect on our evaluation, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) focus on the importance of being objective by proposing that “evaluation is basically a matching process: matching needs to available solutions. If this matching is to be done as objectively as possible, it is best to look at the needs and solutions separately” (p.97). As a result, they specify four major levels for the process of evaluation, i.e. 1. Defining criteria 2. Subjective analysis 3. Objective analysis 4. Matching. To fulfill this objectivity, this paper uses a checklist which has a 5-level scale.

Interestingly, Ellis (1997) and Cunningsworth (1995) believe that there are mainly three kinds of textbooks evaluation. The most popular one is ‘predictive’ or ‘pre-use’, which is useful to predict the actual success of a textbook before using. The second one is ‘in-use’ which is used for examining the performance of a textbook that is recently used. The last type of textbook evaluation is ‘retrospective’ or ‘post-use’; it is used for evaluation in any specific educational situations. This study deals with ‘in-use’ evaluation for examining the performance of ESP textbooks which are used currently.

2.4. Related Research

Nowadays, as ESP becomes an important issue in educational environment, working on ESP and evaluating ESP textbooks is the interesting field of most researchers. So, among different researches in this field, here we mainly focus on research which have been done recently.

Soleimani and ShafieKhah (2014) conducted a research to evaluate whether ESP books taught at Payame Noor University in Iran for B.A students of accounting are satisfying students in aspects of their objectives, needs, and wants. So, the researchers administered a questionnaire to 35 students of accounting to examine their ideas about this book. The result of this study revealed that this book can satisfy students in aspect of objectives and needs; on the other hand, the students believed that the book could not satisfy their wants. This study was really useful for material providers of Payame Noor University to revise their textbooks according to students’ wants too.

Additionally, R. A. Litz (2001) performed an evaluation on a textbook called ‘English Firsthand 2’, which was used at Sung Kyun Kwan University in Suwon, South Korea. The aim of this study was to examine the quality of this textbook. This study showed that the textbook is neither useless nor completely satisfying. Furthermore, NajafiSarem, Hamidi, and Mahmoudie (2013) evaluated ESP textbook of international tourism students. The researchers tried to find out the weaknesses and strength of this book. Also, Rahimpour and Hashemi (2011) accomplished a research on evaluating the English textbooks of high schools in Iran from teachers’ points of view. The findings of this study showed that teachers believed that these textbooks are not satisfying students’ needs.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Instruments

This study uses a 31-items-questionnaire, which was derived from a paper by Rahimpour and Hashemi (2011). The questionnaire was made valid and reliable by the researchers themselves. This questionnaire evaluates a textbook in five aspects i.e. vocabulary, reading, grammar, language functions, and pronunciation practice.

3.2. Participants

The participants of this research are 30 ESP teachers in different Iranian universities. All professors were experienced in teaching ESP courses.

3.3. Procedure

The main purpose of this study is to evaluate the ESP textbooks that are taught all over Iran. To reach this goal, the questionnaires were given to professors and asked them to answer the questions according to ESP textbook, which they have taught recently. The professors were given enough time to answer; as a result, they could have more concentration on questionnaire. Then the results were analyzed to examine the evaluation of textbooks.

4. RESULTS

After collecting the questionnaires, the percentage of each answer was calculated. The whole questionnaire was divided into four parts, (vocabulary, reading, grammar, language function, and pronunciation practice), and the total percentage of each section was calculated too. The results of each section are provided under each table as follow,

Section of Textbook		To great extent	To some extent	Not satisfactorily	Not at all
Vocabulary	1. Does the vocabulary load throughout the textbooks seem to be reasonable for the students of each level?	20%	60%	6.6%	13.4%
	2. Are the vocabulary items systematically graded from simple to complex items?	20%	6.6%	33.4%	40%
	3. Are the vocabulary items repeated in subsequent lessons for reinforcement?	6.6%	33.4%	40%	20%
	4. Are the vocabulary items presented in a variety of ways?	6.6%	26.7%	40%	26.7%
	5. Are the vocabulary items introduced in motivating and realistic contexts?	6.6%	33.4%	33.4%	26.6%
	6. Do the new items receive sufficient practice through different kinds of exercises?	6.6%	33.4%	53.4%	6.6%
	7. Do the vocabulary exercises promote internalization of the previously and newly introduced items?	0	13.4%	66.6%	20%
Total		9.48%	29.55%	39.07%	21.9%

This table shows that ESP teachers are not satisfied with vocabulary section of the textbooks. The highest percentage belongs to 'not satisfactorily', so the textbooks designers should work on this part more and more. About one fifth of the professors were greatly dissatisfied, they believed that this part of the ESP textbooks cannot fulfill students' needs. The percentage of being really satisfied with this part is drastically low; as a result, the designers of these textbooks are suggested to modify this part.

Section of Textbook		To great extent	To some extent	Not satisfactorily	Not at all
Reading	8. Are the texts interesting for the students?	13.4%	40%	26.6%	20%
	9. Are the texts authentic pieces of language?	6.6%	53.4%	26.6%	13.4%
	10. Do the texts cover a variety of topics and themes?	26.6%	26.6%	33.3%	13.4%
	11. Do the topics dealt with meet local and national standards?	20%	53.4%	0	26.6%
	12. Are the topics up-to-date?	13.4%	20%	33.3%	33.3%
	13. Do the texts serve as a window into learning about the target language culture?	0	13.4%	53.4%	33.3%
	14. Do the texts present information in a way that the students will understand?	13.4%	60%	20%	6.6%
	15. Is the content age-appropriate?	20%	53.4%	6.6%	20%

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	16. Are there enough exercises and activities accompanying the texts?	26.6%	33.3%	40%	0
Total		15.55%	39.28%	26.65%	18.52 %

This table manifests that professors are more satisfied with reading sections of ESP textbooks. The second scale, which is 'to some extent', demonstrated the highest percentage. However, the percentages of third and fourth column show that reading sections also have some weaknesses. More than one sixth of the ESP teachers consider greatly that reading section of these textbooks can meet students' needs. As a result, this part of ESP textbooks is better than previous part. However, it is better to revise this section as well.

Section of Textbook		To great extent	To some extent	Not satisfactorily	Not at all
Grammar	17. Is the number of grammatical points introduced in the textbooks appropriate?	13.4%	13.4%	26.6%	46.6%
	18. Are the grammatical points presented in an increasing level of difficulty?	6.6%	6.6%	46.6%	40%
	19. Are the new grammatical points presented in a meaningful context to facilitate understanding?	0	33.3%	40%	26.6%
	20. Are the explanations easy to understand?	6.6%	53.4%	20%	20%
	21. Are there enough examples accompanying the explanations?	20%	13.4%	53.4%	13.4%
	22. Do the grammatical points receive sufficient practice through exercises and activities?	0	40%	33.4%	26.6%
	23. Are the grammatical points repeated and reinforced in subsequent lessons?	0	26.6%	40%	33.4%
Total		6.6%	26.68%	37.15%	29.51 %

This table demonstrates that professors do not believe that the grammar part has best quality, as the percentage of 'to great extent' is the lowest one. On the other hand, they show their satisfaction to some extent. Furthermore, the percentage of the fourth column shows that this section has some drawbacks. As a whole, the material providers should modify this part to increase ESP teachers' satisfaction.

Section of Textbook		To great extent	To some extent	Not satisfactorily	Not at all
Language Functions	24. Is the number of language functions introduced in the textbooks appropriate?	13.4%	13.4%	53.4%	20%
	25. Are the language functions presented in meaningful contexts?	6.6%	13.4%	60%	20%
	26. Do the language functions introduced accompany practice of different kinds? (e.g. in pairs, in groups help)	0	26.6%	33.3%	40%
	27. Are the language functions repeated and reinforced in subsequent lessons?	0	13.4%	40%	46.6 %
	28. Do the language functions exemplify English in its authentic use?	0	6.6%	60%	33.4 %

Pronunciation practice	29. Are the pronunciation points presented in meaningful contexts?	0	20%	20%	60%
	30. Is there enough practice accompanying each pronunciation point introduced?	0	13.4%	20%	67.6 %
	31. Are the pronunciation points repeated and reinforced in subsequent lessons?	0	6.6%	26.7%	66.6 %
Total		2.4%	14.17%	39.17%	44.27 %

In this table, the percentage of first column, which is ‘to great extent’, is drastically low. As a result, it shows the fact that this section has low quality. So, material providers of ESP textbooks should revise the pronunciation and language function of textbooks. Also, the forth column demonstrates that professors are strongly dissatisfied with this section and they believe that ESP textbook do not pay to pronunciation and language functions at all. This study is very beneficial for textbook designers to provide appropriate ESP textbooks.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of this research reveal that the ESP textbooks which are taught recently in Iranian Universities do not meet ESP teachers’ expectations. As all parts of ESP textbooks have not good quality according to professors’ point of view, it is recommended that they need to be modified. This study is useful for textbooks providers and designers to update ESP textbook development. These textbooks need more practices on pronunciation, language functions, and grammar. The current research evaluate the ESP textbooks on the basis of ESP teachers’ point of view, so further studies can be done to evaluate ESP textbooks according to students’ expectations, needs, and wants.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

At first, the researcher wants to express her warm thanks to all the professors all around Iran who helped me to conduct this research and answer the questionnaire. Then, I really want to convey my appreciation to my dear brother for his hope-giving words and insightful helps.

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Appendix: Questionnaire

Section of Textbook		To great extent	To some extent	Not satisfactorily	Not at all
Vocabulary	1. Does the vocabulary load throughout the textbooks seem to be reasonable for the students of each level?				
	2. Are the vocabulary items systematically graded from simple to complex items?				
	3. Are the vocabulary items repeated in subsequent lessons for reinforcement?				
	4. Are the vocabulary items presented in a variety of ways?				
	5. Are the vocabulary items introduced in motivating and realistic contexts?				
	6. Do the new items receive sufficient practice through different kinds of exercises?				
	7. Do the vocabulary exercises promote internalization of the previously and newly introduced items?				
Reading	8. Are the texts interesting for the students?				
	9. Are the texts authentic pieces of language?				
	10. Do the texts cover a variety of topics and themes?				
	11. Do the topics dealt with meet local and national standards?				
	12. Are the topics up-to-date?				
	13. Do the texts serve as a window into learning about the target language culture?				
	14. Do the texts present information in a way that the students will understand?				
	15. Is the content age-appropriate?				
	16. Are there enough exercises and activities accompanying the texts?				
Section of Textbook		To great extent	To some extent	Satisfactorily Not	Not at all
Grammar	17. Is the number of grammatical points introduced in the textbooks appropriate?				
	18. Are the grammatical points presented in an increasing level of difficulty?				
	19. Are the new grammatical points presented in a meaningful context to facilitate understanding?				
	20. Are the explanations easy to understand?				
	21. Are there enough examples accompanying the				

	explanations?				
	22. Do the grammatical points receive sufficient practice through exercises and activities?				
	23. Are the grammatical points repeated and reinforced in subsequent lessons?				
Language Functions	24. Is the number of language functions introduced in the textbooks appropriate?				
	25. Are the language functions presented in meaningful contexts?				
	26. Do the language functions introduced accompany practice of different kinds? (e.g. in pairs, in groups help)				
	27. Are the language functions repeated and reinforced in subsequent lessons?				
	28. Do the language functions exemplify English in its authentic use?				
Pronunciation practice	29. Are the pronunciation points presented in meaningful contexts?				
	30. Is there enough practice accompanying each pronunciation point introduced?				
	31. Are the pronunciation points repeated and reinforced in subsequent lessons?				