# Evaluating 7th Grade English Textbook Based on Ellis Evaluation Frameworka

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## Abstract

This study tries to investigate the pedagogical value of 7th grade English textbook taught in Iranian secondary schools based on Ellis (1997) evaluation framework. To reach this aim a micro-evaluation was done to examine all the involved tasks in 8 lessons of this textbook to examine whether the designed and presented tasks are compatible with their intentional purposes or not.

The analysis indicated many differences between what the tasks are focusing and what they should focus primarily on. Most of the tasks lack providing adequate opportunity of product and process outcome. The analysis also indicates some problems in integrating the tasks together.

The findings of this study provide good insight for language learners, teachers and material developers.

**Key words:** Textbook evaluation; Text analysis; Task type; Language learning

## INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly textbooks play an undeniable role in navigating the language learning process in one way, and providing a route map for both learners and teachers in another way. Accordingly, textbook evaluation and analysis seem vital in order to highlight possible strengths and weaknesses of these textbooks. Based on these findings further improvement and revision for getting the best out of them can pave the way for better understanding of the concept of teaching and learning.

For any teachers providing necessary materials to present and lead their jobs is considered so time-consuming. Teachers try to prepare their desired activities carefully and design their intended syllabus based on their learners' needs and then set priority for the designed materials to meet the exact needs of learners. Thus teachers mostly rely on the material available in their hands for these materials are well prepared due to the organization and presentation of the activities. Also prioritizing the tasks and activities has been done beforehand. So textbooks are considered to be used as a powerful and widespread tool by teachers and instructors.

As another factor affecting much use of published course books is the growing needs of immediate results by learners and teachers. In recent years teachers are expected to achieve the determined learning goals as fast as possible and the urgent needs of acquiring the second language for some special occasions such as immigration, university apply and business success, made this a necessity for teachers to implement the market course books not to waste time for designing materials even if they may are reluctant in using them (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2013).

This over relying on pre-prepared course books increases the evaluation necessity to make sure about meeting all desired and set objectives of any courses. The risk of over relying on the materials as Graves (2000) suggests may lead to lack of the appropriate relation between contents and students, putting aside some important items, outdated activities, lack of enough task-type variety and using unauthentic language.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the body of literature many evaluation checklists and frameworks are proposed, but many of them deal only

with evaluating textbooks before running a project or program to find out the materials' suitability for specific purposes. Little attempt has been done to investigate the textbooks evaluation after being used in proper language program to see whether the material selected works or not, and most of previous studies are done to evaluate project or program evaluation (Alderson, 1992; Lynch, 1996).

This study tries to do an evaluation based on the evaluation framework proposed by Ellis (1997). According to him, an evaluation program can be retrospective or predictive which is elaborated in more details in the next section. Retrospective evaluation can be divided into impressionistic or empirical study done by the researcher. Both these types of evaluation can be beneficiary for teachers and curriculum developer whether to use the textbook again in another program or not.

Teachers and material developers can collect information impressionistically or empirically. It is clear that impressionistic data collection is more tangible for teachers as they can collect information during the course by devising short questionnaires at the end of the course. On the other hand, more systematic ways and empirical data collection are more time-consuming for teachers.

Empirical evaluation can be more manageable through micro-evaluation (Ellis, 1997).

## 2. WHY WE NEED TO EVALUATE THE TEXTBOOKS?

The primary intention of any evaluation process is believed to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of course books in the process of textbook selection for any educational program. These highlighted the pros and cons would be so rewarding in order to bold the strengths and fade the weaknesses in progressive revisions. As what Cunningsworth (1995) believed the process of textbook evaluation should consist of a careful material selection and then probing whether the selected material reflects the actual learners' needs and also objectives of the specific program. Moreover, textbook evaluation can prevent any subjective judgment by the teachers and helps them to obtain a systematic and purposeful understanding of the nature of the textbooks (Ellis, 1997). Course book evaluation can help teachers to recognize the content presented in the books and then if necessary revise and adapt the materials based on the actual learner's needs and requirements.

Also textbook evaluation can lead to a sound judgment whether the presented materials and their priority in the syllabus fit the intended teaching methodology or not (Littlejohn, 1998). The process and results of the evaluation would brighten many aspects of teaching methodology such as the autonomy provoking aspects of the materials and the main role of teacher and learners in the process of language learning.

## 3. TYPES OF ANALYSIS

It worth mentioning that there is a distinction between textbook analysis and evaluation in the literature. Not only the analysis of textbook is essential to meet the learners' needs, but also the analysis of the teaching context seems quite necessary. As McGrath (2002) stated textbook analysis leads to an objective description while evaluation leads to a subjective judgment. Textbook analysis deals with the specific elements or determined criteria while, on the other hand, evaluation investigates the relation between the teaching context and the nature of the materials.

In the literature three main types of textbook evaluation have been proposed. These three categories include predictive evaluation (Ellis, 1997; McGrath, 2002; Tomlinson, 2003), in-use evaluation (McGrath, 2002; Tomlinson, 2003) and post-use evaluation (McGrath, 2002; Tomlinson, 2003). Ellis (1997) also proposed another type of evaluation called "Retrospective" evaluation that can be considered as in-use or post-use evaluation. According to Ellis (1997) "Predictive" evaluation refers to detect materials best suited the learners' needs and objectives of the language program before running the course. On the other hand, "Retrospective" evaluation is done after running the course to evaluate the overall aspects of used materials in order to investigate which activities served its purpose completely and which activities didn't work.

Predictive evaluation or as McGrath (2002) and Tomlinson (2003) called "Pre-use" evaluation is helpful for evaluating the potential value of the materials. In-use evaluation as the name suggests is used to observe the materials while using and measuring their value in use. Also post-use evaluation (McGrath, 2002; Tomlinson, 2003) tries to measure the actual impact of materials on the learners. So it provides the final measurement in order to make decision about material revision or adaptation or replacement in the future.

## 4. ELLIS (1997) EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

According to Ellis (1997) three types of textbook evaluation are proposed, "predictive" or "pre-use" evaluation, "in-use" evaluation and "retrospective" evaluation. Pre-use evaluation is useful for future prediction about the potential pedagogical value of the materials and related decision about textbook selection for specific program. In-use evaluation as the name suggests is used while the material in use inside the specific course to see whether the set objectives of the course are met or not and how much of the material is successful in fulfilling those objectives. The further evaluation, retrospective, is done when the material is used in the program to investigate the overall success

of the material to achieve the course objectives. Also retrospective evaluation can be helpful to understand which activity works and which doesn't, so it can help to improve and modify the materials for future use.

This prominent model of evaluation proposed by Ellis (1997) is called micro-evaluation. As what Ellis (1997) defined, micro-evaluation is an empirical evaluation of the specific tasks that can help teachers and researchers to decide which task should be considered and selected for evaluation. According to Ellis (1997) deciding on what to evaluate could be whether student-based, response-based done by the teacher, learning based or a combination of them.

The following evaluation planning scheme is proposed by Ellis (1997, p.39):

| Question | Choices |
| --- | --- |
| 1 Purpose (Why?) | a. The task is evaluated to determine whether it has met its objectives (i.e. an objectives model evaluation). |
| | b. The task is evaluated with a view to discovering how it can be improved (i.e.a development model evaluation). |
| 2.Audience (Who for?) | a.The teacher conducts the evaluation for him/herself. |
| | b.The teacher conducts the evaluation with a view to sharing the results with other teachers. |
| 3 Evaluator (Who?) | a. The teacher teaching the task. |
| | b. An outsider (e.g. another teacher). |
| 4 Content (What?) | a.Student-based evaluation (i.e.students' attitudes towards and opinions about the task are investigated). |
| | b.Response-based evaluation (i.e. the outcomes—pro-ducts and processes—of the task are investigated). |
| | c. Learning-based evaluation(i.e.the extent to which any learning or skill/strategy development has occurred) is investigated. |
| 5 Method (How?) | a. Using documentary information (e.g. a written product of the task). |
| | b.Using tests (e.g.a vocabulary test). |
| | c.Using observation (i.e.observing/recording the students while they perform the task). |
| | d.Self-report (e.g.a questionnaire to elicit the stuedents'attitudes). |
| 6 Timing (When?) | a.Before the task is taught (i.e. to collect baseline information). |
| | b. During the task (formative). |
| | c.After the task has been completed (summative):<br> i) immediately after<br> ii) after a period of time. |

## 5. EXAMPLES OF TEXTBOOK EVALUATION IN LITERATURE

As one great example of textbook evaluation, Azizifar, Koosha and Lotfi (2009) analyzed the EFL Iranian high school textbook published locally since 1970. Their study compared the mentioned textbook with *Graded English* series published by Ministry of Education in 1984 and *Right Path to English* by Birjandi, Nowrozi, and Mahmodi in 2002 according to the content, pronunciation points and grammar. For conducting this study, the researchers provided the modified version of Tucker's (1975) evaluation model. The results showed that the new published textbooks didn't cover the previous shortcomings and provide inadequate amount of activities provoking authentic communication between individuals and mostly rely on linguistic forms practices and drills.

In another related study Alamri (2008) in Saudi Arabia conducted a study evaluating the 6th grade English textbook published by Ministry of Education in 2004. To do so a questionnaire was administered among 93 English teachers and 11 supervisors. The questionnaire consisted 12 categories including general appearance, topic appropriateness, skills development, learning components and teaching methods. The findings suggested that there is an overall satisfaction among teachers in some categories such as general appearance, language components, objectives and illustrations. The findings also showed that the textbook is not flexible enough to serve different teaching methods and is not considered fully student-centered.

Moreover, Jahangard (2007) in a comprehensive study examined four levels of Iranian EFL high school textbooks. He didn't follow any specific evaluation framework or model but used a mix of different evaluative checklists referring to 13 set criteria. His results suggested better organization of the level four textbooks in comparison with other three levels.

Based on Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of learning objectives, another study done by Riazi and Mosallanejad (2010) evaluated Iranian high school and pre-university textbooks published by Ministry of Education. They reported that according to Bloom's (1956) taxonomy, pre-

university textbook includes more higher-order learning objectives in comparison with three other levels of high school textbooks using lower-level learning objectives.

## 6. METHOD

This study aims to investigate the pedagogical value of 7th grade English textbook taught in Iranian secondary school published by Ministry of Education in 2014. The main evaluation framework applied in this study is Ellis' (1997) evaluation framework. According to Ellis (1997), textbook evaluation can be two folded: One running an empirical investigation and the other a qualitative analysis containing descriptive explanation of the tasks done by the researcher.

This study applies a qualitative approach toward analyzing and describing the tasks presented in the 7th grade English textbook. To do so, an evaluation plan based on Ellis (1997) was prepared which contains seven steps as follows:

a) Choosing a task to evaluate
b) Describing the task
c) Planning the evaluation
d) Collecting the information for evaluation
e) Analyzing the information
f) Reaching conclusion and making recommendation
h) Writing the report

### 6.1 Participants

This study is carried by the researcher herself by analyzing task-by-task of 7th grade English textbook. Then the qualitative analysis and description of the tasks were provided by the researcher.

### 6.2 Material

The main source under study is the 7th grade English textbook taught in Iranian secondary school published by Ministry of Education in 2014. This textbook contains a book which is taught by the teacher in the classroom and an accompanying workbook designed for further practice of students at home. Also this textbook is accompanied by teacher's book, audio CD for aural practices and teachers' flashcards related to each lesson individually. Moreover, in order to develop the teachers' methodology and getting the best use of the textbook, teachers are provided by regular in-service training courses.

The textbook includes 8 lessons and all lessons follow the same pattern. The lessons are covered in 4 pages and only one unit contains 6 pages. All lessons start with a conversation accompanying a related picture to make the context more meaningful. This section follows some practices related to the linguistic forms of the presented conversation. Then sounds and letters exercises, then listening and reading integrated exercises are followed. The last set of exercises in any lesson include speaking and writing practices and an overall role paly section.

To describe the tasks presented in this textbook, it should be considered that the book contains the following task types:

Listening and reading a sampled conversation as an starting task of all units; extracting a mechanical set of examples from the conversation and peer practicing the examples; presenting some drills illustrating the specific sounds and letters compatible with the book syllable; providing the students with the pronunciation practices related to the presented sounds and letters; listening to a contextualized conversation and doing a listening exercise; preparing students with speaking exercises to apply what they have acquired in the previous sections and writing down the result of their interactive pair work speaking activity; and finally providing students with an incomplete conversation similar to the one presented at the beginning of the lessen to be completed with another student.

## 7. DESCRIBING THE TASKS

The first task of each lesson is listening to a conversation and reading at the same time. Also the conversation comes with a related picture to show the context of the conversation better. Students are supposed to listen and read the conversation at the same time and focus deeply on the meaning. Next task provides students with a list of some structural questions and answers and students first listen to these examples then they have to practice them with a partner. These examples are totally decontextualized and are more like mere mechanical drills and repetitions. Then next task asks students to repeat the previous task with the new examples about new syntactic structures. In sounds and letters to task, students should listen to a conversation focusing mainly on specific sounds and spelling techniques designed in the syllabus. After listening and reading the model they should practice the same extract with a partner. In "Listening and Reading" section, students will listen to a conversation related to the theme of the unit then they should answer the listening questions provided according to the listening audio. There is only one question type throughout the book in this section and that is checking the correct answer from the box. In next section, "Speaking and Writing", always a group work is prepared for the students. This task provides students with a table or chart and they should fill the missing information through interaction by other classmates. Some parts of the table are presented as examples and students should do this information-gap task in pair or group work. The final task is an uncompleted conversation about the lesson theme that should be covered in pair work cooperation. In this task students are required to take different roles in the conversation and they can complete the missing parts with their own examples and information from their personal

experiences. After two units a review section covering in two pages is designed to sum up all main information presented during two lessons including structures, vocabulary, expressions and sounds and letters.

## 8. DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

Every single task of the textbook is analyzed based on the Ellis' (1997) evaluation model. Then a descriptive report of the general evaluation of the textbook is provided that elaborates the pedagogical value of the tasks based on specific criteria. As with the qualitative nature of this study statistical procedure is not applied but a short summary of task types and task characteristics is provided.

## 9. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The evaluating process of this study is based on what Ellis (1997) called response-based. It means that the teachers are required to examine the actual outcome of the tasks—both product outcome and process outcome—to understand whether the task achieves what it is intended to achieve or not. So in this section the findings will be reported regarding two types of outcomes in comparison with their intended outcome. The first section of the lessons, "Conversation", is designed to introduce the theme of the lesson and familiarizing students with the general topic of the unit. This section especially at the beginning of the lesson is suitable for presenting the main structures that are going to be taught in detail in further parts. Also as students are unaware of detailed grammatical points, they only focus on the meaning and try to develop their overall understanding of the conversation.

The conversation section of this textbook presents the main theme adequately and also integrate the main structures of the lesson in the body of the sample conversation, but the presented task in the textbook only includes listening to and reading the conversation and no practice or exercise related to it is not designed. Also the expressions, grammatical structure and patterns of the conversation are not analyzed and explained in detail in separate sections. So it may be concluded that students are pushed to memorize the conversation and repeat it at the end of the lesson which promotes rote learning.

Following the conversation section in each lesson two practices are designed primarily focusing on the structural patterns of the conversation. In this section task is forcing students to repeat some fixed phrases and expressions with a partner. Basically the examples provided in this section are completely decontextualized and the learners are not supposed to provide any type of outcomes. Students are only exposed to a list of some structural examples in the form of question and answer to work with a partner. Again here they are not encouraged

to produce so repetition and memorization would be the students' first choice. By finishing these two sections two pages of the lesson is covered that is half of the lesson and students are encouraged to produce neither product nor process outcomes. Only in these two sections students are presented by the main structures and expressions based on the set objectives of the textbook in the syllabus. As for the outcomes, the lack of sufficient opportunity for students to use their background knowledge and personal experience may seem questionable.

In next section, "Sounds and Letters", again an excerpt of a conversation is illustrated mainly focusing on the pronunciation of specific sounds and letters predicted in the syllabus. In this section again students are not encouraged to produce any types of outcomes and the level of their productivity in this task seems inadequate. The main objective of this section is to prepare students to distinguish the differences between individual sounds and letters and improve their self-awareness in using them, but the tasks designed in this section provide some conversational skills such as spelling appropriate names and phone numbers and try to highlight the role of specific sounds and letters in distinguishing specific names and numbers.

In "Listening and Reading" section, the name suggests a kind of integration between these two skills. That is, students are provided with some listening and reading materials and then they have to extract the meaning out of these two types of materials in order to complete the task. But in this section no reading material is provided for the learners and only they have to listen to an audio and check the correct answer from a provided box. May be the intention of the authors about integrating the listening into reading is merely provoking the senses of reading the provided listening exercises that is totally different from the true definition of reading material. Surprisingly there is no warming section before this task to help the learners get more familiar with the listening content and students are presented with the audio material without prior preparation.

In another integrated section two skills, speaking and writing, are integrated together. In this section students are provided with an information-gap task (Prabhu, 1987). Students should interact with each other to complete the missing information in the presented table. This stage of the lesson provides good opportunity for students to interact with each other and use their acquired knowledge to complete the task. In order to complete this task students are forced to interact with each other in their own language and also it is a good place to use their own personal information and link the acquired structures with their real life. On the other hand, the section suggests integration between speaking and writing skills but the task designed doesn't provide any writing strategies or techniques for the students. In this regard the section lacks

equipping students in developing their writing techniques and their outcome is limited only to the aural form.

The final stage of each lesson deals with a role play which is a good opportunity for students to develop their speaking skill. In this section an uncompleted conversation as a prompt is provided for the learners and students are supposed to complete the conversation in pair work with a classmate. This section is useful for any students to apply what they have acquired and complete the conversation in freer way with their personal background. But due to the lack of explicit exposure to the grammatical structures, students may have some problems in using the appropriate language in their outcome. As mentioned before this textbook doesn't provide any separate section for explaining grammatical structures. This lack may increase the risk of memorization and rote learning by the students.

## CONCLUSION

This study tries to investigate the pedagogical value of 7th grade English textbook taught in Iranian secondary schools based on Ellis (1997) evaluation framework. To reach this aim a micro-evaluation was done to examine all the involved tasks in 8 lessons of this textbook to examine whether the designed and presented tasks are compatible with their intentional purposes or not.

The analysis indicated many differences between what the tasks are focusing and what they should focus primarily on. Most of the tasks especially at the beginning of the each lesson lack providing adequate opportunity of product and process outcome. Only in two last sections students have the opportunity to use their actual knowledge. The analysis also indicates some problems in integrating the tasks together. As mentioned earlier in the last section the textbook is not so successful in integrating different skills together to get the best out of them. May be designing more comprehensive and challenging tasks can compensate this problem.

Regarding the methodology, on the other hand, this textbook is not so helpful in incorporating communicative language teaching because the designed tasks are not encouraging students to use their language in order to have meaningful communication with others. Many of the tasks are stick to memorization and mechanical drills to push students to memorize the fixed structural patterns.

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