

Evaluation of EFL Materials Taught at Iranian High Schools

GholamReza Akbari Monjarmuie¹

Abstract

EFL materials (textbooks) play a very important role in many language classrooms but in recent years there has been a lot of debate throughout the ELT profession on the actual role of materials in teaching English as a Second/Foreign Language (TESL/TEFL). Arguments have encompassed both the potential and the limitations of materials for 'guiding' students through the learning process and curriculum as well as the needs and preferences of teachers who are using textbooks. Other issues that have arisen in recent years include textbook design and practicality, methodological validity, the role of textbooks in innovation, the authenticity of materials in terms of their representation of language, and the appropriateness of gender representation, subject matter, and cultural components. Whether or not one accepts the value of textbooks, it must surely be with the qualification that they are of an acceptable standard or level of quality and appropriate to the learners for whom they are being used. It is absolutely essential, therefore, that we establish and apply a wide variety of relevant and contextually appropriate criteria for the evaluation of the textbooks that we use in our language classrooms. This article evaluates four EFL textbooks which have been prescribed for use in the Iranian high schools by the Ministry of Education. The merits and demerits of the textbooks are discussed in detail with reference to 10 common criteria extracted from different materials evaluation checklists. The paper then gives some suggestions as to how to alleviate some of the shortcomings encountered in the textbooks. The purpose of this paper is to determine the overall pedagogical value and suitability of the books towards this specific language program.

Key Words: EFL textbooks, materials evaluation, ELT profession, Iranian high schools.

¹ - Islamic Azad University of Khorasgan

Introduction

I have been teaching English for more than 14 years throughout which time my mind has almost always been occupied with the question, "Why does the TEFL curriculum in Iranian high schools meet neither the expectations of the learners/teachers nor those of the specialists who were involved in the developing of the curriculum?" This apparent lack of success can be attributed to different factors involved in the various stages of curriculum planning. English language instruction has many important components but the essential constituents to many ESL/EFL classrooms and programs are the textbooks and instruction materials that are often used by language instructors. As Hutchinson and Torres (1994) suggest:

"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).

Other theorists such as Sheldon (1988) agree with this observation and suggest that textbooks not only "represent the visible heart of any ELT program" (p.237) but also offer considerable advantages - for both the student and the teacher - when they are being used in the ESL/EFL classroom. Haycroft (1998), for example, suggests that one of the primary advantages of using textbooks is that they are psychologically essential for students since their progress and achievement can be measured concretely when we use them. Second, as Sheldon (1988) has pointed out, students often harbor expectations about using a textbook in their particular language classroom and program and believe that published materials have more credibility than teacher-generated or "in-house" materials. Third, as O'Neill (1982) has indicated, textbooks are generally sensitive to students' needs, even if they are not designed specifically for them, they are efficient in terms of time and money, and they can and should allow for adaptation and improvisation. Fourth, textbooks yield a respectable return on investment, are relatively inexpensive and involve low lesson preparation time, whereas teacher-generated materials can be time, cost and quality defective. In this way, textbooks can reduce potential occupational overload and allow teachers the opportunity to spend their time undertaking more worthwhile pursuits (O'Neill, 1982; Sheldon, 1988). A fifth advantage identified by Cunningsworth (1995) is the potential which textbooks have for serving

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several additional roles in the ELT curriculum. He argues that they are an effective resource for self-directed learning, an effective resource for presentation material, a source of ideas and activities, a reference source for students, a syllabus where they reflect pre-determined learning objectives, and support for less experienced teachers who have yet to gain in confidence. Although some theorists have alluded to the inherent danger of the inexperienced teacher who may use a textbook as a pedagogic crutch, such an over-reliance may actually have the opposite effect of saving students from a teacher's deficiencies (O'Neill, 1982; Williams, 1983; Kitao & Kitao, 1997). Finally, Hutchinson and Torres (1994) have pointed out that textbooks may play a pivotal role in innovation. They suggest that textbooks can support teachers through potentially disturbing and threatening change processes, demonstrate new and/or untried methodologies, introduce change gradually, and create scaffolding upon which teachers can build a more creative methodology of their own.

Therefore, I decided to examine the materials, among others, which are in fact the realization of the process of syllabus design and exclude other factors because it is beyond the scope of the current paper to include them.

Literature Review

Sheldon (1988) has offered several reasons for textbook evaluation. He suggests that the selection of an ELT textbook often signals an important administrative and educational decision in which there is considerable professional, financial, or even political investment. A thorough evaluation, therefore, would enable the managerial and teaching staff of a specific institution or organization to discriminate between all of the available textbooks on the market. Moreover, it would provide for a sense of familiarity with a book's content thus assisting educators in identifying the particular strengths and weaknesses in textbooks already in use. This would go a long way in ultimately assisting teachers with making optimum use of a book's strong points and recognizing the shortcomings of certain exercises, tasks, and entire texts.

If one accepts the value of textbooks in ELT then it must surely be with the qualification that they are of an acceptable level of quality, usefulness, and appropriateness for the context and people with whom they are being used. While the literature on the subject of textbook evaluation is not particularly extensive, various writers have suggested

ways of helping teachers to be more sophisticated in their evaluative approach, by presenting evaluation 'checklists' based on supposedly generalizable criteria that can be used by both teachers and students in many different situations. Although Sheldon (1988) suggests that no general list of criteria can ever really be applied to all teaching and learning contexts without considerable modification, most of these standardized evaluation checklists contain similar components that can be used as helpful starting points for ELT practitioners in a wide variety of situations. Pre-eminent theorists in the field of ELT textbook design and analysis such as Williams (1983), Sheldon (1988), Brown (1995), Cunningsworth (1995) and Harmer (1996) all agree, for instance, that evaluation checklists should have some criteria pertaining to the physical characteristics of textbooks such as layout, organizational, and logistical characteristics. Other important criteria that should be incorporated are those that assess a textbook's methodology, aims, and approaches and the degree to which a set of materials is not only teachable but also fits the needs of the individual teacher's approach as well as the organization's overall curriculum. Moreover, criteria should analyze the specific language, functions, grammar, and skills content that are covered by a particular textbook as well as the relevance of linguistic items to the prevailing socio-cultural environment. Finally, textbook evaluations should include criteria that pertain to representation of cultural and gender components in addition to the extent to which the linguistic items, subjects, content, and topics match up to students' personalities, backgrounds, needs, and interests as well as those of the teacher and/or institution. Cunningsworth (1995) and Ellis (1997) have suggested that there are three different types of material evaluation. They argue that the most common form is probably the 'predictive' or 'pre-use' evaluation that is designed to examine the future or potential performance of a textbook. The other types of textbook evaluation are the 'in-use' evaluation designed to examine material that is currently being used and the 'retrospective' or 'post-use' (reflective) evaluation of a textbook that has been used in any respective institution. This particular paper can be classified as the 'retrospective' type of evaluation in which an attempt is made to check the characteristics of the textbooks under study against a collection of criteria proposed by various researchers.

Methodology

Here I would like to document the materials that were used and the procedures that were followed to support the intent of this study.

Materials

I browsed about 5 checklists proposed by different authors and selected 10 features which were common to most of these checklists to do the evaluation. The following 5 EFL/ESL textbook evaluation schemes were consulted to evaluate the 4 EFL textbooks under study.

The List of 5 Textbook-evaluation Checklists:

- Chastain, K. (1971). The development of modern language skills: Theory to practice (pp. 376-384). Philadelphia. The Center for Curriculum Development, Inc.
- Rivers, W. (1981). Teaching foreign-language skills (pp. 475-483). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Williams, D. (1983). Developing criteria for textbook evaluation. *ELT Journal*, 37(2), 251-255.
- Sheldon, L. (1988). Evaluating ELT textbooks and materials. *ELT Journal*, 42 (4), 237-246.
- Skierso, A. (1991). Textbook selection and evaluation. In M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (pp. 432-453). Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.

After a close examination of the checklists, these criteria were found to be almost common to all the schemes proposed by the above mentioned materials:

1. Are objectives explicitly laid out in an introduction, and implemented in the material?
2. Good vocabulary explanation and practice
3. Approaches educationally and socially acceptable to target community
4. Interesting topics and tasks
5. Clear instructions
6. Content clearly organized and graded
7. Plenty of authentic language
8. Good grammar presentation and practice
9. Fluency practice in all four skills
10. Encourage learners to develop own learning strategies and to become independent in their learning

The Textbooks under Study

- Birjandy et al., (2009). English Book 1.Tehran: Textbook Publishing Company of Iran.
- Birjandy et al., (2009). English Book 2.Tehran: Textbook Publishing Company of Iran.
- Birjandy et al., (2009). English Book 3.Tehran: Textbook Publishing Company of Iran.
- Birjandy et al., (2009). Learning to Read English for Pre-University Students. Tehran: Textbook Publishing Company of Iran.

Procedure

I scrutinized the four EFL textbooks against each one of the features in the checklist one by one. The results of the scrutiny of all the four textbooks on every feature are combined under common headings to save space and time.

Results

Are objectives explicitly laid out in an introduction, and implemented in the material?

At the beginning of book 1 there is an introduction that attempts to clarify the intended teaching objectives. The ultimate goals of the curriculum are not clarified. The authors of the book do not clearly specify the final objectives of the curriculum in vivid words so that the learners know what they are expected to have learnt at the end of the program (long term objectives). Likewise, the short term objectives remain unspecified in the introduction. We do not know what the learners should be able to do to demonstrate that they have achieved the intended objectives at the end of each course e.g. at the end of each year in the educational program.

‘Introduction section’ is totally omitted from books 2 and 3, probably on the grounds that it is included in book 1. The authors might have assumed that if a teacher teaches book 2 or 3, he/she must definitely be aware of the contents of book 1. There is an introduction section in book 4 which is totally different from that of book 1 in terms of the objectives that it specifies as the goals of the lessons and the course.

Part (A) of the Introduction is concerned with why the section “New Words” is included in the book and how it must be instructed by the teachers. It reads, “The purpose of this section is to familiarize learners with the new vocabulary in the Reading Comprehension section.” However, this is not implemented in the books because the number of the

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new words introduced in the New Words Section is considerably less than the number of the new words in the Reading Comprehension section. The question that rises is how and where those missing words are to be taught? For example, in book (B) 1, lesson (L) 1, 22 new words are introduced in the Reading Comprehension but only 10 of them are included in the New Words Section. Likewise, in B2-L3, almost 24 new words are introduced, whereas, only 12 of them are included in the New Words Section. B3-L4 contains almost 43 new words in the Reading Comprehension and only 11 of them are clarified and practiced in the New Words Section. The New Words Section is totally excluded from B4 and nowhere in the introduction have the authors explained why.

In sum, the final goals of the EFL program as well as the behavioral objectives which are aimed at by the curriculum designers are obscure and remain to be delineated. This may have various ramifications across the different phases of the curriculum i.e. classroom implementation and evaluation. Teachers actually dissent as to what teaching methodology to be employed, which skills and psycholinguistic abilities to emphasize and what to include in their exams. Now, the nationwide exams which are administered by the officials for third graders is playing the role of an agreement document among teachers which, in turn, has its own negative effects known as the 'washback effect'.

Consequently, teachers teach in a way that their students can pass the tests which are administered at the final year of high school education and University Entrance Examination rather than executing the actual curriculum worked out by the academic specialists. In fact, there is now a hidden curriculum among learners and teachers which determines what they must do in the classroom.

Good vocabulary explanation and practice

Two types of problem are observed in the explanation and use of the new vocabulary in the series. One is concerned with the lack of correspondence between the different senses of the word introduced in the New Words Sections and the senses which are used in the Reading Comprehensions. The other type is attributable to the poor contextualization of the new vocabulary in the New Words Sections.

At some points the New Words Section in B1 ignores the fact that a word might have several different senses. In some cases, the meaning for which a particular word is introduced in the New Words Section is not consistent with the meaning of the same word used in the Reading

Comprehension, and this probably bewilders the students. For example, in B1-L1, the word “pay” is used as a part of the expression “pay attention to” in the Reading Comprehension whereas introduced as “pay for sth” in the New Words Section which are incompatible in meaning. In the same lesson the expression “grow up” is used in the Reading Comprehension meaning “to become older” and in New Words it is used as “to raise farm produce”. Likewise, in B1- L3, the word “find” is used with two different senses in the Reading Comprehension and the New Words Section: it is introduced in the New Words Section as follows: “Maryam can’t find her notebook.” whereas in the Reading Comprehension it is used in the following sentence: “She returned an hour later and found Newton standing by the fire.” ‘Find’ which is used in the New Words Section means ‘to get back after a search’ but in the Reading Comprehension it means ‘to come across’. As you see the meanings in the Reading Comprehension and the New Words Section do not converge. The word “land” in L2 is used in the Reading Comprehension to mean “a country” and it is introduced in the New Words Section to mean “a farm or field”. Fortunately, this problem is limited to only B1 and L1-L3 and no such cases can be found in the remainder of the book and nor in other books of the series. In addition, in B4, explanation of the new vocabulary as an independent section is omitted from the book and is integrated into the Reading Comprehension section. Some of the new vocabularies which the authors might have assumed to be more significant in carrying the semantic load of the related sentence have been included in the margins of the Reading Comprehension passages with some synonyms or definitions. No specific place is designed to practice the new words in B4. It might be more useful to include some more vocabulary exercises in each lesson so that learners can integrate the new words into their mental lexicon.

The second type of problem is probably ‘poor contextualization of the new vocabulary’ in the New Words Sections of the series from B1 to B3. In B1, L2, three new words are introduced in a single sentence: “The cows are eating grass in the field.”

Likewise, in B2, L1, “There are a banana and a slice of cake on the plate.” or in the same lesson one encounters: “When she does the puzzle right, the man gives her a reward.” This problem recurs in B2, L3. Fortunately; these cases are restricted to the aforementioned cases and do not come up in other lessons. There are no such cases of poor contextualization in B3, and interestingly, a considerable improvement is

observed in this book compared to B1 and B2 in this regard. However, the imbalance between the number of the new words included in the New Words Sections and those used in the Reading Comprehensions and other sections of the book becomes more substantial, e.g. in B3, L1, there are 56 new words included, but only 5 of them are explained in the New Words Section. These imbalances persist throughout the book.

Approaches educationally and socially acceptable to target community

According to White (1988, p.92) “A complete syllabus specification will include all five aspects: structure, function, situation, topic, skills. The difference between syllabuses will lie in the priority given to each of these aspects.” It seems that the authors of the books have sequenced the linguistic content of the materials according to the structural complexity, starting from less complex structures to more demanding ones. Even the reading passages are selected or, probably manipulated, so that they reinforce a particular grammatical point included in the grammar section of the books. However, the question of how and in what order the structures must be arranged in a structural syllabus is a controversial issue. Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 88) pose the same question as writing, “what assumptions underlie the ordering in the structural syllabus? Does the verb ‘to be’ come first, because it is easier to learn? If so, in what sense? Structurally, it is the most complex verb in English. Does it come first because it is needed for later structures, for example the present continuous? Is it considered to be conceptually simpler? Alternatively, is the syllabus ordered according to usefulness? The verb ‘to be’ is more useful than, say, the present simple tense of the verb ‘to go’. If we are operating the criterion of usefulness, what context are we referring to? Do we mean usefulness in the outside world or usefulness in the classroom?”

Nevertheless, my personal experience in teaching these books shows that students learn ‘present perfect tense’ with less effort than ‘the passive structure’. Moreover, they learn the ‘passive structure’ better if they are introduced the ‘present perfect’ earlier. Thus, I suggest that the ‘present perfect’ which is introduced in B1, L9, be transposed to L8 and the ‘passive’ be moved to L9.

Although the reading skill, among others, looks to be of first priority in the design of the books, a big share of the lessons is devoted to grammar drills and the various forms of grammatical exercises throughout B1, B2 and B3. Fortunately, this problem is rectified in B4 of

the series. About 50% of the content of each lesson in B1 to B3 is occupied with grammatical drills. This allocation seems to be unjustified as far as the findings of research on SL reading is concerned. Lewis (1993, p. 17) says that “vocabulary (or lexis) carries more of the meaning of a text than does the grammar”.

Interesting topics and tasks (*Negotiation of Meaning/Task-Based and Cooperative Learning Activities*)

Until the late 1950's, the Grammar-Translation and Audio-Lingual Methods characterized language teaching methodology throughout the world. These approaches advocated decontextualized and rule-focused instruction and practice. Later studies demonstrated, however, that a focus on form and accuracy did not necessarily ensure communicative competence outside the language classroom. This notion of communicative competence was refined along with the Communicative Approach in the 1960's, and this term was eventually accepted to encompass all components of language; from grammar and discourse to social context and strategic ability (Hymes 1972; Widdowson, 1978; Canale and Swain, 1980; Richards and Rogers, 1996). Proponents of the 'Communicative Approach' to language teaching stressed the importance of language use versus knowledge about language (Harmer, 1996). Observation of social interactions attested to the importance of communicative competence and showed that authentic language communication also involved the negotiation of meaning between interlocutors. Negotiation of meaning occurs when some form of information exchange transpires for a real purpose thereby making the context of communication as relevant as the content (Harmer, 1996; Nunan, 1998). All books in the series are deficient in many of the types of task-based learning, consciousness-raising, and discovery learning activities that are not only intended to introduce language forms in authentic data but also engage them in truly meaningful and effective communication such as negotiation of meaning. This certainly has the potential to be a serious problem in some teaching and learning contexts.

With regard to the use of positive interdependence by B4, activities that did not meet this specific criterion were those that typically asked students to work alone first and then compare and/or discuss their answers. In these cases the activities did not provide enough need for group members to interact. In terms of individual accountability, activities that did not meet this criteria were typically those that asked

groups to arrive at a single decision or answer without structuring or specifically specifying the nature of the participation expected from each specific group member. While the problems associated with interdependence and accountability were somewhat discouraging These types of deficiencies are often typical of many textbooks. They can generally be overcome through simple task modifications, particularly in cases where an experienced teacher is using a specific book.

The topics of readings vary from factual to anecdotal ones and sometimes are funny stories. It is difficult to judge on behalf of the learners whether those are interesting for them or not and it needs research. Nevertheless, the majority of the topics are attractive to the learners in my EFL classes. However, it seems that it would be better if the topics are updated to become more congruent with the taste of the new generation which might be a bit different from that of the authors who designed the books(B1,2&3) eighteen years ago. Nowadays, learners' needs are different from what they used to be and; hence it looks better to include texts more related to computer games, internet, and satellite programs. For instance, it is possible to take and adapt some of the texts, words and jargons which are currently used in different fields.. It is also possible to include adapted and simplified versions of quotations and sayings of scholars renowned for their wisdom and eloquence in line with higher culturally valued objectives of education such as trustworthiness, sacrifice, courage, punctuality, patience, honesty, etc. My personal experience shows that the meaning and content of the materials taught in English classes have strong and long lasting effects on the minds of the learners. This is a valuable opportunity if we want to educate them mentally and spiritually. I have observed that the story of Oliver Twist in B2 attracts the students more than the story of a monkey known as Washoe. We should bear in mind that as teachers ,our professional and social responsibility do not boil down to imparting a handful of factual information concerning the grammar or meaning of a series of words and sentences in our classes, rather we should care for the transfer of cultural values to the new generations.

Clear instructions

Most of the instructions are clear and easy to understand for the learners in the books in the series. Even if the learners might not be familiar with the structures and the lexis used in the instructions, the models given for each group of exercises provide contextual clues for the learners as to

what they are expected to do. However, some of the instructions are lacking in the required contextual information and in the meantime, are beyond many of the learners' English language proficiency in terms of linguistic complexity. For instance, in B1, L4, the instruction reads: "*Now look at the pictures in your book or the things around you and make some sentences like the ones in Speaking 1 and Speaking 3.*" In addition, in the same book in L8 we encounter the same problem of complexity in the instruction that follows: "*Write six sentences in the passive form. Three about what happened in the past and three about what will happen in the future.*" This problem exists in B2, too. One possible solution might be to use the learners' native language instead of the target language in the instructions, particularly for B1 and B2 where the learners are not able to understand such sentences.

Content clearly organized and graded

Some of the Reading Comprehension texts tend to be more difficult for the learners to understand than others due to their structural complexity. In working with learners from different proficiency levels I realized that the learners misunderstood or did not comprehend some parts of the Reading Comprehension texts not because they did not know the meaning of the new words included in them but simply because those sentences were too complex for them to parse. However, to solve the problem two solutions are available: the first one is to 're-organize' the texts. This solution needs more modifications and tuning of the texts because most of the Reading Comprehension texts have been selected according to the prominence of the particular grammatical structures which they had and the writers had intended to include them in the lessons. Moreover, it requires a close reconsideration of the new vocabulary that the transposed texts include. The second solution is to break long and complex sentences down into shorter and less complex ones. This solution has its own particular problems and challenges, too. In many cases it is not possible to break a compound sentence down into its constituent clauses and phrases and assemble them into simple sentences without spoiling the meaning of the original sentence. For example, in B2, L2, there are at least 8 compound sentences which are perceived as challenging to the learners. One of the sentences which is used at the very beginning of the text reads: "*Did you know that the same side of the moon faces the earth all the time?*" As you see it is not so easy to change this sentence into some simpler sentences which

convey the same idea or range of meanings. Likewise, at the ending line of the same text you come across: *“So now you know what people who lived before 1959 didn’t know.”* At the first glance one might conclude that sentence simplification is the least troublesome solution, however, in practice, it proves most challenging. In sum, the former solution feels more practical and easier to manage.

Plenty of authentic language

Authenticity is defined as follows by Johnson and Johnson (1999):

Texts are said to be authentic if they are genuine instances of language use as opposed to exemplars devised specially for language teaching purposes. The question of authenticity emerged as an important issue within communicative language teaching and in relation to notional/functional syllabuses, where emphasis was placed on ensuring that the classroom contained natural language behavior, with content identified as relevant to the learner through the process of needs analysis. There are various other reasons why authenticity may be regarded as important. One is that it presents learners with language exposure similar to that enjoyed by native speakers, including all the characteristics of natural language which may be necessary for the learner properly to interpret texts. In addition, there is motivational attraction for insisting on authentic texts, created as means of communicating content and not for some pedagogic purpose. (p.24)

If we base our discussion on the definition of authenticity which is given above, and see it as the degree the materials concord with actual instances of language the learners will encounter in real situations, the materials can be considered as authentic. In fact, the learners’ main use of English language will be limited to reading texts and passages they come up with in academic contexts in future in case they continue their education in universities. In other cases, depending upon the learners’ personal needs, their application of their knowledge of English will be limited to other instances of language used in catalogues, manuals or magazines. In few cases, they might need to listen to English programs on satellites or other media in their everyday life and, in rare cases, to communicate verbally with a foreigner who speaks English. Considering the fact that the bulk of materials is devoted to reading activities, and some space is given to dialogues to provide opportunities for the learners to practice verbal communication, the materials can, to certain extent, be regarded as authentic.

Good grammar presentation and practice

Grammar drills occupy the main share of each lesson and range from repetition, substitution to transformational ones. They are aimed at providing the learners with oral practice of the intended grammatical points. The oral drills are techniques which were mainly utilized in Audio-Lingual method and similar approaches to second language teaching for various pedagogical purposes one of which was automatization of the grammatical patterns. Automatization can be viewed from two perspectives: One is to develop the ability to give quick and in-time responses to particular verbal stimuli mainly in phatic communion. The second one is to develop the ability to process a given piece of information without awareness or attention, making relatively more use of long-term memory. For example, to produce a particular sentence according to the grammatical rules of a language. However, because the so called standard tests which are usually administered by the officials of the Ministry of Education are almost completely lacking in tests items measuring the productive ability of the learners, the teachers, for this or maybe some other reasons, usually skip the drills and replace them with the explicit explanation of the rules and formulas underlying the patterns at issue (*strong negative wash back effect*). Frankly speaking, in regular English classes at high schools they are most often **disregarded** by the majority of the teachers.

Fluency practice in all four skills

The books have devoted extravagant space of the lessons to materials which primarily aim at developing and enhancing the reading ability of the learners. Considering the idea that the main needs of the learners might be to acquire an acceptable degree of mastery and skill in reading materials written in English, this allocation looks justified. However, neither in the introduction nor in the lessons has it been explicitly mentioned by the writers of the books how to treat listening comprehension and writing skills. It is totally left to the teachers to decide whether to practice it or not. There is no section in the lessons specifically designed to develop and enhance listening skills in the learners. However, the teachers can probably work on this skill through having the learners listen to the reading passages read aloud by the teachers or other learners in the classroom. To involve the learners actively and attentively to listen to the passages read aloud, the teacher can ask various comprehension questions at different points or at the end

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of the listening activity to check their understanding. Speaking skill is also taken into account though indirectly and as a marginal activity. There are certain questions at the end of each reading passage which require the learners to give oral answers. The last and not the least is the writing skill. If we define the writing skill as the ability to communicate one's thoughts and ideas to a particular person or group of addressees through the orthographic form of a language, it is possible to claim that it is somehow neglected in the series. Although, some exercises of the lessons are intended to enhance the writing skills of the learners, they are limited to a few isolated sentence production activities. Nowhere in the book, are the learners assigned writing activities to the sense which was proposed above. The authors could have included writing activities in different formats varying from *controlled* to *free* writing according to the proficiency levels of the learner groups.

Encourage learners to develop own learning strategies and to become independent in their learning

Regarding the components of the learner training in the series, the revised edition of book 4, characterizes the features of a good reader in the Introduction section as follows: "*A good reader is the one who is active and has specific goals in mind before starting to read. He/She continuously checks his/her understanding of the text and the text itself against the predetermined goals.*" [Translated from Persian]. The authors continue, "*A good reader usually browses the whole text before starting to read and pays attention to the organization and structure of the text as well as other parts which are relevant and compatible to the goals of the reading. In the process of reading, he/she often tries to predict the incoming data in the text. He/She reads selectively, and continuously revises his decisions as to what to read with close attention, what to read quickly, what to read again, and what not to read and etc.*"

From the above quotation it is understood that the authors are attempting to familiarize the learners with cognitive and behavioral strategies or, at least, raise their consciousness about learning strategies. Moreover, throughout the lessons learners occasionally come up with certain vocabulary learning strategies such as building up semantic trees which relate different words from a common semantic field. It is worth mentioning that nowhere in the books 1-3 is there a part explicitly addressing the issue of strategy training.

In conclusion, regarding the above mentioned criteria, B4 is considered to be qualified in helping the learners to develop some of the learning strategies found in good language learners, although the whole idea of strategy training appears to be a thorny and a controversial issue. Books 1, 2 and 3 in the series need much revision in this regard.

Conclusion

EFL textbooks can play an important role in the success of language programs. Sheldon (1988) suggests that "textbooks represent the visible heart of any ELT program" (p. 237). They provide the objectives of language learning; they function as a lesson plan and working agenda for teachers and learners. Cunningsworth (1995) argues that textbooks are an effective resource for self-directed learning, an effective resource for presentation material, a source of ideas and activities, a reference source for students, a syllabus where they reflect pre-determined learning objectives, and support for less experienced teachers who have yet to gain in confidence. He also contends that we should also ensure "that careful selection is made, and that the materials selected closely reflect [the needs of the learners and] the aims, methods, and values of the teaching program." (p. 7).

One of the ways to amend and improve a curriculum is to improve the textbooks and the materials employed in the program. And this is not possible unless the consumers involved, systematically evaluate and assess them on the basis of some established criteria. The reports of these types of evaluations can be shared among teachers and the authors of the materials to gain more effective EFL textbooks. Moreover, as Cunningsworth (1995) and Ellis (1997) suggest, textbook evaluation helps teachers move beyond impressionistic assessments and it helps them to acquire useful, accurate, systematic, and contextual insights into the overall nature of textbook material.

The writer of the paper believes that the evaluation of the EFL materials currently taught at public high schools requires a deeper and more exhaustive analysis and scrutiny by a group of experienced teachers and that the viewpoints and the ideas of a single teacher might not be adequately reliable because however hard one tries, it is almost impossible to be unbiased and impartial in ones judgments.

Finally I shall conclude with Cunningsworth's remark,

'No coursebook will be totally suited to a particular teaching situation. The teacher will have to find his own way of using it and adapting it if

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necessary. So we should not be looking for the perfect coursebook which meets all our requirement, but rather or the best possible fit between what the coursebook offers and what we as teachers and students need.'
(1 9 8 4 : 8 9)

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