

The Evaluation of ESP Textbooks Based on Students' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The recently proven indisputable role of textbooks in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses has led to a major trend of interest in the value of ESP textbooks. As learners and their learning needs are one of the most significant factors in ESP courses, textbook evaluation from learners' points of view has become more common in this field. Accordingly, this paper has focused on the opinions and attitudes of the students about their ESP textbooks. Filling a questionnaire designed by Litz (2005) and answering some questions in a semi-structured interview, students of biology and psychology at the University of Tabriz expressed their opinions about different aspects of their ESP books. No significant difference was found between these two groups and they had a generally positive attitude about their textbooks. The shortcomings of the books were mentioned by some of the students in the informal interviews which led to some suggestions for material developers as well as teachers.

1. Introduction

The significant role of textbooks in the realm of English Language Teaching (ELT) and one of its major branches, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), has been proven (Harwood, 2005; Riazi, 2003; Richards & Renandya, 2002; Woodrow, 2018). Textbooks are the central means in ELT classrooms that create the most appropriate context for learners and function as bridges to stimulate learners' thinking (Gray, 2000, 2002). In ESP courses, the importance of textbooks might be more evident as the coursebook should meet the specific needs and objectives of the teaching program and learners. Therefore, the main issue has been designing and selecting appropriate textbooks according to the specific needs of learners.

Sheldon (1988) mentions several reasons for textbook evaluation. As the selection of a textbook is one of the central decisions to be made for a course, a detailed evaluation enables the decision-makers to choose among the available textbooks in the market based on the learners' objectives, needs, and interests. Additionally, familiarizing educators with a book's content can help them identify strengths and weaknesses in textbooks which will ultimately help teachers in exploiting the strong points and opting where and how to use supplementary materials. Moreover, learning how to evaluate textbooks systematically can help with the professional growth of teachers. It can also inform material developers of the best materials that would fit learners' needs and objectives. To this end, there is a need to develop a wide variety of contextually appropriate criteria for textbook evaluation which is even more crucial for EPS practitioners. Therefore, having the purpose of increasing the effectiveness of teaching and learning, the materials including the textbooks, are evaluated almost regularly by the teachers themselves which is by no means sufficient. There is an absolute need for *systematic* evaluations (Brown 1995, Ellis 1997, Richards 2001). Browns' definition of evaluation is "the systematic collection and analysis of all relevant information necessary to promote the improvement of a curriculum, and assess its effectiveness and efficiency, as well as the participants' attitudes within the context" (1989, p. 231). Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 97) define evaluation as "a matching process, matching needs to available solutions."

The diversity in the learners' needs, as well as their aims, has been the major concern in textbook evaluation and development. Teachers' task has become more challenging in choosing the best textbook for an intended set of students. Such diversity of needs and aims is more noteworthy in the ESP context as the students of different fields seem to have various needs and need to

learn specific aspects of English (Hyland, 2005). Some scholars have gone too far about this challenge to contend that the presently available textbooks cannot be appropriate and sufficient enough to meet the needs of students. (Thornbury & Meddings, 2001).

Through textbook evaluation, educators and teachers choose the textbooks that most likely meet the students' needs and aims. However, since almost everything is decided based on their needs and aims, as the central agents in ESP courses, the students' opinions about the textbooks should also be considered together with the systematic evaluation. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), learning needs should be taken into account in addition to the target situation needs. Texts which qualify as interesting or humorous for the specific students and those that generate motivation of learners should be selected (Hutchinson and Waters, 1983, as cited in Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). Therefore, the students' opinions can be of high importance since they reveal some facts and aspects to be taken into account in addition to the systematic textbook evaluation done by the experts in the field. Learners' opinions about the material used in ESP courses influence their motivation levels. Furthermore, their ideas can help teachers select a better textbook and course book designers to design the books that are closer to the students' needs and aims. Thus, the present study focused on the learners' opinions and attitudes towards the books used in their ESP courses. It is hoped that the material developers, book designers, and the teachers bear in mind learners' needs, aims, and sometimes, more importantly, their wants.

2. Empirical Studies in the Context of Iran

Aside from the developments in the textbook evaluations in the ESP domain, its current status in Iran should be elaborated. Most of the ESP textbooks used in Iran are published by the Center for Studying and Compiling University Books in Humanities (SAMT). Recently, despite their relevant content and their coherence, they have been criticized by researchers. Nevertheless, some other publications have provided ESP textbooks for teachers. Most of the researchers, however, have focused on the evaluation of the textbooks published by SAMT, the results of which are going to be discussed in the following.

Tajeddin (2005) evaluated some of the ESP textbooks from three aspects of linguistic input, output, and their relation to each other. He concluded that ESP textbooks published by the SAMT organization lack one integrated approach and lesson plan and they seem to have no purpose in the selection of reading texts or the activities. Likewise, Rahimi (2008) selected one of the ESP textbooks for Medical Technology and aimed at evaluating its compatibility with the Iranian curriculum for medical sciences. The findings showed that regarding reading, there was approximately complete compatibility, and regarding writing close compatibility; however, regarding listening and speaking, there was no compatibility.

Attempting to evaluate the textbook "English for the Students of Sociology: Social Science Texts" taught at the University of Tehran to determine its overall pedagogical value and appropriateness, Baleghizade and Rahimi (2011) obtained similar results. They considered practical concerns, skills and strategies, a variety of tasks and activities, and the layout of materials. Though the book showed some advantages, it was not suitable considering the mentioned factors.

Among other studies on the textbooks of Humanities, Zangani (2009) evaluated some of the ESP textbooks in this field comprehensively. He attempted to find out if new aims in language learning and teaching are involved in these books. Moreover, he aimed to see whether the textbooks meet the aims and needs of the students. The results indicated that the textbooks did not incorporate the new goals to develop the linguistic and communicative competence of the learners. Concerning the second factor, it was shown that the textbooks had objectives that did not match with the learners' needs.

Comparably, making use of McDonough and Shaw's (2003) model, Davari, Iranmehr, and Erfani (2013) evaluated the ESP books taught at Payam Nour University in Iran. The main shortcomings of the books were in the following aspects: low face validity, lack of material reviewing and updating, ineffective and traditional exercises and drills, and misconception of ESP. Their overall conclusion was that there is a mismatch between the theory and practice in these books.

Considering the ESP books taught at Payame Noor University in Iran focusing on the attitudes of learners, a study was conducted by Soleimani and ShafieKhah (2014), evaluating the degree of satisfaction of undergraduate students of accounting regarding their ESP textbooks. The aspects under consideration were the students' objectives, needs, and wants. Through a questionnaire, the ideas of 35 students were examined. The results showed the students' satisfaction with the book concerning objectives and needs, while it could not satisfy their wants. This study was indicative of the importance of students' wants in material designing.

In three studies on the ESP textbooks for Medical Sciences, the results showed the dissatisfaction of the students and teachers with the textbooks published in Iran. Razmjoo and Raissi (2010) employed a questionnaire consisting of 55 specific criteria sorted into six categories. The results showed the dissatisfaction of both the students and the teachers with most of the criteria. Theoretical considerations, organizational features, the contents, and language skills were disappointing for both of the groups. In an attempt to compare Medical Terminology (MT) (Cohen, 2008) and English for the Students of Medicine (ESM) (II) (Tahririan

& Mehrabi, 1994), Maleki and Kazemi (2012) investigated the attitude of the students and the teachers. The findings indicated that both groups preferred MT rather than ESM concerning the categories of layout, design, activities, language type, subject, and content. The purpose of the research conducted by Salehi, Khadivar, and Mehrabi (2015) was to evaluate the ESP medical textbook (Cohen, 2008). The instructors and students filled a questionnaire to express their opinion about different aspects of the book. Some of them also participated in an interview. The results indicated that both groups had a positive attitude towards the content of the textbook. Nonetheless, there is a great difference between the two groups' opinions about different aspects of the book.

Ajabshir, (2011) evaluated the ESP textbook "English for the Students of Management" written by Moshfeghi, focusing on the attitudes of both the students and the teachers. The results of her study indicated that the participants did not hold a positive attitude towards the book concerning the author's approach to language and methodology, lack of balance between language skills, and insufficient inclusion of communicative activities. Khoshshima and Khosravani (2014) also conducted a study to evaluate ESP textbooks taught all over Iran based on Iranian teachers' opinions. The result of their study showed the negative viewpoints of the teachers towards ESP textbooks as they did not meet their expectations.

The literature cited here, which presents a part of the works done in this area, indicates that the negative points exceed the positive ones in the ESP textbooks published in Iran. There is also overall dissatisfaction with the books from the teachers' and students' points of view. As selecting the best materials for the courses is of high significance, the purpose of this study was to shed some light on the recent needs of the learners and if the textbooks meet them.

3. Method

3.1. Research Questions

- a. Is there a difference between the opinions of undergraduate students of Biology and Psychology regarding their ESP textbooks?
- b. Do students of Biology and Psychology have positive opinions regarding their ESP textbooks?

3.2. Materials

The evaluated textbooks are:

- a. English for the Students of Biology, Hossein Farhady, Tehran: SAMT Publications.
- b. Reading and Understanding Psychology by Yasmin Mondji, Tehran: Virayesh Publications.

These two books are taught at the University of Tabriz as the material for ESP courses for B.A. and B.S. (undergraduate) students of psychology and biology.

3.3. Participants

The participants who filled out the questionnaires were 40 undergraduate students of biology and 42 students of psychology at Tabriz University. From 82 students, 60 were female and 22 were male ($M = 21$ years)

3.4. Instruments

This study used the questionnaire designed by Litz (2005) for student textbook evaluation which includes a variety of aspects. It evaluates the textbooks from six aspects: validity of the texts in the books, if the subjects and the content of the book are relevant to the students' needs, degree of motivation, the degree to which the book was useful for the four skills, and the usefulness of the activities for the needs and practising the four skills. Each item consisted of five choices based on Likert Scale (strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, and strongly disagree). To ensure that the reliability index of the questionnaire was acceptable, a test-retest method was conducted. The Cronbach's Alpha was .71, which indicated that the instrument was quite reliable.

3.5. Procedure

The purpose of this research was to evaluate and compare the opinions of the Biology and Psychology students about the textbooks taught in their ESP courses. To meet this end, the questionnaire was copied and given to the students so that they could represent their opinions about these textbooks. The students were given enough time to fill out the questionnaire. In addition, the researcher attended these two courses for one session and conducted a semi-structured and informal interview with some of the students. The questionnaires were then analyzed through descriptive statistics (independent samples t-test) to see if there is a significant difference between the opinions of the two groups and if they have a positive attitude towards the books regarding their needs and wants in addition to the objectives of the course.

4. Results

To answer the first research question, an independent samples t-test was conducted to see if there is a significant difference between the opinions of the two groups of biology and psychology students. Table 1 represents the results:

Table 1: Independent Samples T-test

t	df	Sig(2-tailed)	Mean differences	Std. Error Difference
.749	80	.456	2.852	3.810

In the level of significance at the p-value of .05, there was no significant difference between the opinion of students of biology ($M = 96.40$, $SD = 19.10$) and psychology ($M = 93.55$, $SD = 15.270$); $t(80) = .749$, $p = .05$. This means that the students of biology and psychology have the same opinion about their ESP textbooks and the differences that might exist are not significant.

After an overall analysis, the questions were classified so that each question was under the category of one of the factors. Then these questions were computed to be added up to give a score representing the factor to see if there is a significant difference between the underlying factors and variables in the textbooks. Employing SPSS, an independent samples t-test was used to compare the two groups of biology students and psychology, the result of which is represented in Table 2. The p-value in this analysis was also at the level of 0.05.

As can be seen from the results of the t-test, which was run to compare the opinions of the biology and psychology students, t is below 1 in all variables of validity of the texts, compatibility with needs, degree of motivating, the usefulness of the book for the four skills and the efficacy of the activities. The only factor with a score of t above 1 is language type. However, in all of the variables, the significance is more than .05. Therefore, there is no significant difference between the opinions of these two groups. This means that the students of biology and psychology have similar opinions about their textbooks in ESP courses and the differences are very little, if any at all.

Table 2: Independent T-test for each factor

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Validity	.933	80	.353	.627	.672
Subject & Content	.442	80	.660	.258	.585
Language Type	1.204	80	.232	.680	.564
Motivating	-.127	80	.899	.077	.610
Speaking	.402	80	.689	.111	.275
Listening	.680	80	.499	.296	.436
Reading	-.471	80	.639	-.301	.639
Writing	.210	80	.834	.118	.561
Activities	.219	80	.827	-.310	1.412

After the results indicated no significant difference between the two groups under study, one-sample t-test was conducted to see if the scores given by the students are low or high. To answer the second research question, one-sample t-test was conducted for each variable separately, the results of which are represented in Table 3. Since the test value for each variable was different, a column was added to indicate the test value for each.

Table 3: One sample T-test

	Test value	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean differences
Validity	10	9.989	81	.000	3.354
Subject & Content	10	13.045	81	.000	3.793
Language Type	7.5	8.579	81	.000	2.427
Motivating	7.5	4.666	81	.000	1.415
Speaking	2.5	1.959	81	.054	.286
Listening	5	.337	81	.737	.073
Reading	10	12.042	81	.000	3.829
Writing	7.5	3.282	81	.002	.915
Activities	55	-28.998	81	.000	-20.341

With the p-value of .05, one sample t-test indicated that except for speaking and listening skills, the other variables are significantly different from and above their test values. That is, the students' opinions about the aspects of the books are almost positive. For the speaking and listening skill, with the significance of ($p = 0.054$) and ($p = .737$) respectively, the results indicated that the student's opinions do not differ from the test value; therefore, they do not hold a positive attitude about the usefulness of the textbooks for these two skills.

5. Discussion

As indicated in the result section, two groups of biology and psychology students did not display any significant differences in their opinions about their ESP course books. There were not even any significant differences in particular aspects of their books. Their overall evaluation of the book was somehow positive except for two aspects of the usefulness of the book for their speaking and listening. This was in line with what Rahimi (2008) found. It seems that most ESP textbooks designed in Iran focus on reading and writing skills rather than communicative skills.

Looking closer at the book evaluated in this study, we find that the biology textbook has various exercises for increasing comprehension and also exercises for language practice. It involves true/false questions, choosing the best item (for testing comprehension and for language check), answering some questions orally, filling the blanks with appropriate forms of the words, putting sentences in order, completing the text with the words, and translating activities. The psychology textbook involves, in addition, a glossary of key terms in English, and more importantly pre-reading activity in which students are supposed to answer some questions orally before reading the text. The variety of activities serves the students to work both on their comprehension and language skills. That explains one of the reasons for the positive attitudes towards the book which contradicts the findings of some earlier studies (Ajabshir, 2011; Baleghizadeh & Rahimi, 2011; Maleki & Kazemi, 2012; Razmjoo & Raissi, 2016; Tajjedin, 2005; Zangani, 2009).

Nonetheless, the students believed that the books were not beneficial for their speaking skills. In other words, they did not think of the two activities planned to improve oral skills as helpful (Rahimi Alagha, Sahragard, & Rahimian, 2015). Two possible reasons can be considered for this. One is that the speaking activities are limited in number and one speaking activity might not improve the very skill that is problematic for the majority of the students in Iran's universities. This reason can be solved by increasing the number and variety of speaking activities in the books. The second reason is that despite the existence of these activities, there is an implementation problem (Davari, Iranmehr, & Erfani, 2013). That is to say, the activities are not completed in an appropriate manner. It can be said that either the teachers ignore them or they are not done in the classrooms due to lack of proficiency of the teacher him/herself, or due to lack of awareness about the proper way to carry out the activities. Even when these activities are completed in the classrooms, it is limited only to a small number of students. It is usually the case that only the students who feel confident about their oral skills volunteer to answer the questions. Therefore, the others with lower ability to speak never get the chance and do not even try to answer the questions. As Hyland (2006) has maintained that materials are an integral aspect of education, the way teachers implement and employ materials is also influential. As a result, it can be recommended that the

teachers form groups of students in which they answer the questions together and all of them have the opportunity to speak so that they can improve their oral skills. (Nikou, Ramzi, &Tabatabaei, 2014).

In the case of listening skill, however, there is no activity related to listening skill in the books and there are not any audios in the books. The only listening activity that happens in these classes is when the teacher or one of the students read the text while others listen. This activity is neither authentic nor helpful and is artificial and done by non-natives with wrong pronunciations. The lack of listening activities in these books is mostly due to the belief that the primary needs of the students are to be able to read and translate the texts. However, since most of the students aim at continuing their studies in other countries, have a job related to their major, and/or participate in TOEFL or IELTS tests, the need for the ability to communicate in the target language has dramatically increased (Harding, 2007; Zangani, 2009).

Moreover, although statistically there is consent among the students that the books are useful for writing skill, there is no activity in the books which focuses on the writing skill in particular. In addition, in the informal oral interview of the researcher with the students, they expressed their dissatisfaction with the fact that the books only deal with readings and all the activities revolve around this one skill. Despite the variety of activities, this has given the impression that the books' primary focus is the reading skill. The books need radical revisions to meet the needs and want of the students in the ever-changing era.

The merits of the books which has led to a positive attitude of most of the students is the compatibility of the texts with the texts they study in other courses together with the consistency of the students' proficiency level and the difficulty level of the texts. Nevertheless, the interviews indicated that students of biology were not satisfied with the amount of vocabulary they learn in this book. They also mentioned that the book lacks grammatical or linguistic activities. The need to work on linguistic points is prominent in Iran as most students lack the needed proficiency and merely working on texts does not fill this gap in their knowledge. Moreover, in order to prepare themselves for the master degree's entrance exam, the students also suggested that book designers consider this exam in designing and choosing the texts.

To sum up, the biology and psychology students hold a relatively positive attitude towards their ESP textbooks. They had some suggestions and mentioned their dissatisfaction with some aspects of the books which can be considered for the new revisions of the books. Until the necessary revisions are implemented, the teachers can always use supplementary materials to fill the gaps in the textbooks. New technologies and the internet have made this task much easier. It is highly essential that the teachers consider learners' learning needs as well as their goals and target needs (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987).

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to compare two textbooks published by different publications for two majors of biology and psychology based on the opinions of the students. The findings displayed no significant difference between the two groups and both had a generally positive attitude towards these textbooks. The shortcomings were also explained, both based on the results of the tests and also on the informal interviews of the researcher with some of the students. Despite the new technologies, textbooks are still an important part of any syllabus, which gives the course coherence and unity. Therefore, textbook evaluation is of a continuous nature which has to be done continuously to resolve the demerits and to add to advantages according to the changing nature of the learners' needs and aims. Teachers' opinions and criticisms of the books can be of substantial significance. As the scope of the current study was limited to students' view of their ESP textbooks, further research can investigate teachers' viewpoints in addition to those of the students' to complement this evaluation. The criteria to evaluate the textbooks in this study were limited to some scopes, other criteria were left unattended which can be the subject of further studies in this domain. Furthermore, the predictive power of different textbooks about the students' further success can be studied.

As the learners' needs have changed to be able to attend international conferences, watching documentaries about their major, writing papers for journals besides reading and understanding the texts, these should be considered when designing textbooks for ESP courses. Nevertheless, the teachers of ESP courses which are almost always a professor from that specific major, should attempt to overcome the shortcomings of the books by adding supplementary materials to the course and also to teach students the strategies to deal with their problems in the future.

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