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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## Merits and Demerits of English Language Coursebooks Designs: A Scoping Review

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**ABSTRACT**

The evaluation process of English coursebooks in Saudi schools began long back when the English curriculum was updated in the 1980s. This paper reviews the works that have surveyed the Saudi English syllabi from the 1990s to the present. It aims to explore the timeline of the most prominent evaluation endeavors. The findings reveal that the common components of evaluations include content, form, learning tasks, and instruction methods. The majority of these attempts were executed using standardized checklists but implemented on a relatively small number of respondents. However, one study was conducted as part of a project launched by the Ministry of Education (MOE) for the development of the English curriculum. The distinctive satisfaction themes of merits among all evaluations were the visuals, syllabi appearance, and overall content. While teaching methods and the difficulty of tasks were highlighted as demerits. From a cultural perspective, syllabi tend to be contextualized in a Western way, based on the local Saudi culture. This paper recommends conducting a more comprehensive evaluation process online to cover more participants, developing a well-tailored checklist that suits the content and culture of Saudi Arabia, and considering the new technological changes in coursebooks.

**KEYWORDS**

Coursebooks Designs; Saudi schools; English curriculum; Ministry of Education

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### 1. Introduction

Textbooks are the primary teaching materials in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classes in Saudi Arabia, according to the Ministry of Education (Al-Seghayer, 2011). In many educational systems, the coursebook may be the most important component of the English language curriculum. Researchers in the area of materials evaluation have recently begun evaluating textbooks, as they are not always ideal for a certain context (McDonough, Shaw, and Masuhara, 2013). For this reason, textbooks have to be reviewed for particular teaching goals and situations. These materials should be effective and align with the course's objectives. In most cases, textbook evaluation follows standardized checklists developed by authors such as Tomlinson (2003), Litz (2005), Mukundan, and McDonough et al. (2013).

The term "materials" can refer to anything that helps in the instruction of a language. Material evaluation is the systematic assessment process of the value of materials in relation to their goals. As it was classified by Tomlinson (2003), Syllabi can be evaluated before they are used in order to predict their potential value (pre-use). It can also be implemented while the materials are being used (in-use), with a focus on awareness and description of what the learners are doing. Finally, it can be post-use, focusing on the analysis of what happened as an outcome of using the materials (2003). Due to the critical role textbooks play in language learning classrooms, they should be closely monitored and evaluated (Richards, 2014).

In terms of assessment categories, Tomlinson (2003) identified three categories of materials evaluation: pre-use evaluation, in-use evaluation, and finally, post-use evaluation of materials. The most valuable sort of evaluation is post-use evaluation. Because it is based on measurement rather than prediction, it is more reliable than pre-use evaluation because it measures the actual effects of

materials on users. Tomlinson claims it can measure short-term effects like motivation, impact, and learning. It can also track long-term outcomes like learning and application. This category is the most useful because it is done after the participants have used the materials for a while.

Ellis (1997) made a distinction between two types of coursebook evaluation: a retrospective evaluation and a predictive evaluation. A retrospective evaluation is a process designed to examine the coursebooks that have already been used, while a predictive evaluation is a process designed to make a decision concerning what materials to use.

## **2. Research problem**

Since the first published evaluation by Al-Hojailan (1999), many studies by Saudi researchers have been conducted to evaluate the English syllabi in Saudi schools. However, the results of these evaluations have not been organized in such a way that it is valid to compare the results and deduce the merits and demerits of these evaluations. In Saudi schools, there is a growing emphasis on teaching English as a second language, which can depend in part on the quality of textbooks. The Ministry of Education (MOE) updates its curriculum on a regular basis. In the realm of English language education, Brown (1995) underscores the significance of a well-crafted textbook that fulfills the needs of students and educators, thereby establishing a vital connection between the curriculum and classroom setting. Textbooks are essential components in teaching English as a second or foreign language across all educational levels, from primary school to university courses.

The importance of Syllabi as a key tool for instructing the English language and several evaluations done by Saudi scholars over the course of two decades show that the Ministry of Education (MOE) has updated its curriculum on a regular basis. This study reviews these evaluations to help other researchers see previous evaluations conducted on the level of sample size and merits and demerits. Additionally, the cultural context of Saudi syllabi has been considered. This study reviews these evaluations to help other researchers see earlier evaluations conducted on the level of sample size and merits and demerits. Additionally, the cultural context of Saudi syllabi has been considered in terms of its historical development.

## **3. Aim**

This review aims to discover the advantages and disadvantages of the English language curriculum taught in Saudi schools, drawing on previous works of syllabi evaluation. Over time, textbooks have prompted teachers to concentrate on other tasks such as conducting class activities, creating revision materials, and monitoring students' progress (Tekir and Arikan, 2007:3). This paper will depict the picture of policymakers in regard to works conducted in this concern and conclude with recommendations based on the chronological development of EFL curriculum evaluations. The current paper recaps the development of the English language curriculum in Saudi schools and the most distinctive milestones in this historical itinerary.

## **4. Method and design**

This paper employed the scoping review method to examine the studies conducted in the evaluation of the English curriculum taught in Saudi schools. Arksey and O'Malley (2005) stated that the aim of a scoping review is to map the key concepts underpinning a research area and the main sources of evidence available. The scoping review aims to identify the gaps in the existing literature and highlight areas that require further inquiry. We searched the sources using Google Scholar to find relevant publications. The oldest one found was a master thesis titled "Evaluating the English language textbook studied at the first year intermediate schools in Saudi Arabia" by Ereksoussy (1993), but this work was excluded as it was not published.

Eleven works included in this review ranged from (articles, master thesis, and PhD dissertation) stretching over three decades beginning from 1999 until 2021. It seeks to assess the potential volume and scope of available research literature and the current level of synthesis found. We analyzed the documents to highlight the merits and demerits of EL in the development and evaluation of the English Curriculum in Saudi government schools. Additionally, variables such as sample size, student grade, and used instruments are examined. Since a little body of research was found on evaluation and surveying English language coursebooks in Saudi schools, all works that discussed the cons and pros of syllabi have been included.

## **5. Results and Discussion**

The following part narrates several attempts by Saudi researchers to evaluate the English language curriculum taught in Saudi schools. The current review divides those results based on school level, elementary, intermediate, and secondary, discussing the most significant findings in terms of merits and demerits.

### **5.1 Syllabi of Elementary Level**

Following the Ministry of Education's introduction of English at the elementary level in 2004, Al-amri (2008) evaluated a sixth-grade English language textbook; the study aimed to examine a dozen main categories, including the design, supporting materials, objectives, topic relevance, learning activities, flexibility, socio-cultural contexts, teaching methods, development of skills, teachability,

and practice and testing. All these components were rated positively except for the teaching methods. On the other hand, learning components received the highest marks. The findings indicated that the most significant advantage was its flexibility. The textbook lacks communicative tasks and activities that meet the needs of various levels of learning styles, as well as critical thinking prompts. It also uses outdated teaching methods that focus on the teaching process more than pedagogical concerns. These findings demonstrate that teachers can participate in syllabus discussions by reflective practice in the classroom.

Al-Saif (2005) evaluated the grade-six English textbook which was taught in Saudi elementary schools. 2931 teachers, supervisors, and trainers were given a checklist to complete. The study's goal was to look at the textbook's strengths and weaknesses, with a particular focus on its applicability to teachers, young learners, and their social contexts. The findings of the study revealed that the data distribution was not conclusive. It noted that the textbook is just "moderately adequate" and that it required continuous evaluation in response to the changing circumstances of the module.

### **5.2 Syllabi of Intermediate Level**

Al-sowat (2012) rated the coursebook of English Language "Say It in English" used in the first year of Intermediate schools as "Good" in terms of its layout, physical appearance, content, and learning objectives. The language genre, language skills, tasks and activities, vocabulary and structures, cultural values, and teacher needs, on the other hand, all received a "Poor" rating. Overall, the textbook received a "Poor" rating.

Al-Yousef (2007) evaluated the Grade-3 of Intermediate English textbook used in Saudi schools. The study found that teachers, supervisors, and students thought the coursebook was moderately adequate. The content and visuals of the textbook received the most support, while grading and recycling, as well as supplementary material, received the lowest ratings. The 3rd-grade intermediate English textbook was evaluated by Al-Yousef (2007) using Cunningsworth's (1996) checklist. The findings revealed that supervisors, teachers, and students like that textbook. However, some parts like supplementary materials, gradation, and recycling had low satisfaction.

### **5.3 Syllabi of Secondary Level**

Alharbi (2015) evaluated "The Flying High" coursebook, which was then taught in Saudi secondary schools. Williams (1983) and Keban, Muhtar, and Zen checklists were used in the study (2012). In spite of significant flaws in the vocabulary glossaries and in the review section, as well as the inferior quality of the textbook paper and binding materials, the evaluators were generally satisfied with this textbook. Williams' checklist, likewise, revealed both merits and demerits. Vocabulary, reading skills, and technical facets were all given high marks, while speaking, writing, and grammar were given low marks. As stated earlier, Keban et al.'s checklist was developed to determine how language coursebooks work on a wide and broad level, whereas Williams' checklist offers a detailed and elaborate evaluation.

Al-Hojailan (1999), in his PhD dissertation, assessed the quality of the English coursebook that has been taught in grade-3 of secondary "English for Saudi Arabia". The study's findings revealed that the book's design, supporting materials, cultural content, academic content, and assessment methods were all well received satisfactory ratings. There were disagreements in terms of national goals and teaching methods. The study resulted in the integration of the textbook, the writing book, and the workbook. Other changes include adding model tests, adding the educational goals within the Teacher's Manual, expanding grammar rules, adding free composition, posting images on the cover, and updating the topics every five years.

The "Traveller 5" coursebook, which is taught in the grade-3 secondary schools, was evaluated by Alhamlan (2013). Students rated several aspects of the textbook positively. As a result, this study recommended that the textbook should be improved in several areas, including minimizing the considerable number of new vocabulary items and material difficulty and allowing students more interaction in the classroom. In terms of culture, 59% of students believe the cultural context was appropriate. This evaluation was a part of the Saudi English Language Development Project (SELDP).

Al-Malki (2014), in fulfillment of his master's project, examined the "Flying High" textbook that was used in Saudi secondary schools. The researcher employed a questionnaire to evaluate 42 teachers' perspectives on the textbook's quality, the preparation plan's effectiveness, their teaching techniques, and administrative assistance. Teachers' perceptions of "The Flying High" coursebook varied in this study, and there may be a correlation between their preparation, practices, and administrative support and their attitudes toward the textbook.

Aljouei & Alsuhaibani (2018) evaluated the effectiveness of the Traveller coursebook series taught in secondary schools in terms of design & layout, accessibility, appropriateness, activities, and skills. The results of this study showed that the coursebook's layout, accessibility, activities, and skills are fairly effective. The findings revealed that the textbook does not meet the students' language level, but teachers claimed that the textbook is above the level of Saudi secondary students. Moreover, teachers held debatable perspectives regarding cultural appropriateness and class time.

Alsulami (2021) evaluated a textbook called Traveller 4, which is taught in the second grade of secondary schools. He employed a questionnaire to investigate teachers' viewpoints on a range of related items. The questionnaire was given out to high school English language teachers in Riyadh city, and it was composed of 40 items, which were divided into six constructs. The findings of this study revealed important points relating to the textbook's general appearance and design, objectives, content, social and cultural contexts, tasks and activities, and usefulness for developing language skills. He found that teachers' perception of these items is acceptable. However, they recommended adding more learning objectives to ensure that they are achieved at the end of the semester; the topics should be designed to be attractive so that students can express their own views. Moreover, listening activities should be supplemented by its resources. Besides, writing tasks should be appropriate to the student's level.

Table (1): A chronicle summary of the prominent endeavors made to evaluate the merits and demerits of English coursebooks in Saudi schools.

Author	Year	Syllabi level	Method and instruments	Participants	Found merits	Found demerits
Al-Hojailan	1999	third-grade secondary	mixed method using questionnaire contained eight criteria , qualitative data collected through document analysis, content analysis, and interviews.	128 teachers, supervisors, and administrators	book's design and illustrations, supporting materials, academic content, cultural context, and assessment techniques	NILL
Al-Saif	2005	6th grade – elementary	checklist	2931 teachers, supervisors, and trainers.	the textbook was moderately adequate	data was not conclusive
Al-Yousef	2007	third grade–intermediate	Cunningsworth's (1996) checklist	184 participants	the visuals of the textbook and the Content	recycling, gradation, and supporting material were the most poorly rated components.
Al-amri	2008	6th grade – elementary	checklist	93 teachers and 11 supervisors	flexibility.	outdated teaching materials lack communicative tasks
Al-sowat	2012	first Year Intermediate Grade	descriptive questionnaire	48 teachers	content, objectives, and physical appearance	tasks and activities, structures, language skills, vocabulary, teachers' needs, and cultural values
Alhamlan	2013	third year of secondary schools	checklist	500 students	cultural context	the difficulty of materials in the textbook and a substantial increase in the quantity of new vocabulary items
Al-Malki	2014	secondary schools	questionnaire	42 teachers	layout and instructional design of the curriculum reflected its excellent quality.	teachers need more preparation to get familiar with this textbook and difficulties in implementing the new teaching methods and strategies.
Alharbi	2015	secondary schools	two checklists 1. (Williams (1983) checklist 2. Keban, Muhtar, and Zen (2012) checklist	20 participants	Participants generally satisfied	the quality of the paper and the chapter review sections were insufficient, failing to consider the contextual variations between the Saudi and Western cultures.
Aljouei & Alsuhailani	2018	secondary schools	mixed methods using two instruments: content analysis and questionnaire	94 teachers	effective layout, accessibility, activities, and skills	debatable view on cultural context, time-demanding activities
Alsulami	2021	2nd grade–high schools	survey questionnaire	70 teachers	teachers found all constructs are acceptable	few supplementary listening resources provided do not meet the learning objectives

The process of evaluating and surveying the coursebooks or syllabi in Saudi school syllabi was done using the following checklists:

- Williams' checklist (1983) was used for the overall evaluation of strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, it can be used to analyze different language skills separately and in detail.
- Cunningsworth (1995) developed his own checklist for textbook evaluation. His checklist is classified into different parts, which constitute any English textbook. It is created in the form of questions that cover all important areas of evaluation.
- A checklist developed by Keban et al. (2012) is designed to evaluate language textbooks; it views language skills as a single component. It also gauges students' satisfaction level with the syllabus.
- Mukundan (2011) proposed a checklist for evaluating English language textbooks that addressed two factors: general characteristics (e.g., syllabus and curriculum, methodology) and educational-teaching content.

#### 5.4 English language syllabi and culture

Faruk (2014) conducted an evaluation of three textbooks printed and used in third-grade secondary schools over the last 30 years: "Saudi Arabian Schools' English Textbook," used from 1982 to 1997; "English for Saudi Arabia textbook," taught from 1998 to 2012; and "Traveller 3," used from 2013 to the present. In terms of cultural context, the third textbook, Traveller 3, contrasted with the previous two textbooks from 1989 to 2012. Traveler 3 (2013–present) deliberately avoided using English in a religious and local Saudi cultural context. Conversely, Traveler 3 placed Western culture within its appropriate cultural context. Only two texts attempted to depict Islamic and Saudi features in a Western context, while 18 texts included elements of Western culture. These findings are consistent with the MOE's direction to teach both English and its culture.

Allehyani et al. (2017) evaluated the textbooks "Traveller 5" and "English for Saudi Arabia." The researchers aimed to evaluate the level of representation of inner-circle culture in Saudi secondary school textbooks. The researchers took two approaches: one with educational supervisors and the other with teachers. "Traveller 5" incorporates multicultural topics and places a strong emphasis on communicative language competence, whereas the "English for Saudi Arabia" textbook focuses on Saudi local culture and does not provide authentic materials or resources from other countries. The authors argue that Saudi textbooks should display authentic materials from English-speaking societies more prominently than they currently do. According to the study, students should be exposed to communicative situations they might encounter in their daily lives as English language speakers.

Table (2) Cultural considerations in Saudi schools curriculum (1982 - Present)

Author	Year of Study	Scope	Grade	Coursebook	Cultural aspects
Faruk	2014	cultural context,	Grade-3 secondary school textbooks	"Saudi Arabian Schools' English" (1982 to 1997).	the religious and cultural milieu of Saudi Arabia was purposely disregarded.
				"English for Saudi Arabia", (1998 to 2012)	
				Traveller 3	The Western culture was contextualized.
Allehyani et al.	2017	inner-circle of the culture	secondary school textbooks,	"English for Saudi Arabia", (1998 to 2012)	only Saudi local culture presented, and lack of authentic materials.
				"Traveller 3", which was taught (2013 till now)	multicultural topics discussed and communicative-language competence supported

Saudi English textbooks have at least 30 years of embedded local culture, which naturally creates a rift between the curriculum and the authenticity of the materials used. Mahboob and Elyas (2014) state that the entire series of "English for Saudi Arabia" course books accurately portray Saudi Arabia's local and Islamic culture. This trend has led teachers to limit student exposure to English and related cultures in the classroom, resulting in a lack of cultural and linguistic competence among young learners.

Nevertheless, Allehyani et al. (2017) argue that the introduction of the "Traveller" series introduced in 2012 marked a significant turning point. This series is distinguished by its inclusion of multicultural themes and the use of communicative language teaching (CLT) methods, such as discussions, role-playing, and problem-solving tasks. The latest coursebooks, such as the Traveller series, have replaced the three outdated textbooks and moved towards Western culture, exposing students to diverse cultural elements beyond local ones. According to Faruk (2014), the Ministry of Education and Saudi citizens have become more receptive to teaching English alongside inner-circle culture in the past ten years.

## 6. Conclusion

The English textbooks used first in 1924, when the country was prompted to introduce English Language Teaching into its formal education system, differ from those published in the 1980s and 1990s, as the country had already progressed as a middle-income state. Therefore, education in Saudi Arabia is an ever-changing process in terms of teaching methods, classroom activities, materials, and textbooks. As shown in Table (1), researchers gradually surveyed more participants to get more reliable results. The checklists used to evaluate the English language textbooks have become, over time, more detailed, with extended items addressing many aspects of the English curriculum taught in Saudi schools. It is an advantage for the MOE (Ministry of Education) to launch a pilot curriculum. For example, the "Traveler series", presented as Pilot Edition in 2011, allows teachers and supervisors to evaluate the syllabi before they get officially in-use. In the line of culture, the English language curriculum developed in favor of integrating Saudi culture, with a clear trend to avoid religious issues.

This integration of domestic culture comes on account of authentic materials used in real Western life (table 2). The reform of new textbooks toward modernization can be seen in the cultural content of English textbooks. The Saudi MOE was responsive to several recommendations initiated by researchers, such as those presented by Al-Hojailan (1999) in his dissertation.

## 7. Future perspective

The future recommendation for policymakers in MOE is to conduct a more comprehensive surveying process online to cover more participants. Developing a well-tailored checklist suits the content and culture of Saudi Arabia. Among the surveyed articles, we recommend re-evaluating textbooks periodically in terms of appropriateness for students' levels and learning abilities. The new era of using MOOC and distance learning in Saudi Arabia and worldwide demands that new evaluations be performed, considering domains related to e-curriculum.

## 8. Limitations

The findings of this paper may not be easily generalizable to other contexts or educational systems due to unique cultural, social, and educational factors in Saudi Arabia. Besides, the scoping review method used to evaluate the English curriculum in Saudi schools has limitations. It relies on Google Scholar for search sources, which may cause it to overlook other relevant studies. The review excludes unpublished work, which could miss important insights. The review's time range of 1999-2021 may not capture recent developments in the English curriculum.

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