

An Evaluation of the English Textbooks: Perspectives from High School Teachers in Thai Nguyen City

Pham Ai Linh¹, Hoang Thi Them²

¹Faculty of International Training, Thai Nguyen University of Technology, Vietnam

²Faculty of International Training, Thai Nguyen University of Technology, Vietnam

ABSTRACT: This paper presents a study on investigating high school teachers' perspectives on the English textbooks implemented in Thai Nguyen city. In investigating, a questionnaire was used to collect data and then the data was analyzed through the descriptive statistical procedures of SPSS Version 20. The findings reveal high school teachers' evaluation of the English textbooks in terms of price and availability, extra materials, layout and design, instruction, methodology, language areas, language skills and topics. Although the English textbooks are appropriate for their students, it is desirable that publishers and teachers should make some changes in the English textbooks to enhance teaching and learning.

KEYWORDS: textbooks, criteria, evaluation, methodology, availability

I. INTRODUCTION

In today's world, English has been considered an international language for people to exchange between nations. In the context of Vietnam, English is the key for Vietnamese people to reach out the world. Therefore, English has become a compulsory subject at all schools and universities in Vietnam since 1960s. Thanks to the constant concern of the Vietnamese government, the English language teaching and learning have been improved considerably. However, there is a fact that most Vietnamese students cannot effectively communicate with foreigners in English, which make Vietnamese people difficult to keep up with internalization trend.

To solve this problem, the Vietnamese Prime Minister signed Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg to promulgate the National Project entitled: "Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education system, Period 2008 – 2020" known as National Foreign Languages 2020 Project. One of the objectives of the Project is to renovate foreign language teaching and learning in the national education system and to implement a new foreign languages programme at all educational levels and training degrees so that by 2020 most Vietnamese young people graduating from secondary vocational schools, colleges and universities will be able to use a foreign language confidently in their daily communication, their study and work in an integrated, multi-cultural and multi-lingual environment, making foreign languages a competitive advantage of the Vietnamese people to serve the cause of industrialization and modernization of the country".

In order to achieve these objectives, writing English textbooks is an importance task of the project because textbooks are "agents of change" (Hutchinson & Hutchinson, [24, 317]). As a result, a series of the English textbooks has been published and used as teaching and learning materials at most Vietnamese schools.

Compared to the former textbooks for lower secondary schools, the three-level English textbook series (the English textbook series from Grade 10 to Grade 12) have been a remarkable change in lesson content and teaching methods. The former textbooks concentrated more on presenting grammar, while the series of the three-level English textbooks have been designed to help students to develop English communicative competence through the four skills of listening, reading, writing and speaking. Moreover, they provide students with general understanding about the countries, people and cultures of some English-speaking countries and other countries in the world. Additionally, the overall objective of the three-level English textbooks is that when students graduate from high schools, they will achieve Level 3 (CEFR Level B1) of the 6-level foreign language competence framework for Vietnam. For this reason, the series of CLT based textbooks require teachers to use communicative language teaching method which is different from their previous methods.

In implementing the series of English textbooks, teachers have different perspectives because of the differences in geographical locations. The implementation of English textbooks in urban areas is different from that in suburban areas. We, therefore, decided

An Evaluation of the English Textbooks: Perspectives from High School Teachers in Thai Nguyen City

to conduct this research to investigate high school teachers' perspectives on the English textbooks implemented in Thai Nguyen city.

1. Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are to aims at finding high school teachers' perspectives on the three-level English textbooks for grades 10, 11, 12 named "Tieng Anh Global Success" published by Education Publishing House co-operating with Pearson Education. Based on the research results, this study also provides practical suggestions for better use of the English textbooks.

2. Research questions

From my research objectives, the central questions to be examined in this study are:

RQ1: What are high school teachers' perspectives on the English textbooks implemented in Thai Nguyen city?

RQ2: What suggestions can be given to the use of the English textbooks?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. What is a textbook?

Textbooks are extremely important in teaching and learning because they are material support for language instructions and a book for use in an educational curriculum. (Brown, 2000)

According to Richards and Schmidt (2002), a textbook is a book on a specific subject used as a teaching learning guide, especially in a school or college. Textbooks for foreign language learning are often part of a graded series covering multiple skills including listening, reading, writing, speaking, and grammar or they only deal with a single skill.

For example, a reading textbook might be the basis for a course on reading skills, providing both a set of reading texts and exercises for skills practice. A writing textbook might provide model compositions. A grammar textbook might serve as a reference book and provide examples as well as exercises to develop grammatical knowledge. A speaking text might provide passages for students to read and discuss. A listening text together with audiocassettes or CDs might serve as the primary listening input in a listening course. (Richards, 2001)

Actually, textbooks for a language programme are used in different ways depending the curriculum objectives.

Although in some places, textbooks are taken for granted, they may not be used at all in other places. Teachers work according to a syllabus or according to his or her own programme, and they use textbook and supplementary materials as the need arises. (Ur, 2009)

From the viewpoint on whether textbooks are used, it can be concluded that textbooks must be considered the main materials and basis that teachers follow in the situation of Vietnam. In addition, to obtain the curriculum aims the English textbooks covering multiple skills have been issued for Vietnamese teachers and students.

2. Advantages and disadvantages of textbooks

Textbooks have both advantages and disadvantages depending on how they are used and the contexts for their use. Richards (2001) indicates the advantages of textbooks as follows: (i) Textbooks provide structure and a syllabus for a program; (ii) They help standardize instruction because students in different classes receive similar content and therefore can be tested in the same way; (iii) They maintain quality; (iv) They provide a variety of learning resources since textbooks are often accompanied by workbooks, CDs and cassettes, videos, CD-ROMs, and comprehensive teaching guides; (v) They are efficient as they save teachers' time, enabling teachers to devote time to teaching rather than materials production; (vi) They can provide effective language models and input; (vii) They can train teachers; (viii) They are visually appealing.

However, there are also disadvantages of textbooks. Richards (2001) mentions 5 negative points of textbooks as follows: (i) textbooks comprise inauthentic language; (ii) the subject matters encompassed in the textbooks could be biased for eluding debated issues; (iii) textbooks are incompatible with learners' needs; (iv) the exploitation of textbooks could contribute to teachers' tendency of de-skilling themselves; (v) the cost of textbooks could be expensive for several learners.

Above all, the advantages of textbooks outweigh the disadvantages so it is suggested that teachers should use textbooks in teaching, but use them creatively.

3. Criteria of choosing textbooks

Cunningsworth (1995) points out a basic quick-reference checklist for evaluating and selecting textbooks. This checklist includes aims and approaches, design and organization, language content, skills, topic, methodology, teachers' books and practical considerations. Having the same view as Cunningsworth, Jemery Harmer (2007) also indicates possible areas for choosing a textbook. They are

- price and availability (How much does the course book cost? Are all the components (coursebook, workbook, teacher's guide, audio, etc) available?),
- add-ons and extras (Apart from a workbook, what other extras are offered with the course? Are there are internet sites with extra materials (exercises, texts, etc.) for users?),

An Evaluation of the English Textbooks: Perspectives from High School Teachers in Thai Nguyen City

- layout and design (Is the book attractive? Does the design of the book make it easy to follow?),
- instructions (Are the instructions clear and unambiguous? Are they written in language that the students will understand?)
- methodology (What kind of teaching and learning does the coursebook promote? Is there a good balance between study and activation?)
- syllabus (Is the syllabus appropriate for our students? Does it cover the language areas (grammar, vocabulary, functions, pronunciation, etc) that we would expect?)
- language skills (Does the coursebook have the appropriate balance of skills? Is the skills work really designed to promote the skills (e.g. writing for writing, not writing for learning)
- topics (Does the book contain a variety of topics? On balance, are the topics appropriate for the kind of students who will be using the coursebook?)
- cultural appropriacy (Is the material appropriate for the cultural situation that the students are in? Do the texts contain culturally insensitive material?)
- teacher's guide (Does the coursebook have an accompanying teacher's guide? Is it easy to use? Does it explain things clearly?)

III. METHODOLOGY

1. Description of the textbooks

The three-level English textbook series consists of English 10, English 11 and English 12 Global Success published by Education Publishing House co-operating with Pearson Education for high school students at the age of 16, 17, and 18 respectively. The series of textbooks aim at helping students to achieve level B1 of CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) or level 3 of VNFLPF (Six-level Foreign Language Proficiency for Vietnam, 2014). Each textbook contains 10 learning units in which there are eight components per each unit, including Getting Started, Language, Reading, Speaking, Listening, Writing, Communication and Culture/ CLIL, and Looking Back and Project.

2. Participants

The participants in the study were 30 teachers of English from six high schools where the English textbooks "English Global Success" are implemented in Thai Nguyen city. Ten of them obtain master's degree in English Language Teaching Methodology and twenty of them hold bachelor's degree. Their teaching experiences range from five to twenty-five years.

3. The instruments

The data of the study was obtained by means of a questionnaire which was based on the criteria for choosing and evaluating textbooks of Harmer (2007). It consisted of 15 questions, thirteen of which were five-point Likert scale questions. The questionnaire was divided into two parts written in Vietnamese to avoid possible misunderstanding. The first part was designed to collect participants' demographic information, consisting of their genders, the year of English teaching, their qualifications. The second part was used to investigate teachers' perceptions of the English textbooks for high school students.

4. Data collection procedures

The questionnaire was distributed to all of the 30 teachers by the researcher, and returned within one day. The data was analyzed through the descriptive statistical procedures of SPSS Version 20.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The tabulated data and the results of the study were represented, accompanied by the corresponding data analysis.

1. Price and availability

Table 1. Teachers' perspectives on the price and availability of the English textbooks

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
The price of the English textbooks is reasonable.	30	1.00	5.00	2.0	1.203
All the components (textbooks, workbooks, teachers' guide and audio-tapes are available.	30	4.00	5.00	4.8	.406

It can be seen from table 1 that among 30 teachers who participate in the study (N=30), most of them (M=2.0) disagreed that the price of the English textbooks is reasonable. It is, therefore, suggested that the English textbooks should be at lower prices. As for the availability, the teachers perceived that all the required components (textbooks, workbooks, teachers' guide, and audio-tapes) are highly available, as shown by the high mean (M=4.8) and low standard deviation (SD=.406). It is clear that the all the components of the English textbooks are fully provided, which is crucial for effective teaching and learning.

An Evaluation of the English Textbooks: Perspectives from High School Teachers in Thai Nguyen City

2. Add-ons and extras

Table 2. Teachers' perspectives on add-ons and extras

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
There are internet sites with extra materials (exercises, texts, etc.) for users.	30	4.00	5.00	4.4	.498

The high mean (M=4.4) in table 2 indicates a high level of agreement among 30 surveyed teachers. The high school teachers in Thai Nguyen city generally found the extra materials of the English textbooks offered on the internet valuable and beneficial. It is, therefore, advisable for the teachers to make use of these resources which can enhancing teaching effectiveness and enrich the learning experience for students.

3. Layout and design

Table 3. Teachers' perspectives on the layout and design of the English textbooks

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
The textbooks have an eye-catching layout and high-quality images.	30	1.00	5.00	2.7	1.317
The number of learning units, the components and component headings of a learning unit, the number of periods for each heading are clearly designed.	30	1.00	5.00	3.8	1.366

It is revealed from Table 3 that high school teachers' perceptions on eye-catching layout and high-quality images of the textbooks are different. The mean rating of 2.7 (M=2.7) and a standard deviation of 1.317 (SD=1.317) show that some teachers found the layout and images appealing, while others might not find them as attractive or relevant to their teaching needs. It is recommended that high school teachers should value clear organization and navigability over visual appeal alone to make sure that the textbooks support effective teaching and learning processes. Moreover, textbook publishers should consider ways to enhance visual appeal. As for clarity of learning units and components, the teachers agreed that the number of learning units, the components and component headings of a learning unit, the number of periods for each heading are clearly designed, as shown by the high mean (M=3.8). Clear component headings and structured units, in fact, help teachers navigate the textbook easily, which help the teachers save time.

4. Instructions

Table 4. Teachers' perspectives on the instructions of the textbooks

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
The instructions are clear and unambiguous.	30	2.00	5.00	4.1	.711

As can be seen from Table 4, 30 surveyed teachers agreed that the instructions of the English textbooks are clear and unambiguous, as indicated by the high mean rating (M=4.1) and low standard deviation (SD=.711). It is obvious that the clear instructions of the English textbooks can benefit students because they have clear guidelines so that they can understand the assignments and activities, and then can complete them by themselves.

5. Methodology

Table 5. Teachers' perspectives on teaching methods promoted in the textbooks

Methodology	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)	17	56.7	56.7	56.7
Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT)	5	16.7	16.7	73.3
Project-based Learning (PBL)	5	16.7	16.7	90.0
Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)	3	10.0	10.0	100.0
All of the above methods	0	0	0	0
Total	30	100.0	100.0	

The results from the table shows that CLT is the most prominently promoted teaching method in the English textbooks with 50% of the teachers choosing CLT in the survey. CLT encourages students to communicate real meaning as a way of learning, and which emphasizes language use, especially through concentrating on language functions (Harmer, 2007). TBLT and PBL were each mentioned by 16.7% of the teachers, while only 10% of the teachers agreed that the textbooks promote CLIL and none of them chose all of the aforementioned methods. In the English textbooks, the variety of teaching methods including CLT, TBLT,

An Evaluation of the English Textbooks: Perspectives from High School Teachers in Thai Nguyen City

PBL and CLIL which are all modern methods are used in teaching and learning. These inclusions in the textbooks point out the effort to align teaching and learning methods with current trends in language education.

6. Syllabus

Table 6. Teachers' perspectives on the coverage of the language areas

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
The textbooks cover the language areas (grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation) that I would expect.	30	2.00	5.00	4.2	.886

Table 6 shows that the teachers agreed that the textbooks adequately address grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. It suggests a high level of satisfaction among teachers regarding the comprehensiveness and adequacy of the language areas covered in the textbooks. It is, therefore, important to maintain and further enhance relevance of language coverage in textbooks to meet the needs and expectations of educators and learners.

7. Language skills

Table 7. Teachers' perspective on language skills in the textbooks

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
The textbooks have the appropriate balance of skills.	30	4.00	5.00	4.7	.466
The skills work is really designed to promote the skills (e.g: writing for writing, not writing for learning).	30	1.00	5.00	3.7	1.014

It is revealed from table 7 that the teachers strongly agreed that textbooks effectively balance the development of all language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking). This means that the English textbooks provide students with opportunities to practice and develop all necessary language skills. However, the skills work designed to promote skills is perceived not by the teachers with the mean rating of 3.7 ($M=3.7$). It is, therefore, suggested that effective skills work should clearly align with skill-specific objectives (e.g., writing tasks that focus on writing skills rather than just content learning).

8. Topics

Table 8. Teachers' perspectives on the topics in the English textbooks

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
The topics are familiar to the Vietnamese students and are suited to their age.	30	1.00	5.00	2.3	1.268

It can be seen from table 8 that the mean rating is 2.3 ($M=2.3$). This shows that the teachers disagreed that the topics are familiar to the Vietnamese students and are suited to their age. It is advisable that publishers should change some topics so that they can be interesting for Vietnamese students. Furthermore, publishers should pay more attention to the developmental stages and interests of students at different age levels.

9. Appropriateness

Table 9. Teachers' perspectives on appropriateness

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
The textbooks are appropriate for my students.	30	2.00	5.00	4.3	.802
The textbooks raise my students' interest in further English language study.	30	1.00	5.00	3.1	1.357

Table 9 reveals that the teachers strongly agreed that the textbooks are appropriate for their students. This appropriateness will be beneficial for the teachers because it is easy for them to implement the textbooks and support them in achieving desired learning outcomes.

With regards to students' interest in further language study, teachers perceive that the textbooks moderately raise their students' interest in further English language study. This means that there is variability in how effectively textbooks engage students and stimulate their interest. It is, consequently, suggested that publishers and educators should develop materials that not only meet educational standards but also motivate students to deepen their English language skills and interests.

V. CONCLUSION

In the study, high school teachers' perceptions of the English textbooks were investigated. Investigating teachers' perspectives on the English textbooks implemented for high school students is indispensable for publishers and educators to adjust their curriculum. Through the results of the study, the English textbooks generally meet expectations in terms of availability, extra

An Evaluation of the English Textbooks: Perspectives from High School Teachers in Thai Nguyen City

materials, clear design, instructional clarity, methodology, language areas and skills development. There are, however, areas including the price, layout, topics and student engagement that publishers should consider to improve in order to enhance overall effectiveness. In addition, collaboration between publishers and educators will be important in refining future editions to better meet the needs of students and educators in English language education.

REFERENCES

- 1) Brown, H.D (2001). *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*. New York: Longman.
- 2) Cunningsworth, A. (1995). *Choosing your coursebook*. Macmillan.
- 3) Hoang, V. V. (2016). Renovation in curriculum design and textbook development: An effective solution to improving the quality of English teaching in Vietnamese schools in the context of integration and globalization. *VNU Journal of Science: Education Research*, 32(4).
- 4) Hoang, V.V. (2018). MOET's three pilot English language communicational curricula for schools in Vietnam: rationale, design and implementation. *VNU Journal of Foreign Studies*, 34(2).
- 5) Harmer, J (1998). *How to Teach English: An Introduction to the Practice of English Language Teaching*. Harlow: Longman.
- 6) Harmer, J (2007). *The Practice of Language Teaching*. Pearson. Longman.
- 7) MOET. (2008). Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg: 'Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System, Period 2008 to 2020'. Retrieved from http://www.chinhphu.vn/portal/page/portal/chinhphu/hethongvanban?class_id=1&_page=18&mode=detail&document_id=78437
- 8) Nunan, D (1991). *Language Teaching Methodology: A textbook for teachers*. London: Prentice Hall.
- 9) Richards, J.C (2001). *Curriculum Development in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 10) Richards, J.C and C. Rodgers (1991). *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: CUP.
- 11) Richards, J.C & Schmidt, R (1983). *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*. Pearson Education.
- 12) Ur, P (1996). *A Course in English Language Teaching: Practice and Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.