Evaluation of *Prospect 1* in Terms of Task Types

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Abstract

Course books are a core part of any curriculum. Davison (1975) suggests that in the EFL classes, the next important component after the teacher is the textbook. As a matter of fact, constant evaluation of textbooks enables us to make appropriate decisions in educational programs. McGrath (2001) suggests some methods for evaluating materials including: checklist method, in-depth method and integrated method which is the combination of two former methods. Nowadays, under the influence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT), several textbooks have been introduced in EFL contexts, using different types of tasks. This study aims to evaluate the English course book used in 7th grade of high school in Iran, titled (Prospect1), in terms of task types. In this study Finch (1999) task type checklist is used as a reliable instrument. Also, an in-depth method is used to have a comprehensive evaluation. The findings show that static /one-way tasks occur more frequently than dynamic / two-way tasks. Furthermore, the frequency of shared tasks is more than other task types. This shows that pair work and group work are more focused in this book.

Keywords: textbook evaluation, CLT, TBLT, task types, checklist

Introduction

Task-based Instruction (TBI) based on the constructivist theory of learning and communicative language teaching methodology has evolved in response to some limitations of the traditional Presentation, Practice, Performance (PPP) approach (Long and Crookes, 1991; Ellis, 2003). Task-based teaching provides learners with opportunities for learner-to-learner interactions that encourage authentic use of language and meaningful communication. Nowadays, most textbooks and course books try to improve learners' communicative competence through using real-life and communicative tasks. Murphy (2003) emphasized the fact that tasks may be chosen and implemented so that particular pedagogic outcomes are achieved. Tasks must be designed carefully to lead the students to the intended objective.

As a matter of fact, students' achievements depend on different factors one of which is the features and quality of textbooks used in classes. Textbooks are necessary tools in teaching. They can manage the process of teaching and learning. Therefore, constant evaluation of textbooks enables us to make appropriate decisions in order to have more successful educational programs. Evaluation is made easier, more valid and objective when it is based on a reliable instrument. Checklist is an instrument that helps teachers or researchers in the ELT field, to evaluate teaching materials like textbooks.

Literature Review

Task- Based Language Teaching

Task-based learning was first developed by N. Prabhu (1987) in Bangalore, southern India. Prabhu believed that students may learn more effectively when their minds are focused on the task, rather than on the language they are using. It means that task-based instruction creates more favorable conditions and facilitates L2 acquisition. Task-based language teaching focuses on the ability to perform a task or activity without explicit teaching of grammatical structure. It provides learners with opportunities for learner-to-learner interactions that encourage authentic use of language and meaningful communication. Task-based instruction (TBI) views the learning process as a set of communicative tasks that are directly linked to the curricular goals they serve (Brown, 1994). The goal of a task is to "exchange meaning rather than to learn the second language" (Ellis, 2003).

In a task-based lesson, the teacher does not pre-determine what language will be studied, the lesson is based around the completion of a central task and the language studied is determined by what happens as the students complete it (Frost, 2004).

Skehan (1998*)* proposes five principles for task-based instruction:

1. Choose a range of target structures.
2. Choose tasks which create appropriate conditions for learning.
3. Select and sequence tasks to achieve balanced development.
4. Maximize the chances of a focus on form in the context of meaningful language use.
5. Use cycles of accountability. Get learners to self-assess regularly. (Adapted from Skehan 1998, pp.129-32)

Task

Task has been defined in different ways by different researchers and experts. Prabhu, the originator of TBLT, defines task as 'an activity which require learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allows teachers to control and regulate that process' (Van den Branden and others, 2006). For Nunan (1989), task is a piece of classroom work involving learners in understanding, directing, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is on meaning rather than form. Nunan reports that, "The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right" (Nunan, 1993, p. 59). Ellis (2003) believes that a task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. He states that a task can engage productive or receptive, oral or written skills and also various cognitive skills (Van den Branden and others, 2006).

Task Types

Tasks have been categorized in different ways. Some researchers group them based on the goals of the tasks, and others classify them according to the task features. Prabhu (1987) was the first to classify tasks into three types: information gap, reasoning gap, and opinion gap (Prabhu, 1987, cited in Nunan, 2004). Berwick (1988) distinguished between transactional and interpersonal tasks. Nunan divided tasks into two categories: "real-world tasks or target tasks" and "pedagogical tasks" (1989, p40-41). Furthermore, Ellis (1991) distinguished between reciprocal and non-reciprocal tasks. The distinction between these two types of tasks is that the former requires an exchange of information while the latter does not. Richards (2001) divided tasks into jigsaw tasks, information gap tasks, problem solving tasks, decision–making tasks, and opinion exchange tasks. Later, Nunan (1999) grouped the tasks according to the strategies underpinning them. As a result, he proposed five different tasks types: cognitive, interpersonal, linguistic, affective, and creative. Finch (1999) offers a summary of task-types, from static to dynamic, and from experience tasks to independent tasks. He distinguishes between static/one-way and dynamic/two-way tasks, and offers representative activities in terms of discovery tasks, experience tasks, guided tasks, shared tasks and independent tasks. These divisions are flexible and often overlapping; activities can be described as belonging to various categories, depending on the context and the manner in which they are used. Task difficulty is important in this structuring, and Candlin (1987) offers a checklist of considerations:

1. One-way tasks should come before two-way tasks;
2. Static tasks should come before dynamic ones;
3. "Present time" tasks should come before ones using the past or the future;
4. Easy tasks should come before difficult tasks;
5. Simple tasks (only one step) should come before complex tasks (many steps).

Textbook Evaluation

Teaching materials play an important role in language teaching and learning programs. Davison (1975) suggests that in the EFL classes, the next important component after teacher is the textbook. Tomlinson (2001) defines a textbook as a book "which provides the core materials for a course" .Textbooks can serve as a tool to motivate and stimulate language learning (Skierso,1991).As a matter of fact, textbooks should meet certain standards and criteria because the content of textbooks influences what teachers teach and what learners learn. Constant evaluation of textbooks enables us to make appropriate decisions in order to have successful educational programs. The basic goal of materials evaluation is selecting teaching materials which are appropriately relevant for a particular teaching context. Sheldon (1988) mentions different reasons for textbook evaluation.

It provides good knowledge of a textbook's content and helps teachers to identify textbook merits and demerits already being used. Tok (2010) highlights the value of textbook evaluation, by saying that "evaluation is an intrinsic part of teaching and learning". For him evaluation is a "matter of judging the fitness of something for a particular purpose" (Tok, 2010).

Famous researchers of this field including Cunningsworth, 1995, McDonough and Shaw, 2005,

Sheldon, 1998, Tomlinson, 2001, Hutchinson & Torres, 1994, etc. all believe that we must evaluate textbooks to make sure that they all meet basic needs of teachers to get along efficiently with the whole process of teaching a second language. Cunningsworth (1995) states that textbook evaluation helps teachers move beyond "impressionistic assessments" and it help them to acquire useful, accurate, systematic, and contextual insights into the overall nature of textbook material.

There are different ways to evaluate textbooks. McGrath (2001) suggests some methods including "checklist method" that means analyzing a textbook based on some criteria, and "in-depth method" in which some parts of textbook are selected for evaluation. In another classification, McGrath introduces "pre-use", "in-use" and "post-use" evaluation. Since every method has its pros and cons, he recommends an integrated approach in which all methods are applied.

Evaluation is made easier, more objective and valid when it is based on a reliable instrument. One of the most reliable methods for evaluating teaching materials is the checklist. An evaluation checklist is an instrument that provides the evaluator with a list of features of successful teaching materials. A number of checklists have been made by researchers (e.g., Daoud & Celce-Murcia, 1979; Eriksoussy, 1993; Skierso, 1991; Sheldon, 1988; Tomlinson, 2001; Tucker, 1975; Ur, 1996; Williams, 1983). Most of these standardized evaluation checklists contain similar components. However, the criteria which every checklist is based on, distinguish them.

For Ansary & Babaii (2002) evaluation checklists should have some criteria related to the physical characteristics of textbooks such as layout, organizational, and logistical characteristics. They also suggest that a textbook's methodology, aims, approaches and the degree to which it fits the needs of the individual teacher's approach and the organization's overall curriculum should be considered as important criteria (Ansary and Babaii, 2002). In addition, 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 socio-cultural environment.

Textbook Evaluation in Iran

English is taught and learned as a foreign language in Iran and outside the language classroom there are few or no opportunities for language learners to practice and use English. Therefore, the role of ELT materials used in classrooms is very important. Some studies have focused on text book evaluation in Iran in order to choose the best teaching materials. However, they are mostly about global course books taught in institutes. For instance, Sahragard, Rahimi, and Zaremoaeyeddi (2008) conducted an in-depth evaluation of the *Interchange* series with a focus on the real application of communicative and task-based approaches applied in the materials of the text book. Razmjoo and Jozaghi (2010) devised a checklist based on the elements of the Multiple Intelligences (MI) theory proposed by Gardner (1998) to evaluate the *Top Notch* series. Alemi, Jahangard & Hesami (2013) evaluated two global course books (*Top Notch* and *Interchange*) which are taught in Iranian ELT institutes, in terms of their task types according to Nunan's (1999) classification of the tasks.

In some studies English course books of high schools in Iran have been evaluated based on different criteria. Jahangard (2007) evaluated four EFL textbooks which were prescribed for use in Iranian high schools by the Ministry of Education. The merits and demerits of the textbooks were discussed in detail with reference to 13 common features extracted from different material evaluation checklists. Another example is Hashemi and Rahimpour's (2011) study, which is the evaluation of three English language textbooks of Iranian high schools. They concluded that English language textbooks that are taught at Iranian high schools do not meet teachers' expectations. Davoudi & Khani (2012) evaluated High school textbooks of general English courses prepared and published by the Ministry of Education in Iran and (*New Bridge to Success)* series which are taught in Turkish high schools. They adopted ESL textbook evaluation checklist devised and prepared by Joshua Miekley (2005).

Recently new series of English books for guidance schools have been published under the title "Prospect". Since they are totally different from previous course books, a few studies have been conducted to evaluate them. For instance, Janfeshan & Nosrati (2014) utilized a checklist developed by Fiorella Biocchi in 2001, for analysis of "*Prospect 1*". In fact they believe that this checklist is designed for educational institutes.

Considering all studies and finding mentioned above, this study aims to evaluate the book "*Prospect1*" in terms of different task types. In order to do so, a checklist prepared by Finch (1999) is utilized.

Methodology

Tomlinson (1999) believes that there is not one sample plan for textbook evaluation, "the framework used must be determined by reasons, objectives, and circumstances of the evaluation". Since current study aims to evaluate the English course book used in 7th grade of high school in Iran, titled *Prospect1*, in terms of task types, a checklist of different task types provided by Finch (1999) is used. This checklist that is illustrated in (Table 1), distinguishes between static/one-way and dynamic/two-way tasks, and offers representative activities in terms of discovery tasks, experience tasks, guided tasks, shared tasks and independent tasks. These tasks are more explained in (Appendix A).

Table 1: Checklist of task-types (Finch, 1999)

Types of Tasks	Static(one-way)	Dynamic(two-way)
Experience tasks	• Memory games • Review activities(one-way) • Simple lexis activities(grammar &vocabulary) • Questionnaire (one-way)	• Brainstorming • Review activities(two-way) • Basic interviews • Questionnaire (two-way) • Storytelling
Guided tasks	• Using classroom language • Structural activities(drills) • Comprehension activities • Dictation activities • Role-plays	• Discovering activities • Group project-work • Dramas
Shared tasks	• Pair work(information gap, information transfer) • Group work (information gap, information transfer) • Tasks about class members • Simple dialogs • Language games	• Pair work (e.g. interview) • Group work (problem-solving, opinion gap) • Jigsaw activities • Surveys • Pyramid activities • Role-plays & simulations • Error correction • Peer- assessment • Discussions
Independent tasks	• Homework • Self-study (book, internet) • Self-assessment	• Independent projects • Writing to an email pal

Since different tasks have different effects on learning process, it is important to find out which task types should be used more. In this study the book *Prospect1* was analyzed carefully in order to identify what task types have the highest frequency and which ones have the lowest.

The book consists of 8 units and 4 review sections followed by a photo dictionary. There are 11 tasks in each unit and 12 tasks in review sections. These tasks vary from simple repetition of conversations to interviews and role-plays. The sequence of tasks is from simple static one-way tasks to dynamic pair work and group work activities. The frequency of different task types is calculated and it is illustrated in Table 2. Since the categories are overlapping their percentage is not calculated.

Table 2: The Frequency of Task Types

Task Types	Static (one-way)	Dynamic(two-way)
Experience tasks	20	20
Guided tasks	40	0
Shared tasks	16	24
Independent tasks	12	0

As it is illustrated in the table 2, static tasks are more frequent than dynamic tasks. Also, static guided tasks have the highest frequency and dynamic guided tasks and independent tasks have the lowest frequency. Regarding Experience tasks, static tasks occur as frequent as dynamic tasks. However, shared tasks are more dynamic than static in this book.

Conclusion

The present study evaluates "*Prospect 1*" which is used for high schools in Iran, in terms of task types. As this book is designed based on communicative language teaching principles, it consists of different communicative tasks that help students learn English and use it appropriately. The book consists of about 100 tasks. As the findings show most of tasks are static guided tasks. It means that using classroom language, structural activities (drills), comprehension activities and role-plays occur more than any other task type. The next frequent task type is dynamic shared tasks including pair and group work, role-plays and simulations. It shows that oral and communicative skills are emphasized. The low frequency of independent tasks shows that written tasks are less focused in this book.

Regarding the sequence of different task types, structural activities (drills) which are simpler are followed by some interviews and role-plays that are more challenging. However, the level of difficulty of tasks is so that students with no English background can understand and do them.

As every study has its own limitations, it worth mentioning that since this book is the first of six books in *Prospect* series, the other books can be evaluated in order to have a comprehensive assessment of this series. Also the criteria for evaluation can differ and this book can be evaluated based on other evaluative checklists.

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Appendix A: Task Types

Category 1: "Information-gap", "Information-transfer" and "Opinion-gap' tasks:

a) **Information-gap tasks:** (pair-work)

☐ Missing information is asked for and supplied by different students;

☐ Information flows in one direction ("what time is the next bus"?);

☐ Language is usually simple and can be based on a mode("Have you ever …?");

☐ The task is over when the information has filled in;

☐ There is often a focus on form.

b) **Information-transfer tasks:** (text-to-graphs, tables-to-graphs)

☐ Information is transferred from one place to another, often changing format. E.g. the information in a table is used to make a graph; information in a text is put into a table;

☐ Students have to find key words and ideas;

☐ Language is based on the text, but there is room for the students to make their own questions and answers.

c) **Opinion-gap tasks:** (discussions, role-plays, interviews)

☐ Authentic problems promote personal responses;

☐ Language is unpredictable;

☐ The students' language is used;

☐ Students' opinions are important;

☐ There is no focus on form.

☐ There is little focus on errors.

Category 2: "Static" and "Dynamic' tasks:

a) static tasks: (e.g. questionnaires, surveys, pair-work)

☐ simple one-way transfer of information ("Where is the book?" "On the table");

☐ students learn new content in a controlled (and "safe") learning environment;

☐ the language is controlled (from the teacher);

☐ the language is predictable;
☐ errors are easy to identify and to repair (consistent structures);
☐ there is often a focus on form;
☐ the interaction finishes after the answer to the question.

b) dynamic tasks: (e.g. free-talking, role-plays, discussions)

☐ the transfer of information can happen in many directions
☐ the language is made by the students;
☐ the language is not predictable;
☐ errors are only repaired if they interrupt communication;
☐ the transfer of information can continue for some time;
☐ communication is more important than grammatical accuracy;
☐ many forms can be used.

Category 3: "One-way" and "Two-way" tasks:

c) one-way tasks:

☐ usually static;
☐ information flows in one direction;
☐ there is no need to continue the interaction;
☐ the language is predictable;
☐ the language often follows a mode (e.g. "What time is it?", "What time is the movie?" "How many people in the class like ice-cream?");
☐ there is often a focus on form.

d) two-way tasks: (e.g. brainstorming, role-plays, simulations, discussions)

☐ often dynamic;
☐ information flows in more than one direction (questioner and responder);
☐ the language is unpredictable;
☐ many forms can be used;
☐ communication is important.

Category 4: "experience tasks", shared tasks", "guided tasks", "independent tasks":

e) experience tasks: (memory games, pre-task activities, brainstorming)

☐ these are often static, but dynamic, one-way or two-way tasks can be used;
☐ the learner's previous language-learning is important (e.g. memory games);
☐ the student becomes aware of the language that he already possesses;
☐ the student uses previous language-learning for new language;
☐ little or no focus on form;
☐ little or no focus on errors;
☐ a learning "schema" is made for the new language.

f) guided tasks:

☐ usually static (sometimes dynamic), one-way or two-way
☐ these support the students while they perform the task;
☐ they use predictable language;
☐ exercises are simple and can be based on a mode;
☐ exercises are often focused on form;
☐ exercises are often focused on errors;

g) shared tasks: (pair-work, group-work, class surveys, jigsaw activities)

☐ static or dynamic, one-way or two-way;
☐ cooperative learning strategies are encouraged;
☐ learners help each other (e.g. pair work, group work);
☐ learners correct each other.

h) independent tasks:

☐ usually dynamic, two-way;
☐ learners work alone (without the teacher);
☐ the teacher offers help in planning, etc.;
☐ language is unpredictable (e.g. discussions, projects);
☐ the teacher is a language resource;
☐ the student develops learning strategies;
☐ self-assessment is important.