

# Current Issues in the Evaluation Research of Writing Materials in Saudi Arabia

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## Abstract

Over the last two decades, there has been a growing trend in Saudi Arabia toward research on English language textbooks, such as Alamri (2008), Alenezi (2019), Al-harbi (2017), Aljouei and Alsuhaibani (2018), Al-Sowat (2012), and Alsulami (2021). The use of a Likert scale checklist approach to evaluate strong and weak points in L2 textbooks is a prominent feature of this trend. Teachers, administrators, supervisors, and/or students are inquired to complete a survey that includes a variety of questions, including language activities. However, such an approach has failed to address four major issues that hinder appropriate evaluation of writing activities in English textbooks. Thus, this study contributes to our understanding of how future studies should take current issues into account.

**Keywords:** Likert scale, problems of writing activities/materials, textbook evaluation

## 1. Introduction

L2 textbook evaluation plays a critical role in the development of L2 teaching and learning. The review of previous research shows that the evaluation of English language textbooks in Saudi Arabia has been conducted using a Likert scale checklist approach (Alamri, 2008; Alenezi, 2019; Al-Hajailan, 1999; Al-harbi, 2017; Alharbi, 2015; Aljouei & Alsuhaibani, 2018; Almalki, 2014; Al-Sowat, 2012; Alsulami, 2021; BinObaid, 2016). The purpose of this approach is to examine the general strengths and weaknesses of L2 school textbooks using views from language teachers, administrators, supervisors, and/or students. A questionnaire survey checklist can contain various categories, for example, language content, learning objectives, layout and design, appearance, appropriateness, teaching methods, language skills, activities, etc. There are several items under each major category, for example, Al-Sowat's study (2012) contained 79 items. Nevertheless, the Likert scale checklist approach has major problems that prevent a proper analysis of writing activities in English textbooks.

## 2. Issues Preventing an Accurate Evaluation of Writing Materials

This section aims to discuss four significant flaws that have become so dominant in L2 textbook evaluation research. In particular, they have prevented English language textbook researchers in Saudi Arabia from properly analyzing writing activities in textbooks in Saudi Arabia using a Likert scale checklist approach.

### 2.1 Problem One

The first problem is the checklist approach often disregards the connection between language activities (e.g., reading, listening, speaking, writing, grammar, vocabulary) offered in a learning unit of an English textbook. This approach often examines language activities in isolation, which does not provide an accurate understanding of the development of language skills. This idea also contradicts current research that states language skills are often interconnected and developed together. Hyland (2014) stated that L2 writing skills cannot be built in isolation; rather, they should be strengthened through reading. Textbook investigators in Saudi Arabia have disregarded the potential connection between writing activities and other language activities in a learning unit of an English textbook from an ecological perspective. Thus, there is a need to study how writing activities in the writing sections of textbooks are interconnected or independent from other activities in a learning unit.

Aljouei and Alsuhaibani (2018) created a Likert scale checklist from previous studies to evaluate *Traveller* series textbooks. The checklist items addressed writing skills in isolation from reading, listening, and speaking skills. Hence, the findings from the checklist provided no information about the interaction between writing skills and other language skills. Interestingly, they also conducted a content analysis of the textbooks. They briefly stated that many of the speaking activities are incorporated with the writing activities; learners discuss a specific subject and

then write about it. However, an expanded description was lacking. Furthermore, although the content analysis examined listening skill activities, speaking skills activities, and reading skill activities, the study did not explain whether writing activities are integrated with these activities. Likewise, it did not consider the possible interrelationships between language activities (listening, reading, and speaking) in a learning unit. It reported the results of these skills in isolation. For instance, the results about listening skills showed problems related to the authenticity of listening. Overall, as many studies, Aljouei and Alsuhaibani (2018) succeeded in achieving their goal by informing us about the strength and weakness of the *Traveller* series textbooks. Nevertheless, they did not provide information on the interrelationship between language activities in an English textbook, leaving us with a range of unanswered questions and little indication of how teachers may need to supplement their instruction appropriately.

## 2.2 Problem Two

The second problem is research findings have not educated professionals specifically about writing activities offered in L2 textbooks. In some studies, there is a complete absence of studying writing activities in the textbooks. For example, Al-Harbi (2017) and Almalki (2014) utilized questionnaires to collect data about textbooks, but they did not include any statement about writing activities and questions about specific language skills were limited. Al-Harbi's questionnaire about the textbooks *Traveller 3* and *Traveller 4* contained thirteen statements about language activities and twelve statements about language skills in general terms. Similarly, Almalki's survey had fifty statements about the textbook series *Flying High*. None of these studies contained a specific statement about writing skills or activities. Almalki (2014) included only one general statement about the four language skills asking language teachers in Saudi Arabia whether "Essential competencies across the four skills areas (reading, writing, listening and speaking) are identified and given priority in the development of the curriculum" (p. 93). In short, previous studies aimed to evaluate the strength and weakness of L2 textbooks using a Likert scale checklist, but they have not adequately dealt with writing activities offered in English textbooks used in Saudi Arabia.

## 2.3 Problem Three

The third problem is that studies with some data about writing activities have found conflicting results that are difficult to interpret. For example, Alharbi (2015) utilized two checklists to evaluate the *Flying High* series textbooks. In the first attempt, Alharbi used Keban, Muhtar, and Zen's (2012) checklist to obtain teachers' views about these statements: "All language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) are balanced and integrated within each unit," and "Writing activities are suitable for young learners' level" (p. 26). The results showed that 14 teachers rated them either good (40%) or excellent (30%). Alharbi concluded that the teachers had positive opinions about these two statements.

However, in the second attempt, Alharbi used William's (1983) checklist, which had four statements about writing. The statements included: (1) "It gives practice in controlled and guided composition in the early stages," (2) "It relates written work to the pupils' age, interests, and environment," (3) "It demonstrates techniques for handling aspects of composition teaching," and (4) "It relates written work to structures and vocabulary practiced orally" (p. 12). The results indicated that the vast majority of teachers disagreed with the first three statements.

Alharbi indicates that the teachers' opinions about writing skills offered in the *Flying High* series were negative. However, most of them agreed with the final statement. This evidence suggests that it would be interesting to investigate how the texts make these connections to not only structures and vocabulary but also other skills. Briefly, Alharbi's study demonstrated that checklists, which include vague statements about writing activities, might not provide an accurate picture about the representation of writing activities in textbooks.

## 2.4 Problem Four

The fourth and last problem is the checklist approach implemented in the Saudi Arabian context often relies on quantitative investigation. Textbook researchers often used percentages and numbers to show their results. Yet, there is much less information about the qualitative examination of English textbooks in Saudi Arabia that could help us understand how the textbooks offer writing strategies to prepare students to become skilled writers. This issue implies that there is a need for qualitative research.

## 3. Conclusion

This review has discussed the main limitations of L2 textbook evaluation research conducted in the Saudi Arabian context. Specifically, it demonstrates how a Likert scale checklist approach can prevent English language textbook researchers in conducting an appropriate evaluation of writing activities presented in textbooks. The study contributes to our understanding of how future studies should take into consideration current problems. Thus, more

research using various L2 textbook evaluation research methods is needed to provide a suitable picture about the inclusion of writing activities in textbooks in order to develop a student's writing skills.

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