

ESP Textbook Evaluation: The Case of Kuwaiti Students of Business Administration

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Abstract

Textbooks are considered an essential component of classroom materials. Teachers usually examine a wide range of textbooks offered in the book market to determine an appropriate one that fits the pedagogical demands. Textbooks' evaluation is, therefore, important to determine and improve their suitability for students' needs. Specifically, in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP), textbooks play a significant role in enhancing students' learning of specialized English skills and using such skills to address occupational needs.

This study was undertaken to evaluate the quality of the *Business Result Second Edition (2017)* textbook and its suitability for the needs of students majoring in Business Administration (BA) at the College of Business Studies (CBS) in Kuwait. An evaluation checklist was utilized to examine five factors (subject matter, linguistic issues, exercises and activities, course objectives, and layout of materials and visuals). Participants included 10 English language teachers who taught the ESP course at CBS. Results indicated that despite having some disadvantages, the textbook was relatively suitable for the course. The findings of this study can be adopted by the curricula designers at CBS to improve or modify the textbook in question.

Keywords: English for specific purposes (ESP), textbooks, textbook evaluation, checklist

1. Introduction

Since the late 1960s, English for specific purposes (ESP) has emerged as one of the most prominent areas of English language teaching (ELT). It has received significant attention in the field of teaching English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) (Knight, 2022; Liu & Hu, 2021). ESP is a learner-centered approach to teaching English as an additional language that focuses on developing English skills in specific disciplines. As defined by Anthony (2018):

ESP is an approach to language teaching that targets the current and/or future academic or occupational needs of learners, focuses on the necessary language ... and skills ... and assists learners in meeting these needs through the use of general and/or discipline-specific teaching materials and methods. (p. 1)

Textbooks and materials are the most convenient means of providing the necessary language skills required by the teaching-learning system, in general, and ESP, in particular (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994). Therefore, ensuring they are suitable for the intended courses is of utmost importance. This can be achieved via textbook evaluation, which is the purpose of this research paper.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Role of Textbooks in Language Learning/Teaching

Textbooks play a pivotal role in language teaching and learning, particularly in EFL/ESL teaching and learning. They are considered important linguistic resources teachers use to assist students in achieving specific learning objectives. Hutchinson and Torres (1994) argue that textbooks have a vital and positive role in teaching and learning English. They indicate that textbooks provide the necessary input into classroom lessons through different texts, activities, and explanations. Therefore, no teaching-learning situation, they argue, is complete without its relevant textbook. Similarly, Sheldon (1988) suggests that textbooks not only offer considerable advantages for both students and teachers when they are used in ESL/EFL classrooms but also "represent the visible heart of any ELT program" (p. 237).

O'Neill (1982) provides four justifications for using textbooks. Firstly, most parts of textbook materials can fit students' needs, even if they are not specifically tailored for them. Secondly, textbooks allow students to review their learning progress and make plans in terms of future learning. Also, textbooks are equipped with good material, which is available to students at affordable prices. Finally, appropriate textbooks allow for adaptation and improvisation by the teachers to meet students' needs. In addition, Cunningsworth (1995) emphasizes the multiple roles textbooks serve in the ELT curriculum. He argues that textbooks present the spoken and written material, promote communicative interaction, stimulate ideas for classroom activities, serve as a language reference for learners, offer self-directed learning, support less experienced teachers, and serve as a syllabus where they reflect pre-assigned learning objectives. Similarly, Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) indicate that coursebooks expose learners to the English language. They provide four reasons for using textbooks in ESP classrooms: as a source of English language, especially in situations where English is a foreign language; as learning support, where they stimulate cognitive processes; for motivation, where they encourage fun and creativity; and for self-study or reference purposes.

However, despite their crucial role in the classroom, several researchers (e.g., Cunningsworth, 1995; Fajardo-Dack, 2016; Knight, 2022; Richards, 2017) argue that textbooks should not be the only source of teaching material. Cunningsworth (1995), for example, states that in ESP programs, textbooks cannot satisfy the diverse and broad needs of all its users. Heavy independence on a single textbook, he further argues, reduces teachers' creativity, limiting their flexibility and contributions to the learning process. Fajardo-Dack (2016) also claims that textbooks remove power and initiative from teachers because they are requested to follow prescribed curricula and use textbooks that may not fit students' needs. In addition, Richards (2017) indicates that textbooks largely determine what topics are taught in the classroom, and teachers, confined by a textbook, feel limited or restricted in what they present to students. Supplementary materials are, therefore, supportive additions because they can support the core textbook and allow innovations toward individual students' needs. Moreover, Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) point out that supplementary materials can maximize students' exposure to the language when using them for their own learning practice. Yet, despite the different attitudes toward textbooks, it is widely agreed that textbooks are of great value in the process of teaching and learning (Knoch & Macqueen, 2022; Macalister & Nation, 2020; Mishan, 2005; Tomlinson, 2012; Viana, Bocorny, & Sarmento, 2019).

2.2 Textbook Evaluation

While textbooks play an important role in the teaching and learning process, "they should not determine the aims themselves or *become* the aims," but rather they should be "at the service of teachers and learners" (Cunningsworth, 1995, p. 7). As Mukundan and Kalajahi (2013) indicate, textbooks can best be seen as an important resource in achieving aims and objectives that have already been established in terms of students' needs and language learning outcomes. Given the nature of ESP, that is, it is designed for specific disciplines; textbooks need to serve these disciplines by reflecting their context and being compatible with the needs and interests of the learners. Cunningsworth (1995) argues that ESP textbooks tend to be viewed as distinct from other general ELT textbooks because of the emphasis on the content. He maintains that "it is [therefore] of crucial importance that careful selection is made and that the materials selected closely reflect the aims, methods, and values of the teaching program" (p. 7). Accordingly, in selecting a new textbook, it is essential to conduct an evaluation to ensure that it is suitable and meets the specific needs of learners and that it is in line "with institutional ideologies on the nature of language and learning" (Nunan, 1991, p. 209).

Sheldon (1988) offers justifications for evaluating textbooks. He argues that evaluation helps teachers and curriculum developers make important educational and administrative decisions. They will be able to identify the merits and demerits of available textbooks and find a solution to endless problems of choosing among ample alternatives. Textbook evaluation can also contribute to teachers' development and professional growth. Several researchers (e.g., Byrd, 2001; Ellis, Skehan, Li, Shintani, & Lambert, 2020; Siegel, 2021) claim that textbook evaluation can assist teachers in going beyond impressionistic assessments through gaining useful, accurate, and systematic insights into the nature of the textbook material. Textbook evaluation, therefore, can potentially serve as a way of 'conducting research' as well as a form of 'professional empowerment and improvement' (Ellis, 1997, p. 41).

Richards (2017) points out that evaluation is a continuous process. It helps to build educational programs, assess their achievements, and improve their effectiveness. Through evaluation, he suggests, educators can make sound judgments about the efficiency of the materials and textbooks used to bring about intended learning outcomes.

Thus, evaluation is an essential part of learning and teaching. It is one of the essential elements of any curriculum and plays a substantial role in determining what students learn. As Rea-Dickins and Germaine (1992) put it, “evaluation is an intrinsic part of teaching and learning” (p. 3). Therefore, material evaluation should be the top priority of any curriculum.

2.3 Checklists as an Evaluation Tool

Among different evaluation tools, checklists can be useful for evaluating ESP textbooks to determine their suitability and whether they need to be supplemented and/or modified. McGrath (2016) points out that one of the advantages of using checklists is that they are systematic in a way that they ensure all important items are considered for evaluation and that they are ‘checked off (or ticked)’ (p. 26) once their presence has been identified. Checklists, he further adds, are also useful for comparison and contrast. They allow comparisons between different sets of textbook materials and facilitate decision-making. Furthermore, checklists are considered a convenient and flexible evaluation tool as educators can add or drop different evaluation items, that is, they can be ‘tailored’ (p. 27) according to their needs.

Detailed checklists can be composed to carry out an in-depth evaluation of a textbook. Researchers (e.g., Cunningsworth, 1995; McDonough, Shaw, & Masuhara, 2013; McGrath, 2016) suggest that detailed checklists could consist of a comprehensive set of criteria that can be exhaustive enough to ensure the assessment of all characteristics of the textbook. This will facilitate the examination of the suitability of the textbook in serving learners’ educational needs and syllabus requirements (Cunningsworth, 1995).

Checklists can also be helpful in ‘pre-use’ and ‘post-use’ material evaluation. Several researchers (e.g., Ellis et al., 2020; Mukundan, 2007; Mukundan & Kalajahi, 2013) indicate that in pre-use, or predictive, evaluation of textbooks, checklists can assist educators in determining which textbooks best suit their purposes. Once they have used a specific textbook, they can further use checklists to diagnose its strength and weakness and determine if it has ‘worked’ (Ellis, 1997, p. 36) for them. This type of evaluation is referred to as retrospective evaluation. However, while each type of evaluation has its own significance and aims at making the teaching/learning environment more effective, it is suggested that textbook evaluation should be a ‘cyclical’ process (McGrath, 2016, p. 14). The pedagogical values and suitability of the textbook need to be continuously evaluated in all two types of evaluation (Ellis, 2018). For the current study, the second type of evaluation was used.

3. The Present Study

This study investigated the appropriateness of the ESP textbook assigned to Business Administration (BA) students at the College of Business Studies (CBS), Kuwait. The college offers a 2-year diploma degree in BA. During their studies, students take two ESP courses: ENG 154, followed by the more advanced course ENG 204. The textbook under investigation was *Business Result Pre-Intermediate Second Edition*, published by Oxford University Press, assigned for ENG 154 course. A post-use evaluation was carried out on the textbook.

The curricula designers at CBS aim to equip the students with the English communication skills required for future recruitment in the business-related workplace. It is, therefore, essential to ensure that students have adequate English proficiency and can compete in the job market. Thus, there was a need to conduct the present study to evaluate the current textbook assigned to business students to examine to what extent it fits the pedagogical demands and is adequate in preparing students for their future workplace.

4. Methodology

The objectives of this study were to evaluate the quality of the business textbook and to examine its suitability for students’ needs. To meet these objectives, quantitative methods for data collection and analysis were used.

4.1 Participants

A total of 10 English language teachers working at CBS participated in this study. The language instructors have a minimum qualification of a Master of Arts degree in TESOL, TESL, and TEFL and have a teaching experience in ESP ranging from 5 to 30 years. Upon their approval to participate in this study, the teachers signed the consent form, agreed to the procedure, and for this material to be used for research purposes.

4.2 Instrument

One of the most established instruments used to evaluate textbooks is checklists. This study adopted Sheldon’s (1988) textbook evaluation checklist, which is widely used in the literature (e.g., AbdelWahab, 2013; Mukundan, Hajimohammadi, & Nimehchisalem, 2011). The checklist was also constructed using elements of Miekley’s (2005) evaluation model. As Miekley (2005) indicates, the items in the checklist are based on either previously

developed checklists (e.g., Byrd, 2001; Macalister & Nation, 2020) or recent research; for example, investigation concerning effective strategies used in second language teaching (e.g., Auerbach & Paxton, 1997; Lee & Heinz, 2016; Moran, 1991). The checklist examined five main parts: subject matter, linguistic issues, exercises and activities, course objectives, and layout of materials and visuals. Each part consisted of 4, 3, 3, 3, and 3 items, respectively. The rating system is based on a 5-point Likert scale: excellent, good, adequate, poor, and very poor.

4.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The checklist was distributed to the English teachers by the researcher. The participants were required to rate each item on the checklist according to the 5-point scale. The checklist resulted in numerical data. Microsoft Excel software was employed to generate the percentage for each scale point and to calculate the average responses for the items.

5. Results and Discussion

The first area under investigation was subject matter. This part consisted of 4 items. The first item was: *the language in the textbook is natural and genuine, i.e., authentic pieces of language*. 70% of the respondents selected excellent, whereas 30% selected good. The next item was: *the content motivates and interests students*. 90% of the respondents selected good, and 10% selected excellent. The third item was: *the content is compatible with students' needs and background knowledge*. Similar to their response to the second item, 90% of the respondents selected good, whereas 10% selected excellent. The fourth and last item in the subject matter area was: *the content is up to date*. 60% of the respondents selected good, whereas 40% selected excellent.

The next area was related to linguistic issues. This part consisted of 3 items. The first item was: *vocabulary and grammar are gradually presented from simple to complex*. 80% of the respondents selected good, and 20% selected excellent. The second item was: *new grammar and vocabulary are repeated in the following chapters for reinforcement of meaning and use*. 50% selected adequate, 40% selected good, and 10% selected excellent. The last item in the area of linguistic issues was: *new vocabulary is presented in various ways (e.g., glosses, appositives, and contextualization)*. 60% of the respondents selected good, 30% selected adequate, and 10% selected excellent.

The third area investigated exercises and activities. This part consisted of 3 items. The first item was: *the interactive and task-based activities require students to engage with the new vocabulary to communicate*. 50% selected excellent, 30% selected adequate, and 20% selected good. The second item was: *exercises and activities encourage students to use the grammar rules by creating situations in which these rules are required*. 40% selected excellent, 40% selected good, and 20% selected adequate. The third item was: *exercises and activities encourage critical thinking*. 40% of the respondents selected excellent, 30% selected adequate, 20% selected good, and 10% selected poor.

The next area dealt with course objectives. This part consisted of 3 items. The first item was: *the textbook is suitable for the intended students*. 50% of the respondents selected excellent, and the rest (50%) selected good. The second item was: *the textbook supports course and program objectives*. 60% of the respondents selected excellent, and 40% selected good. The third item was: *the textbook is in line with broader educational concerns*. 70% of the respondents selected good, and 30% selected excellent.

The last area investigated the layout of the textbook and visuals. This area consisted of 3 items. The first item was: *the textbook is appealing*. 60% of the respondents selected good, whereas 40% selected excellent. The next item was: *photographs and illustrations motivate and interest students*. 60% of the respondents selected good, whereas 40% selected excellent. The third item was: *the size and format of the print are appropriate for the reader*. 50% of the respondents chose good, 40% chose excellent, and 10% chose adequate.

Based on the results obtained, the textbook in question is relatively suitable, with teachers' responses mainly falling under the categories of excellent and good. As shown above, most items on the checklist are highly ranked, with an overall average score of 4. However, concerning grammar and vocabulary recycling in the following chapters, this item is mostly rated adequate, with an average score of 3. Nevertheless, the textbook provides online supplementary material where students can find additional exercises to enhance their practice of the new vocabulary and structure.

Notably, while all responses for all items fall under excellent, good, and adequate, 10% of the participants ranked the relation between the exercises and critical thinking poor with an average score of 3 for this item. It should be noted, however, that no textbook is perfect, and no one textbook will satisfy all users. Therefore, textbooks should not be the only source of the learning process. Complementary materials, in this case, need to

be considered as they can be helpful if a textbook is lacking in a specific area or does not deal with it in a satisfactory way (Cunningsworth, 1995).

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study evaluated an ESP textbook assigned to students of Business Administration. A checklist was used to evaluate its suitability for students' needs and whether it fits the pedagogical demands. Data obtained from language instructors teaching the ESP course revealed that the textbook is relatively useful despite having some disadvantages.

Textbook evaluation is deemed very important because the data obtained can help make decisions about the future of textbooks (Siegel, 2021). To develop and improve a curriculum, textbooks used in ESP programs, and ELT in general, need to be evaluated. This study has contributed to the field of ESP, specifically in emphasizing the role of textbooks in ESP programs. It also builds on the body of work highlighting the importance of evaluating ESP textbooks to ensure their suitability for students' needs, thus fulfilling program objectives.

The findings of this study have significant implications for curricula designers and language instructors at CBS. The results can be used as a reference to improve or modify the textbook. Curricula designers at CBS can use these findings to update the textbook with supplementary materials and encourage the teachers to utilize the online materials and resources provided by the textbook publisher. Several workshops could also be arranged to train the teachers to use the online materials and resources, given that the publisher offers these for free.

This study is not free from limitations. The study is based on quantitative methods for data collection and analysis. A quantitative approach derives findings from numerical values and statistics calculated in an 'objective' manner (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 31). However, this study might benefit from non-statistical data, namely, interview data. Interviewing the participants might allow for an in-depth understanding of their responses and their varying opinions on the same evaluative items. This, nonetheless, can be a point of departure for future research.

While this study aimed at a retrospective evaluation of the textbook, it emphasizes the importance of conducting a needs analysis before the beginning of the course to further specify students' needs. The lack of needs analysis is the main reason for the unsuitability of many ESP textbooks. Future research can pursue this issue. There is also a need for further research to survey the students' views and to explore their degree of satisfaction with the textbook. Their points of view can reveal specific data about any shortcomings associated with the textbook. Moreover, further studies can be conducted to observe how the textbook is used in the classrooms.

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