

AN EVALUATIVE REVIEW OF A COURSE IN ENGLISH, BOOK #4

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1. Introduction

Course books are said to be the core of language teaching and learning processes on which the EFL teachers and English language institutes obviously base their activities. EFL students often consult teachers for a suitable textbook or even a good institute to be recommended to them for self-study or regular classroom attendance. Frankly speaking, most of recommended textbooks are judged on superficial and physical appearances rather than from an evaluative point of view.

One of these prominent centers Iran Language Institute (ILI) affiliated with the Institute for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults enjoys the most popularity due to its systematic methodology, resourceful teaching materials and well-experienced teachers. The course books are prepared and adapted by the publishing office of the ILI and are used by all branches through the country. Course books BE, BA, 1, 2, 3 are elementary, 4, 5, 6, 7 are intermediate and 8 through 12 are considered for advanced users. Course books 4-7 have the same format and this paper will mostly deal with level four course book.

2. Significance of the Study

Iran Language Institute is as a prominent institute, being overwhelmed by enthusiastic students waiting long enough to be enrolled in EFL classrooms, claims an eclectic approach to EFL teaching, but the course books appear to be based on audio-lingual material design procedures. Therefore, there appears to be a strong and sufficient rationale for a survey to be conducted to locate strengths and possible weaknesses of the course book series. Furthermore, it has been observed and reported that, at times, teachers complain of the contents of the course books. Moreover, the researcher teaching these series up to course book #5 has experienced some of these shortcomings, especially in level 4 resulting in many students failure.

To carry out this piece of study, the reviewer has utilized frameworks proposed by Sheldon (1988) and Skierso (1991) which contain a comprehensive summary of common core factors that reviewers, administrators, teachers, learners, academic and educational advisors most frequently adhere to when deciding on the selection and use of a textbook.

3. Factual Details

- 3.1. Title: A Course in English #4**
- 3.2. Authors: Iran Language Institute editorials**
- 3.3. Publisher: Iran Language Institute**
- 3.4. Price: 5500 Rials**
- 3.5. ISBN: N/A**
- 3.6. Number of Pages: 212 pages**
- 3.7. Components: Spoken/Reading/Dialog/Composition**
- 3.8. Level: Pre-intermediate (as a part of a series)**
- 3.9. Size: Medium (16X24cm.)**
- 3.10. Units: 11 units each comprised of vocabulary, dialog, reading, spoken, writing**
- 3.11. Hours: 44 hours (including mid-term and final exam)**
- 3.12. Target Skills: All four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing)**
- 3.13. Target Learners: EFL learners (especially Iranian learners)**
- 3.14. Assessment: Good**

4. Features

4.1. Rationale

The course book seems to be bridging the gap between elementary and intermediate levels. The objectives of the book are not mentioned, but it seems to be based on present Iranian students' academic needs, however not directly stated.

4.2. Availability

Copies are only obtainable for enrolled students through ILI branches throughout the country. Therefore, it is not available on the market.

4.3. User's Specifications

Specifications such as target age, range, culture, probable learning preferences are not introduced. However, the possible students must have either successfully completed level 3 or been assigned to this level after taking part in a placement test and an oral interview with the minimum age of 14. The learner is required to have an appropriate level of fluency in oral production and reading and writing. Different course books for different levels concentrates on an intensive English course than an ESP program from elementary to the advanced level.

4.4. Layout/Graphics

The text is composed of eleven units starting with a table of contents with no introductory section or any mention of the author(s). Each unit includes a vocabulary section with related definitions and example sentences following by a dialog with a few questions; a reading passage with some general, multiple-choice or matched questions and vocabulary development section with completion exercises; a

spoken section started with some directed discourse questions, followed by substitution and transformation drills; and a writing section which deals with guided composition. The text utilizes a traditional audio-lingual design based on mechanical drilling. There is no use of graphics or pictures in the text, except a black and white picture preceding each reading passage. This appears to be a major flaw.

4.5. Accessibility

There appears to exist some terms of the material organization so that it makes it hard for the learner to spot his location in the process of learning and advancing smoothly.

Words definitions seem, in some cases, more difficult than the words themselves. No phonetic transcription is given to help the learners for better pronunciation of the words. Example sentences seem to be incomplete and definitions are contrived.

Dialogs look artificial and in most cases contrived; therefore, lacking vitality of real life conversations. The exchanges sometimes include long and jaw-breaking utterances for both the teacher and the learner.

Reading passages seem more natural, but some of them contain words, structures or idioms which do not suit the prescribed level of mastery of the learner. Multiple-choice questions are not sufficient and are mostly superficial than being inferential. The vocabulary development section which contains words and their derivatives seems to be inadequate to improve the sense of creativity in the learners.

The spoken section, which is to be done orally, starts with the direct discourse which is promising and gives the learners a chance to converse. Grammar explanations seem to be incomplete and insufficient and even in cases misleading. Substitution drills look artificial, tedious and excessive varying from easy to hard ones not following an appropriate sequence. Even gradation and selection appear to be not perfectly logical. Due to their audio-lingual style of material design, the drills whether substitutional or transformational are teacher-controlled and lack any pair work or learner's interaction.

The unit ends with a writing section which is designed to improve the mechanics of writing in the learners. However, in most cases, they fail this goal and are mere exercises with no sense of improvement in the writing habits of the students.

There is not any word or verb forms list or any appendices to guide the students to the proper page and unit for revision, self-study and effective explanation at the end; however, there exist small spaces for student's notes through the text.

4.6. Linkage

The book lacks meaningful exercises, but it abounds in mechanical drills, designed for repetition, substitution and limited question-answer transformation. The text is not accompanied by any workbook; however, a writing section ends each

unit to be done as homework. The materials are geared to the dialogs and reading passages, manipulating the structures introduced in terms of theme, situation, topic, grammatical and lexical progression. The text enjoys common internal and external coherence, gradually becoming more difficult in terms of structure and vocabulary; presenting some of the modal auxiliaries, indirect questions, intensifiers, conditionals type I, three major subordinating clauses (noun, relative, and adverbial), etc.

4.7. Selection/Grading

Dominated by audio-lingual material design approach, it becomes apparent that the materials have been grammatically sequenced. Moreover, the authors have tried to give precedence to more frequent and easier vocabulary items over difficult ones; however, in some cases, they have failed in this criterion. Furthermore, there is no mention of any criterion behind selection, gradation and sequencing.

4.8. Physical Characteristics

No space has been designed for students' notes except the margins which may be used for this purpose. Binding and paper quality of the copies is so low that they may wear out easily after a term's use.

4.9. Appropriacy

The topics of the dialogs are not fully of everyday use and they seem contrived and remote. The reading passages, more or less, bear the same above-mentioned problem. However, they make it possible for the learners to interact with more genuine written language. It needs to be mentioned that the material and topics seem inappropriate for learners below the age of seventeen.

4.10. Authenticity

One of the major disadvantages with this text and others related to this series is the fact that the authenticity and realism of the material has undergone large mutation due to cultural reasons and appear to be more artificial than authentic or realistic. This results in more bookish and formal style of language use.

4.11. Sufficiency

As a major shortcoming, although the vocabulary, dialog and passages are tolerable, the grammatical structures seem to be over-abundant, especially the incomplete introduction of the three major types of nominal, adjectival, and adverbial clauses, faces the teacher and the learner, in particular, with much difficulty due to insufficient time for presentation, practice and intake. However, the text has recently been provided with a supplementary self-study text containing more explanation on grammatical points, completion and multiple-choice test items.

Some seven fifteen-minute but very old black and white video-tapes accompanying the text appear to be the only audiovisual aid to the syllabus. Iran Language Institute has done its best to overcome these problems by employing more experienced and resourceful teachers.

4.12. Cultural Bias

It is quite natural for a government affiliated institute to try to reduce the target cultural effects and make attempts to base the content of the text on more universal and culture-free topics. The contents of the text seem to be adaptations of series used by IAS before the revolution and other sources on the market. The authors have tried to grade the structures first and then to select topics to be geared to the grammar of each unit with no specific educational philosophy behind it. The text seems neutral to stereotyped or offensive images of gender, race, social class or nationality, trying to use more Iranian names and locations.

4.13. Educational Validity

The text follows, more or less, classic principles of Audio-lingual Method of language teaching. Thus, it reacts against traditional grammar giving primacy to oral language than written form. They consider reinforcement as a vital element in the learning process. Rote learning by memorizing dialogs and performing pattern drills will enhance verbal behavior. Analogy provides a better foundation for language learning than analysis. The context bears the meaning and teaching a language involves teaching aspects of the culture of native speakers (Richards and Rodgers, 1986). However, academic staff has recently claimed that they follow an eclectic approach to language teaching and try to modify the material. It is apparent that the material content is geared to the educational and vocational needs of Iranian learners.

4.14. Stimulus/Practice/Revision

The text contains eleven eight-exchange dialogs and eleven reading passages. The dialogs are to be memorized for the next session and presented in class next time and evaluated for fluency, intonation, stress and comprehension. The passages are to be read at home and sufficient questions prepared by the learners for classroom interaction and evaluation. Dialogs and passages are followed by abundant pattern drills for effective consolidation of the materials on the learners which in many cases turn out to be tiring and boring. Besides classroom performance evaluation which is done by the teacher a mid-term and a final exam is administered by the institute.

4.15. Flexibility

The teacher has to follow the teaching methodology and the syllabus prescribed by the institute with little or no flexibility. Any change or modification is

to be consulted with the authorities; however, the teacher finds no free time to incorporate or exploit additional material.

4.16. Guidance

As it was mentioned above, the teacher is to follow directions and procedures, basically audio-lingual methodology, prescribed by the authorities with complete limitation for the teacher not to ignore the methodology. However, this seems to be an advantage for both the teacher and the learner to know what is going on in the classroom and what will follow next. The burden of proper exploitation of the material requires an experienced and resourceful teacher to teach the text successfully.

4.17. Overall Value for Money

The text contains eleven units embodied in 212 pages to be covered during a full 44-hour term including two exams. It needs mention that there are twenty-two sessions and each class session includes 120 minutes of class activity. Although the timing of each session seems a little tiring for both the teacher and the learner, it is very cost-effective for the learner. Nonetheless, the realization of the stated objectives mainly depends on experience and skill of the teacher, and Iran Language Institute adheres to firm and careful procedures in selecting its teachers.

5. Final Remarks

Since this text is a part of a series and the vocabulary definitions in levels 1-3 are given in Persian, but they are defined in English here, and there exist minor changes in methodology, they may cause some problems for the learners which can be overcome by fine treatment and suitable material evaluation.

To improve this text and the related series, the followings are suggested:

1. Use of phonetic transcriptions and easier definitions and example sentences and providing levels 1-3 with sample sentences.
2. Use of more authentic and natural dialogs with fewer syllables in each dialog at most ten or eleven.
3. Use of better, more up-to-date and interesting topics in reading passages followed by more referential display questions and exercises.
4. Use of more directed discourse exercises for better interaction of the learners and more appropriate language use in classroom.
5. Suitable deployment of meaningful exercises, upgrading learner-learner interactions and pair-work, and reducing the number of mechanical drills.
6. Trying to give the learners a better feel for writing through step-by-step application of the mechanics of writing from simple, compound, and complex sentences to small paragraphs and finally to creative writing.
7. Use of formative and summarized evaluation of the whole curriculum.

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