EFL Curriculum and Needs Analysis:
An Evaluative Study

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Abstract

The current paper is an assessment of the ‘Traveller 5’, the English Language curriculum that is taught in third secondary Schools in Saudi Arabia. Through this paper, the author focused on whether this curriculum fulfills students’ needs. This syllabus has been introduced as part of the English Language Development Project (ELDP) implemented by the Saudi Ministry of Education. In order to achieve this goal, a questionnaire was prepared by the project committee aimed at exploring students’ perceptions about this particular syllabus. The participants of this project were 500 female students at the third secondary grade from Riyadh region in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The results of the research revealed that the syllabus meets the requirements of the students in general sense. However, students did not give high evaluation to issues such as; the difficulty of the material in the textbook, the allowing students to interact in the classroom, and the number of the new vocabulary items in the textbook. The paper suggests focusing on these items in order to make it according to students' needs.
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1. Introduction

   English language curriculum has witnessed substantial developments over the past decades. The process of curriculum development is a dynamic process involving interrelated elements of needs analysis, goals placement, implementation, and program evaluation (Richards, 2011). The evaluation of the existing curricula has been argued to have many benefits. According to Jackson (2005), curriculum evaluation is undertaken in order to ensure that the learners’ needs are adequately addressed. The English for Academic Purposes (EAP) curriculum should undergo continuous evaluation and renewal in order to make it effective and responsive to the future needs of the learners.

   The needs assessment in an EAP is mainly carried out in order to obtain a deep insight and a greater input about the current and future needs of language learners from multiple perspectives: subject teachers, present and former students to assist in making well-advised decisions on the objectives and the goals that the new curriculum should address and to ensure that the curriculum content matches the students’ needs as closely as possible (Cowling, 2007).

   Textbook is regarded as the visible heart of any English language teaching program. It is the foundation for how much linguistic input the students will get in the classroom (O’Neill, 2008). Richards (2011) argues that in some contexts, textbooks may provide the ground for the content of the lessons, and the type of linguistic practice the learners engage in. In other contexts, textbooks may be complementary to the teacher’s instruction. For students, textbooks may be the main source of contact they have with the language apart from input given by the instructor (Cowling, 2007). Furthermore,
textbooks may serve as a kind of training to the teachers by giving them ideas on how to teach lessons.

Besides being a fundamental teaching tool in regular English teaching and learning contexts, textbook also has a significant role in the process of innovation. According to Hutchinson and Torres (1994), the significance of the textbook becomes more vivid in periods of change. Textbooks may act as go-betweens and possible agents for change during educational innovation because of many reasons; first textbooks act as a tool for teacher and learner training, textbooks provide a picture of how the renewal will look like and they provide the psychological support to instructors.

Evaluation of the English language curriculum has become very common in all EFL contexts. This has coincided with the efforts of the educational authorities to produce native-like speakers of English in places where English is not the native language. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has always been engaged in improving the English language teaching programs at all levels few years ago. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to enhance these efforts by evaluating the ‘Traveller 5’ textbooks for third secondary grade as part of the English Language Development Project (ELDP) that is carried out under the supervision of the Saudi Ministry of Education.

1.2. Research Questions

Following research questions guided the research;

a) To what extent does the Traveller 5 textbook meet the needs of the third secondary grade students?
b) What do the students think of the textbook regarding its components?

c) What are the changes that should be made to Traveller 5 textbook in order to meet the needs of the third secondary grade students?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Types of Syllabus Evaluation

Evaluation of syllabuses is an essential aspect in teaching English as a foreign language. According to Ellis (1997), there are two main types of evaluation: predictive and retrospective evaluation. Predictive evaluation is the assessment of course before implementation while retrospective evaluation takes place after the course is implemented. He argues that instructors often encounter the mission of selecting the materials that they will use. In other words, the teachers need to conduct a predicative evaluation of the materials that they have in hand in order to determine which materials suit their purposes the best. In addition, once they use these materials, they need to carry out further evaluation to identify whether these materials were workable or not. This is what is called the retrospective evaluation (Ellis, 1997: 36).

This paper is a kind of the retrospective evaluation. Since the textbooks in Saudi public schools are not produced by the EFL instructors themselves, the instructors have to determine which textbooks suit the needs of their learners. Accordingly, there are many textbooks produced around the world every year and this wide collection of textbooks is designed for EFL situations. This variation results in a confusion among teachers, particularly those who have not strong experience. In addition, experienced instructors may find it difficult to determine a textbook for their target students. As has been pointed
out by Chambers (1997: 15), the materials selected in an English language teaching class should be chosen by the possible highest number of users. This is to enhance the feeling of decision ownership. Therefore, there is interrelatedness between the selection and evaluation of textbooks.

2.2. Syllabus Evaluation Rationale

Many reasons have been provided for textbook evaluation. Sheldon (1988) proposed that selection of an English language-teaching textbook often marks a significant a managerial and educational decision. Deep evaluation enables administrative and teaching staff of an organization to make a distinction between all available textbooks in the markets.

2.3. ELT Syllabus Evaluation in the Global Context

As for ELT textbook evaluation, many studies concentrated on textbook analysis and evaluation in different contexts throughout the world. Kirkgöz (2009) evaluated three English textbooks (Texture, Time for English, and Trip 1) taught to grade four classes in primary schools under Turkish Ministry of National Education. For this purpose, he designed the questionnaire based on the curriculum objectives and the guidelines given by other researchers. Results of the study revealed that students unanimously agreed that each of the textbook was colorful, well-illustrated with pictures with interesting characters, drawings, and were appropriate to their own level, all making the learning of English easier and entertaining. Teachers also stated that the books promote student-centered learning allowing them to take an active part in the learning process through a variety of activities.
Similarly, Mehrdad (2012) evaluated the general English course at Islamic Azad University of Hamedan, Iran. The researcher used a questionnaire to investigate the students' conceptions of good learning of English expressed in terms of their own wants and lacks. The results of the study clearly pointed to a need to improve the course syllabus in different ways. The majority of the students expressed their desire to enlarge their vocabulary and strengthen their grammar.

In addition, Zarei & Khalessi (2011) investigated cultural density in the internationally distributed textbooks (IDTs) of English Language, i.e., Interchange Series. The findings of the study indicated that textbooks are artifacts which are strongly grounded in cultural assumptions and biases.

Furthermore, Thein (2006) conducted a study to evaluate the suitability and effectiveness of the textbooks used for teaching English to religious studies students at Myanmar Institute of Technology. Questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations were used to collect data both from teachers and learners. The study was aimed at investigating the extent to which teachers and learners' expectations match the objectives of the program in developing students' communicative skills and critical thinking. The findings revealed that textbooks used in the program were not suitable for reasons including: the textbooks did not contribute to achieve the needs and wants of both teachers and learners, they were not effective to promote students' critical thinking, and they were not effective in improving the students' communicative skills for everyday life situations. Thein (2006) suggested that textbooks must be localized to meet teachers and learners' needs. He also emphasized upon the importance of adapting activities that
encourage collaborative learning, natural and experiential interactions to help young people think critically.

2.4. ELT Syllabus Evaluation in the Saudi Context

The studies that tackled the evaluation of textbooks in Saudi Arabia in ELT context dealt with General English courses in the broader sense. Alamri (2008) evaluated quality of a sixth grade English language textbook for Saudi boys' schools which was introduced at elementary stage by Ministry of Education in 2004. This research project evaluates a new textbook that is considered the foundation stone in the English language program in Saudi Arabia. A survey questionnaire was used in this study to elicit the perspectives of 93 English language teachers and 11 supervisors in Riyadh Educational Zone about the textbook in question. Findings were generally in favor of the textbook except for the teaching methods and some other sub-items. The results also revealed that although needs’ assessment criterion such as; general appearance, design and illustration, topic appropriateness, skills development, and flexibility are satisfied in the book but still they need to be improved.

Khafaji (2004) evaluated the materials used to teach English to the secondary level in Saudi public high schools. He discussed general educational policy of the Kingdom as well as specific policy for teaching English. General outcome of this study suggested that the materials have failed to provide students with an adequate source of interesting and academically purposeful substance to achieve the aims and objectives set for the students’ learning process. The study also revealed that the Audio-Lingual approach, which is the underlying approach in teaching the materials, has been a factor in limiting the capabilities of accomplishing aims and objectives of learning the language.
Al – Jaser (1989) compared boys' and girls' First Secondary-level English Textbooks. He reported that such textbooks should be modified in the light of students' gender, level, and needs. Ereksoussy (1993) conducted an evaluation of the girls' First Grade Intermediate English Textbook. She evaluated the objectives, the content selection, practice activities, and assessment models. Al-Yousef (2007) investigated the third grade intermediate English Course Book in Saudi Arabia implemented in 2005 by the Ministry of Education. He argues that the results of the study revealed that both the teachers-supervisors and the students perceived the course book as moderately adequate.

In addition, a recent study evaluated English for Specific Purposes (ESP) syllabuses. Habtoor (2012) carried out a study to evaluate First Class: English for Tourism, as an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) textbook taught to the sophomore students of Tourism and Archaeology at King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The study tried to draw out the opinions of the teachers on the textbook regarding its components, its practicality, its activities, the language type, the subject, the content, and the four basic language skills incorporated in the book, the sub-skills of grammar and vocabulary, and how they are offered. It also investigated the appropriateness of the book regarding the learners’ level and their needs. The results revealed that there was a consensus among the teachers on the suitability of the textbook. The results also revealed that the textbook corresponds to the teachers’ expectations and meet the needs of the students in the Saudi Arabian context.

Based on the above literature review, it is clear that the ELT syllabuses used in Saudi context still face problems related to the students' needs and meeting their due
language level. Therefore, this paper adds to the previous efforts to evaluate the new project's textbook ‘Traveller 5’ in the light of students' needs.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of this project consisted of 500 female students at the third secondary grade in Riyadh region in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The study was conducted as part of the English Language Development Project (ELDP) that has been implemented by the Saudi Ministry of Education. The textbook series that was evaluated is called ‘Traveller 5’ series for the third secondary grade in the Saudi public schools.

3.2. Instruments and Procedure

A questionnaire employing a three-point scale with ranges; “high”, "mid", and "weak" was used. The questionnaire items were prepared by the English Language Development Project (ELDP). The questionnaire consisted of fourteen items to evaluate how the students perceive the ‘Traveller 5’ textbook. The items of the questionnaire tackled a number of syllabus design issues such as layout and design of the textbook.

3.3. Data Analysis

The students' responses to the questionnaire statements were collected and analyzed in terms of frequency and percentage of responses. Moreover, there is a rank of the statements according to the degree of frequency as perceived by the students.
4. Results & Discussion

In order to answer the research questions, the students' responses to the questionnaire statements have been analyzed. Below is a detailed discussion of the results obtained through this questionnaire.

4.1. Layout & Design

Results reveal that textbook satisfies overall needs and requirements of the students as 47.93% of the students evaluated the technical design of the textbook units as "high", while 23.11% of the students evaluated the technical design of the textbook units as "mid", and only 10.33% of the students evaluated the technical design of the textbook units as "weak". Also, the majority of students believed that the textbook has adequate explanatory pictures and a diversification of pictures. 83.79% of the students evaluated the book as having a high degree of internal organization and layout. This can be shown in the below figure 1:

Looking at the internal organization and layout of each unit, it can be noticed that the objectives are set out vividly and each unit concentrates on the four main skills.
Structures and communicative tasks are shown in daily life situations such as hotels, markets, airport, railway stations, etc. The classes of activities in each unit are presented in a specific order over the main skills and sub-skills. The unit starts with a writing task, followed by grammar and vocabulary, reading task, speaking, and practices. Summary of the main language functions and a list of the new words are provided in the unit.

4.2. Subject and Content of the Textbook

Most of the students appreciated the subject and content of the book as 59.65% of the students perceive that the objectives of the unit are clear, 48.96% of the students believe that the unit is associated with the student environment, and 63.79% of the students believe that the material is difficult for the students.

About 73% of the students’ report that they benefit from the technologies associated with the units, 59.65% of the students report that the unit content is appropriate to the culture of the community, and 49% of the students report that the students interact with the unit. About half of the student report that the unit is not very easy to deal with.

4.3. Language Skills

Looking at the textbook, the textbook presented a balance of the four main language skills. Speaking, reading, writing, and listening skills are represented equally in the textbook. Each unit in the textbook has exercises in speaking, reading, writing, and listening.
4.4. Overall Assessment of the Textbook

The figure below shows that the highest rank is given to the suitability of the pictures in the textbook, followed by the suitability of the exercises, the clarity of the objectives, the suitability of the textbook to the culture, and the provision of the feedback.

![Figure (2)]

It is clear that there is an agreement among the students on the suitability of the textbook. Universally, the results show that the textbook comes to the students' expectations and meets the needs of the students in teaching and learning English in this particular stage. Eventually, this book becomes suitable for the purpose for which it has been selected and there is a match between the textbook and ELT syllabus at the above-mentioned site. This sheds light of what Cunningsworth (1984) said that “there is no perfect textbook which meets all the requirements of teachers and students. Instead, it is the responsibility of the teacher to explore his own way of using or adapting the course book” (P.4).
However, there are some changes that should be made to ‘Traveller 5’ as per the perceptions of the students:

a) Most of the students reported that the material of the textbook is difficult for the students. According to Cowling (2007), the degree of difficulty of a textbook should be based on the students' level and their cognitive level.

For example, the reading material in unit 4 deals with the King Solomon's Mines. Such topics are considered difficult for the students at this age and their background about the relevant material is not too much. Easier materials should have been used in the syllabus. (p. 44).
b) Also, the number of the new vocabulary items in the unit is not evaluated as high. Although there is a standard for the number of new lexical items in a unit, Habtoor (2012) reports that the textbook should provide the learners with new words in order to enrich their knowledge about the world.

For example, in unit 8, the “Advent of the dictionary” passage does not contain many new words as highlighted by the yellow color in the text. The textbook is good at enhancing the lexical knowledge of the students by introducing the words
in the context, but new and valuable words should be introduced in order to maximize the lexical knowledge of the students. (P.96).
c) Eventually, the provision of the opportunity for the students to interact and to practice language with peers is not evaluated as high in the study. The main aim of learning a language is for communication. Jackson (2005), reports that the proper textbook is the one that provided the students with a sufficient amount of interaction of all types.
For example, in unit 7, the further discussion section tackles some open questions that can be made between one of two groups of students. Instead, the activity is not designed for this purpose. The pair and group activities are not much used in the curriculum. Most of the tasks are required to be performed by the student himself. The pair and group activities need to be maximized in order to enhance interaction between the students and the teachers and between the students and their peers. (P. 92).
5. Conclusion

Present research paper was an evaluation of the ‘Traveller 5’ curriculum taught to the third secondary Schools in Saudi Arabic. This syllabus has been introduced as part of the English Language Development Project. The above mentioned evaluation reflects the notion that the ELT syllabuses must undergo continuous evaluation in order to see whether these syllabuses meet the students need or not. The assessment of ‘Traveller 5’
series as per students perceptions reveal that though students are satisfied with the syllabus yet there are minor issues like; the difficulty of the material in the textbook, the allowing students to interact in the classroom, and the number of the new vocabulary items in the textbook. Adding communicative exercises and activities such as group and pair work, games, puzzles and role-play as these can help students carry out their communicative tasks in real life. Communicative approaches that can allow various activities are highly recommended. Only then, student can be encouraged to talk and actually use the language. The attention should be on the performance and meaning rather than competence and accuracy.
References


