A comparative study on evaluation of Turkish and English foreign language textbooks

Sezen Tosun*

Sezen Tosun, Akdeniz University, Antalya, Turkey

Abstract

Evaluation and selection of suitable materials that best fit the learners’ needs is becoming more and more important for all levels in language teaching. Therefore, this comparative study focuses on the perceptions of undergraduate and graduate students as well as teachers regarding the effectiveness of “Turkish Elementary Textbook by Kurtuluş Öztopçu” and “English Textbook Face to Face”. This study closes with suggestions based on the teachers’ and the students’ preferences that may help textbook writers, education researchers to acquire useful and accurate insight into the nature of the existing textbooks. The study sheds light on the necessity of material adaptation as well.

© 2012 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. Open access under CC BY-NC-ND license.
Selection and peer-review under responsibility of ALSC 2012

Keywords: Foreign language textbook; textbook evaluation; material adaptation

1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language is an inevitable part of the educational life for any individual who aspires to be intellectual and thus fit in the current globalized society. It is not surprising that teaching and learning English as a foreign language is encouraged in the first place because of the dominance of English as a lingua franca in all international contexts. It is the language of science, aviation, computing, diplomacy, and tourism. In academic contexts, Swales (1987) estimates that more than 50% of the millions of academic papers published each year are written in English, and the percentage is growing

* Sezen TOSUN. Tel.:+90 507 440 0590
E-mail address: sezent@sas.upenn.edu

This article reports on part of a study of master’s dissertation supervised by Assoc. Prof. I.Hakkı Mirici.
year by year. English plays a part in the cultural, political or economic life of many countries worldwide. It plays a crucial role as a medium of instruction in many schools around the world and the students who understand the English language are more advantageous as the language is internationally recognized, therefore they can further their studies in any country as long as understand the English language (Sheldon, 1988). Due to the above reasons, the importance of English as a global language has had a great impact on students’ attitude in Turkey. In her research related to the language attitudes of Turkish students towards the English language, Karahan (2007) found out that the students generally were aware of the importance of the proficiency level in English helpful in understanding other cultures and consequently, they wished to have more fluent and accurate English speaking skills. In recent years, parents have also begun to take part in their children’s education because of the huge demand for English as a foreign language.

Turkish, on the other hand, as a least widely spoken language around the world, is generally offered at several universities as a language requirement for students’ major. As a result of the above reason, there are not as many teaching materials in Turkish as in English language. In relation to Turkish teaching materials, Kuruoğlu et al (1996) state that most materials which are available are marginal and are not compatible with the particular needs of language programs. Teachers spend a lot of time developing their own materials in order to meet the needs of their program. Some of those who develop their own materials do not know what other additional teaching aids and materials are available nationwide. Pala (2005) claims that the internet offers large amounts of authentic language in many languages. However, this is not true for less commonly taught languages, such as Turkish. There is a need for more focused attention to develop pedagogically and methodologically sound online materials in Turkish. Therefore, the selection of textbook represents one of the most crucial decisions that administrators and teachers have to make, as there are many issues which will affect the development of not only English foreign language textbooks but also Turkish foreign language textbooks in the near future. Cunningsworth (1984) states that most teachers use published teaching materials at some stage in their teaching career. No matter where they teach, what they teach and to whom, they use some course books or other published material for it is time and money saving. Therefore, they have to evaluate the materials to make judgments and to reach sound decisions about them. When taken up in this respect, it is beyond argument that not only textbooks but also other teaching materials have great influence on foreign language learning. In order to find out the best teaching materials, there are some key factors not only teachers and administrators but also textbook authors need to take into account before adopting teaching materials for their learners.

In this research, so as to find out the efficiency of the existing Turkish foreign language textbook, it is compared with an English textbook which is commonly used in many educational settings. Such a comparative study will support the foreign language textbook development and the quality of language teaching regardless of the fact how widely they are spoken all over the world. This particular study intends to answer the question “What do students and teachers think about the textbook they use to teach and learn Turkish and English as a foreign language?”

The sub research problems are as follows:
1. What is their opinion about their textbook as a teaching/learning material in terms of its teaching objectives and the content?
2. What is their opinion about their textbook as a pedagogical tool which is based on a particular educational theory or principles?
3. To what degree is the evaluation of Turkish foreign language textbook similar to that of English foreign language textbook?
4. What further suggestions, if any, could be made to improve the current foreign language textbooks in general?

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

The study has been designed covering both quantitative and qualitative data. The ultimate aim of the study is to examine the efficiency of Turkish and English foreign language textbooks from the perspectives of teachers and students. The research study began with the literature review. In order to determine the relative strengths and weaknesses of each textbook, “textbook evaluation instrument” was administered to both teachers and students. It was an expert opinion questionnaire, which was prepared in accordance with the opinions of the experts in the field of EFL. The data obtained from the study were analyzed descriptively by using SPSS. Percentages and the numbers are used to present the data, which explain the quantitative aspect of the study. The similarities and differences between the opinions of teachers and students were examined. Comparing and contrasting findings from Turkish foreign language textbook with English foreign language textbook are the qualitative aspect of the study.

2.2 Research Participants

The data for Turkish textbook were collected from 35 undergraduate and graduate students in the US. In order to inquire the teachers’ attitudes towards the textbook, a course book evaluation survey was given to the 23 instructors. The participants who used English textbook was comprised of students at Akdeniz University, School of Foreign Languages during 2010-2011 fall semester. The data for English language textbook “Face to Face” were collected from 62 undergraduate preparatory class students and 22 instructors of different fields at Akdeniz University in Turkey. The sample of this survey study consists of 97 students and 45 teachers chosen randomly from a total of 7 universities. Students enrolled in the Turkish language program in 6 different American Universities (University of Pennsylvania, Boston University, Syracuse University, Idaho State University, University of California, University of Massachusetts) were asked to complete an extensive survey on their opinions about several aspects of Turkish textbook. The data for the English textbook were obtained from only one Turkish university in the same academic year.

3. Findings and Results

This section of the paper presents the results of the study which aims to assess the effectiveness of Turkish and English foreign language textbooks. The findings and the results are stated under the related problem statements.

3.1 Findings based on the research question 1: “What is their opinion about their textbook as a teaching/learning material in terms of its teaching objectives and the content?”
To answer the research questions, a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the textbook evaluation instruments reported by both groups of teachers and students were applied. In order to identify the appropriateness of the textbook in a particular teaching situation, teaching objectives of both textbooks were analyzed in terms of:

a) communicative development,
b) intercultural development,
c) skills and competence development,
d) linguistic content,
e) thematic content

Table 1. Opinions of the students and teachers about the Turkish textbook in terms of its teaching objectives and the content

|                      | Students | Teachers |
|----------------------|----------|----------|
|                      | Agree (%)| Disagree (%)| Agree (%)| Disagree (%)|
| Spoken Practice      | 88.6     | 0.0      | 38.1      | 23.9        |
| Written Practice     | 74.2     | 0.0      | 38.1      | 4.8         |
| Promoting Cross Cultural Understanding | 74.3 | 5.7 | 57.2 | 19.0 |
| Providing five language skills | 74.3 | 14.3 | 30.0 | 45.0 |
| Presenting clear grammar structures | 90.0 | 0.0 | 90.0 | 5.0 |
| Presenting vocabulary in context | 74.3 | 14.3 | 75.0 | 10.0 |

As is seen in Table 1, teachers and students’ attitudes towards the efficiency of Elementary Turkish are different in all dimensions. Although quantitative data obtained from students questionnaires may seem to be positive, this may result from the fact that Turkish textbook allows self study. In the absence of a language teacher, students can learn the basic structures and common phrases easily. However, concerning active interaction, responses given by teachers to open ended questions prove that many exercises in the Elementary Turkish do not seem to contribute students’ communicative development. Since the entire book is based on teaching structural patterns, spoken interaction and production skills seem to be neglected. The Table 1 also shows that 45 % of the teachers disagreed that the textbook provides an appropriate balance of five language skills. The results of the analyses also revealed that Elementary Turkish was very effective in terms of providing cultural elements of the target language.

Table 2. Opinions of the students and teachers about the English textbook in terms of its teaching objectives and the context

|                      | Students | Teachers |
|----------------------|----------|----------|
|                      | Agree (%)| Disagree (%)| Agree (%)| Disagree (%)|
| Spoken Practice      | 77.4     | 11.3     | 68.1      | 13.6        |
| Written Practice     | 14.5     | 54.8     | 13.5      | 59.1        |
| Promoting Cross Cultural Understanding | 42.0 | 22.6 | 72.8 | 9.1 |
| Providing five language skills | 66.1 | 14.5 | 50.0 | 31.8 |
| Presenting clear grammar structures | 50.0 | 17.8 | 50.0 | 22.7 |
| Presenting vocabulary in context | 79.0 | 11.3 | 50.0 | 18.1 |
As illustrated in Table 2, the respondents are particularly optimistic about the communicative aspect of the English textbook “Face to Face”. It is also obvious that both groups of respondents find the activities and tasks helpful in terms of providing practice in spoken language. Both teachers (59.1%) and students (54.8%), on the other hand, think that English textbook lacks in providing enough writing activities as there is too much emphasis on speaking and listening activities. It is also obvious that students have more positive opinions than teachers have as regards to the efficiency of the skills and competences in English language textbook. This may result from the fact that language textbooks generally fail to satisfy teachers’ expectations as their teaching experience and techniques vary. In addition, students and teachers gave positive feedbacks about the presentation of vocabulary. In their responses to two open-ended questions, students particularly think that the new vocabulary is repeated in subsequent units.

3.2 Findings based on the research question 2: “What is their opinion about their textbook as a pedagogical tool which is based on a particular educational theory or principles?”

In the present study the principles of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages were examined, because the CEFR informs about course objectives, content, teaching procedures, assessment practices and materials; content is based on domains of language use; teaching procedures aims to be interactive and communicative; assessment is based on the skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing (Mirici et al 2009). In the light of the CEFR principles, it can be concluded that the aim of language education is to promote the development of the learners’ intercultural communicative competence through autonomous learning, self assessment and cultural diversity. The evaluation and selection of the foreign language textbooks in accordance with the CEFR principles are of great importance. Therefore, both Turkish and English foreign language textbooks were evaluated according to objectives based on the CEFR. In Face to Face, competences, skills and syllabuses are more linked to the Council of Europe’s Common European Framework. Besides, elementary level of Face to Face covers the key objectives of level A1. Moreover, at the end of each unit students are provided progress portfolio which helps students to develop their ability to assess their own progress. On the other hand, there is not any specific distinction among levels in Elementary Turkish. Students are not encouraged to do self assessment to see how much there is to learn and what they can do with the language.

3.3 Findings based on the research question 3: “To what degree is the evaluation of Turkish foreign language textbook similar to that of English foreign language textbook?”

Quantitative and qualitative data revealed that there are several differences between two foreign language textbooks. The most obvious difference is the presentation of grammar and the exercises to practice structural patterns. In Face to Face, grammar is always presented in context, usually in the form of a text illustrating the use of the particular grammatical structure such as dialogues, short reading passages, letters and questionnaires. On the other hand, in Elementary Turkish, grammar rules are presented explicitly, adopting a deductive way of teaching and generally dialogues are provided as a context.

Second difference is the presentation and revision of vocabulary. Face to Face pays attention to the revision of vocabulary either in a separate section including matching, filling gaps exercises or through
reading texts. The new vocabulary is also revised in workbook. In *Elementary Turkish*, on the contrary, each word is given with its translation and generally practiced with substitution drills. A word list is provided in each unit separately. According to qualitative and quantitative data, vocabulary load in each unit in *Elementary Turkish* is too much and the exercises to reinforce the new vocabulary in the wordlist are not enough. Another difference is the format and the organization of textbooks. In *Face to Face*, each unit contains embedded illustrations, contextual photographs and charts that make topics understood easily. On the other hand, results reveal that *Elementary Turkish* is lack of visual cues to meaning, which may help to activate learners’ background knowledge about the topics.

As for the presentation of the culture of target language, *Elementary Turkish* is found useful as it presents cultural notes in each unit, which provides specific cultural facts, issues about Turkey and common idiomatic expressions. *Face to Face*, on the other hand, is not found helpful in terms of building cultural awareness. All in all, the analysis shows that there are many differences between the compared textbooks contrary to a few similarities. These notable differences may be useful for textbook writers, teachers and other parties wishing to improve foreign language education by selecting appropriate textbook.

4. Conclusion and Suggestions

Inspired by recent developments in the Council of Europe’s language programme, the main purpose of this particular study was to evaluate Turkish and English foreign language textbooks so as to provide tangible results to different parties being involved in language learning and teaching process. By the help of this current research, it has been observed that both foreign language textbooks have strengths and weaknesses in different ways.

Decisions related to textbook selection is of great importance in foreign language teaching and learning process. As any negative characteristics of teaching materials affect not only students but also teachers and the whole classroom dynamic, it is important to be aware of the standard features of an ideal textbook. Despite the fact that the needs and expectations of individual students, teachers and administrations can never be totally met, textbooks should be designed in accordance with the standard teaching objectives, content and methods based on a particular educational theory or principles. If languages are expected to be taught by the help of textbooks, everyone needs to play their part.

Textbooks are only as good as the teachers who are using them. It is important to note that a textbook can be a very effective teaching tool in the hands of a good teacher. Therefore, teachers should know their students’ aims, needs, interests, levels and learning styles to adapt and supplement their textbooks at the very beginning of the year. Any consideration of adopting foreign language textbooks should begin with a needs analysis.

It is also important for teachers to adapt the course materials to the needs, age group and different learning styles of their students. In order to make students communicatively competent and engage all types of learners, including mixed ability students, foreign language textbooks should offer supplementary materials for extra practice with skills. These additional resources should include authentic materials, articles from magazines or newspapers, songs, short stories and poems which are used by native speakers in real life.

While selecting foreign language textbooks, authorities should draw their attention on the specification of learning objectives. Textbook committee members should be selected by experts in this field of study.
who can analyse, evaluate and supplement teaching materials in the light of students' needs. Besides, it is better to make a needs analysis to find the most effective textbook which appeals to the particular learner group.

Textbook writers should be open to get feedbacks from teachers and students about their textbooks, and re-evaluate their methods and strategies by taking into consideration of students' and teachers' perceptions. Academic studies conducted on the evaluation of foreign language textbooks should also be considered significant to improve the quality of the existing textbooks.

References

Council of Europe. (2001). Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cunningsworth, A. (1984). Evaluating and Selecting EFL Teaching Materials. London: Heinemann.

Karahan, F. (2007). Language Attitudes of Turkish Students towards the English Language and its Use in Turkish Context” Çankaya University, Journal of Arts and Sciences, 7, 73-87.

Kuruoğlu, G., Algar A., Sezen, E., Erol, S., Jaeckel, R. (1996). Language Learning Framework for Turkish. AATT Project report. Retrieved November, 2, 2011 from http://www.princeton.edu/~turkish/aatt/pdf/LLFreport.pdf

Mirici, İ. H. (2008). Development and validation process of a European language portfolio model for young learners. TOJDE, 26-34.

Öztöpçu, K. (2006). Elementary Turkish. Istanbul, Turkey: Kebikeç Publishing.

Pala, Ö. (2005). Teaching listening and reading comprehension in turkish using web-based materials. University of Oregon.

Redston, C., & Cunningham, G. (2005). Face to Face. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sheldon, L. (1988). Evaluating ELT Textbooks and Materials. ELT Journal, 42, 237-246.

Swales, J. (1987). Utilizing the Literatures in Teaching the Research Paper. TESOL Quarterly, 21, 41-68.