A Textbook Evaluation of Socio-Cultural Contexts in Top Notch Series

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Abstract

The study explored the appropriacy of socio-cultural contexts in Top-Notch Series. For this purpose, a survey questionnaire was used to elicit the teachers and supervisors’ perceptions concerning the Series. The findings revealed that the intercultural content of the Series was understandable and positively evaluated by the participants. However, the textbooks had no clear objectives in the beginning and did not satisfy what was stated. Moreover, the textbooks did not satisfy teachers and supervisors’ expectations regarding teachability. Finally, there was no clear consensus regarding the cultural awareness component. To conclude, some implications and suggestions for teachers and textbook designers are considered.

Keywords: Top Notch Series; materials evaluation; textbook evaluation; socio-cultural contexts; EIL

1. Introduction

1.1. Top Notch in Iran

As the trend of globalization continues to grow, language learning assumes even greater significance. Students need to build the communication skills required to deal with educational, social, travel, and business situations foreign to their own language and culture.

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In today’s world, English functions as the international lingua franca. English is the language for international trade, commerce and communication and its teaching and learning is a clear and growing need. As a result, it has been suggested that the previous EFL/ESL models be replaced by English as an International Language (EIL) which is the use of English for communication by people of various nations (Smith, 1976). The model claims that it is descriptive, reformatory, functional, non-artificial, intervarietal, cross-cultural, universal, multicultural, and intercultural (Baxter, 1980; Kachru,1982; Smith, 1983).

Iranian students feel the need to be proficient in English to be able to have communication with people outside Iran and to acquire knowledge in the fields of sciences, arts and new inventions, and of transferring knowledge and the sciences to other communities. It is most unfortunate that school instruction in the Iranian educational system has been unsuccessful in providing learners with communication skills they need. A major reason is that locally produced English language textbooks used in Iranian schools cannot meet the expectations of most learners and teachers (Yarmohammadi, 2002; Razmjoo, 2007). On the other hand, according to Razmjoo (2007), while school textbooks are not conducive to CLT implementation, private institute textbooks represent the CLT principles to a great extent.

Among the most widely instructed EFL course books in Iranian English institutes, Top Notch series have now become almost the most-frequently-used series in almost all of the institutes. The series claim to be unique in helping students to learn the communication skills and cultural fluency needed to deal with speakers of English with different languages and different cultures from around the world.

The strong association between the contents of textbooks and the learning of the students makes textbook evaluation a task of great importance to the future success of an educational program. To make sure that student needs and expectations as well as program expectations are being met appropriately, careful scrutiny of the text intended for use is absolutely essential. Learners of English as a foreign language often do not have much chance to speak or use the target language because learning is limited to the classroom environment and they have little contact with English or English (native) speakers. As a result, it is essential that texts and materials provide learners with knowledge of the target language and culture as accurately and objectively as possible. This often turns out to be problematic especially when the aim is presenting cultural content without stereotypes or essentialist perspectives, while keeping information relevant and interesting.

1.2. Objectives of the study

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the appropriacy of socio-cultural contexts in Top Notch series, a six-level communicative course for adults and young adults written by Joan Saslow and Allen Ascher, and published in the United States of America by Pearson Longman Incorporation in 2006. The reason behind the choice is that the book series are widely used in Iranian institutes and their evaluation will be an urgent need and of a great value.

The research project tries to find answers to the following research questions:
1. Are the social and cultural contexts in the series understandable?
2. Are cross-cultural perspectives in communication and developing real intercultural communication emphasized in the Series?
3. Regarding culture presentation, do the Series have a positive view of the cultures presented?
4. Does the cultural content of the textbooks promote flexibility and tolerance of otherness and cultural diversity?
5. Do the textbooks set clear aims and objectives in the beginning and satisfy what is stated?
6. Are the teachers comfortable teaching the cultural content of the textbooks?

1.3. Significance of the study

Teaching materials exert a powerful influence over the process of learning and teaching. By evaluating the materials we can justify or improve them. Tomlinson (1998) asserts that materials can be (a) instructional: they can inform learners about the language; (b) experiential: they can offer experience of the use of language; (c) elicitititative: they can provoke language learner into using language; and (d) exploratory: they provide opportunities
for learners that lead to discoveries about the language. In effect, materials are mostly instructional since they act as the main source of input for learners and the language practice that takes place in language classroom.

Since the contents of English textbooks have a significant association with the learning of the students, the evaluation of the textbooks for English is a task of great importance to the future success of the educational program. By properly scrutinizing the textbooks intended for use, it is possible to select materials which match the needs of the learners in the target situations. The results of the study will also be of great help to English language teachers, ELT administrators and experts and materials developers.

The above-mentioned reasons motivated the researchers to evaluate the socio-cultural context in Top-Notch Series studied at different language institutes in Iran. The significance of choosing the series is that the textbooks are widely used in institutes and evaluating them will be a pressing need.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Defining materials evaluation

As a field of study, materials evaluation is defined as “a procedure that involves measuring the value (or potential value) of a set of learning materials. It involves making judgments about the effect of the materials on the people using them” (Tomlinson, 2003, p. 15). It is essential that the evaluation be based on some predetermined principles to achieve greater validity and reliability. According to Tomlinson (2003), in developing a set of principles, the evaluator’s theory of learning and teaching and second language acquisition research should be considered. As Carter and Nunan (2001) assert, this applied linguistics procedure can be predictive pre-use evaluation, ongoing whilst-use evaluation or retrospective post-use evaluation.

Hemsley (1997) identified three basic kinds of ELT materials evaluation. The first kind is an intuitive, impressionistic approach based on the first impression of the evaluator. One way of doing so is going through the materials or by reading the publicity blurb. The second approach is a formal prior-to-use evaluation. In this systematic and comprehensive approach, the materials are closely examined using careful checklists or questionnaires. The third one which is the ‘process approach’ involves three steps: predictive evaluation, choice of a material, and finally a post-use retrospective evaluation.

2.2. Arguments for and against using textbooks

In language teaching, textbook evaluations are conducted to understand whether the textbook fits into the official curriculum or the intended language program on the one hand, and meet the varying needs of the learners, on the other. Textbooks play a prominent role in any English language teaching program and are, as Hutchinson and Torress (1994) assert, a universal element of teaching and learning process.

Tomlinson (2001) states:

Proponents of the course book argue that it is the most convenient form of presenting materials, it helps to achieve consistency and continuation, it gives learners a sense of system, cohesion and progress and it helps teachers prepare and learners revise. Opponents counter that a course book is inevitably superficial and reductionist, in its coverage of language points and in its provision of language experience, it cannot cater for the diverse needs of its users, it imposes the uniformity of syllabus and approach, and it removes initiative and power from teachers (p.87).

2.3. Cross-cultural factors in language learning

The cultural context in which communication takes place influences human interaction to a great extent. Culture provides humans with an overall framework for organizing their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in relation to their environment. In addition, it is believed that the language of a people reflects the culture of their society.

Since language and culture are inseparable, the teaching of culture is an integral part of EFL learning and teaching. As a result, second and foreign language learners necessarily become learners of the second culture because a language cannot be learned without having a firm grasp of the cultural context in which it is used. In the same way, knowledge of the target culture can facilitate language learning.
 Méndez García (2005) mentions that including the target language culture in intercultural communication materials serves the following purposes:
1. To enhance students’ knowledge of the world and their knowledge of foreign communities
2. To familiarize them with the most salient behavioural patterns of the target societies
3. To promote attitudes of respect and tolerance
4. To foster reflection upon one’s own culture
5. To emphasize the relative role of one’s cultural assumptions or developing real intercultural communication in an intercultural world

Reimann (2009) contends that the following factors should be considered in evaluating textbooks’ effectiveness in presenting cultural content:
- Goals and outcomes, the extent to which content is used to raise cultural awareness or otherwise engage the students in a way that promotes interest and a positive understanding of the target language and relevant communities.
- Presentation, i.e., the way in which cultural information is included, omitted or simplified.
- Practicality, including general factors which determine how cultural content is balanced to account for immediate, short term concerns such as teachability, marketability and relevance.

Moran (2001) claims, that his Cultural Knowings Framework helps learners develop cultural competence. In this model, four interconnected learning interactions are involved in the cultural experience:
- Knowing about which comprises collecting information and acquiring knowledge about the products, practices, and perspectives of a culture;
- Knowing how refers to gaining the ability to behave in a culturally appropriate manner;
- Knowing why includes developing an understanding of the underlying aspects of a culture which include the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes about that culture. This process involves analysing one’s cultural experiences and comparing them with the perspectives of the target culture.
- Knowing oneself is related to understanding how one’s own culture influences their beliefs, views, values, and reactions towards their experiences in a new cultural context. Understanding oneself as a cultural being helps learners comprehend, adapt, and integrate into another culture.

2.4. Empirical studies
Several study projects have been carried out in Iran to evaluate textbooks. Yarmohammadi (2002) evaluated the senior high school textbooks based on a revised version of Tucker’s model and concluded that the textbooks are not authentic, English and Persian names are used interchangeably, and that oral skills are ignored. Amalsaleh (2004) used Van Leeuwen’s model (1996) to evaluate the representation of social factors in three types of textbooks, including junior and senior high school textbooks. He came to the conclusion that the textbooks demonstrated a differential representation of social factors that tended to portray female as performers belonging to a home context and having limited job opportunities in society. The results of Aliakbari’s study (2006) revealed that the ELT textbooks in Iranian high schools did not prove helpful in developing intercultural competence and cultural understanding. In another study project, Sahragard, Rahimi and Zaremoayyedi (2009) evaluated a series of ELT materials namely, Interchange, using Littlejohn’s detailed framework (1998) and concluded that in these textbooks the learners are not the initiators of the tasks. Razmjoo (2007) investigated the extent to which the Iranian high school and private institute textbooks represent the CLT principles. The results of the study revealed that Iranian high school textbooks are not conducive to CLT implementation, whereas private institute textbooks represent the CLT principles to a large extent.

3. Method
3.1. Participants
In this study, a number of English teachers and supervisors in different language institutes in the Iranian cities of Isfahan, Qom, Gachsaran, Kashan, and Mashhad were asked to fill in a survey questionnaire giving their views concerning the socio-cultural context in Top-Notch Series. The total number of the participants in the study was 42 (i.e., 34 teachers and 8 supervisors). Of the participants 30 hold B.A. and 12 hold M.A. degree in TEFL ranging
from 1 to more than 5 years of experience in teaching and supervising English classes in general, and Top-notch Series in particular.

3.2. Instrument

A survey questionnaire of 16 items was used as the research instrument. To conduct the evaluation, the researchers used the ideas and suggestions from different sources including Brian Tomlinson (2001), Méndez García (2005), and Moran (2001) and provided an evaluating model for the study. At the beginning of the questionnaire, a set of demographic questions was used followed by 16 closed-ended questions grouped under five main categories namely: (a) intercultural knowledge and understanding, (b) cultural awareness, (c) culture representation, (d) aims and achievements, and (e) teachability. The questionnaire was given to 5 linguists and specialists to judge its validity. Some items were modified and others were deleted according to the jurors’ advice until the researchers came up with a final draft of 16 items. To determine the reliability of the questionnaire, the KR-21 formula was used. Table 1 presents the reliability values of all the 5 sections of the questionnaire. The values ranged from 0.75 to 0.91 which can be considered high reliability values.

Table 1: Reliability values of questionnaire categories based on KR-21 formula

| Questionnaire sections | No. of items | r     |
|------------------------|--------------|-------|
| Section 1              | 3            | 0.85  |
| Section 2              | 3            | 0.82  |
| Section 3              | 5            | 0.91  |
| Section 4              | 2            | 0.75  |
| Section 5              | 3            | 0.88  |

4. Data analysis and results

To analyze the gathered data, first the means and standard deviations of each and every statement were calculated to get to know to what extent each characteristic of the textbooks in question has enjoyed the approval of the subjects. The second part of the data analysis interpreted the data on a per-category level to estimate the extent to which each category was approved of in the textbooks. Finally, to compare the responses of teachers and supervisors, a two tailed independent samples t-test was used.

4.1. The results of per-statement analysis

A. Intercultural knowledge and understanding

On whether or not the social and cultural contexts in the textbooks are understandable, the results indicated that 80.95% of the participants support the statement, while, only 19.05% of participants disagree with the statement. So, it can be said that the majority of the participants believe that the social and cultural contexts in the textbooks are understandable. The mean score is 2.80 and standard deviation is 0.40.

On whether the content of the textbooks is free from stereotypical images and information or not, a large conflict among the participants can be observed. Over 47.61% of them disagree on the statement and 4.76% strongly disagree. On the other hand, 47.61% agree and no one strongly agrees. The arithmetic mean is 2.42 and the standard deviation is 0.59. The results also show that 38.09% of the participants agree and 23.80% strongly agree on the statement that cross-cultural perspectives in communication and developing real intercultural communication are emphasized. In addition, the results show that 33.33% of the participants disagree and 4.76% strongly disagree with the statement. The arithmetic mean is 2.80 and the standard deviation is 0.87.

As noted above, on two of the three evaluative criteria, the textbook was considered appropriate. However, there exists a conflict between the participants regarding the second statement. The results are indicated in Table 2.
Table 2: Intercultural knowledge and understanding

| Statement | strongly disagree | disagree | agree | strongly agree | mean | Std. |
|-----------|------------------|----------|-------|----------------|------|------|
| 1 The social and cultural contexts in the textbooks are understandable. | 0.00% | 19.05% | 80.95% | 0.00% | 2.80 | 0.4 |
| 2 The content of the textbooks is free from stereotypical images and information. | 4.76% | 47.61% | 47.61% | 0.00% | 2.42 | 0.5 |
| 3 Cross-cultural perspectives in communication and developing real intercultural communication are emphasized. | 4.76% | 33.33% | 38.09% | 23.80% | 2.80 | 0.8 |

B. Cultural awareness

The participants’ opinions, tabulated in Table 3, show that nearly 58% of the participants favor the statement that the cultural content of the textbooks increases sensitivity to cultural diversity while over 42% of the participants are against it. The arithmetic mean is 2.61 and the standard deviation is 0.74. Furthermore, regarding the statement that the cultural content of the textbooks promotes flexibility and tolerance of otherness and cultural diversity, two thirds of the participants agree on the statement and 4.76% strongly agrees. Only 28.57% of participants are against this statement. The arithmetic mean is 2.76 and the standard deviation is 0.53. Finally, considering the statement that the cultural content of the textbooks does not assign values to cultural differences, half of the participants are in favor of the statement, while the other half are against it. For this item, the arithmetic mean is 2.47 and the standard deviation is 0.67.

Table 3: Cultural awareness

| Statement | strongly disagree | disagree | agree | strongly agree | mean | Std. |
|-----------|------------------|----------|-------|----------------|------|------|
| 4 The cultural content of the textbooks increases sensitivity to cultural diversity. | 4.76% | 38.09% | 47.61% | 9.52 | 2.61 | 0.74 |
| 5 The cultural content of the textbooks promotes flexibility and tolerance of otherness and cultural diversity. | 0.00% | 28.57% | 66.66% | 4.76% | 2.76 | 0.53 |
| 6 The cultural content of the textbooks does not assign values to cultural differences. | 4.76% | 47.61% | 47.61% | 4.76% | 2.47 | 0.67 |

C. Culture representation

Regarding the accurate representation of cultural content, the results are contradictory. While almost 48% of the participants disagree with the statement, 43% agree and 9% strongly agree with it. The mean score is 2.61 and the standard deviation is 0.66.

Regarding the representation of cultural content without stereotypes or essentialist perspectives, the results indicate that there is an extreme percentage of the participants supporting the statement, i.e, 63.90% agree and 4.76% strongly disagree. On the other hand, almost 30% of the participants are against the statement. The arithmetic mean is 2.66 and the standard deviation is 0.65.
With regard to culture representation, the results show that an extremely high percentage of the participants support the statement that the book expresses positive views of ethnic origins, occupations, age groups, social groups and disability. 66.66% of the participants agree and 19.04% strongly agree on the statement. On the other hand, only 14.28% disagree on the statement, with no one in strong disagreement. The mean score is 3.01 and the standard deviation is 0.58.

Furthermore, the results show that the majority of the participants support this statement that the cultural information is relevant and interesting. 52.38% of the participants agree and 23.80% strongly agree on the statement. Only 23.80% disagree with the statement. The arithmetic mean is 3.00 and the standard deviation is 0.70.

Finally, almost 60% of the participants believe that the textbooks in question present cultural content with a validating context. On the other hand, almost 40% disagree, with no one to strongly disagree. The mean is 2.66 and the standard deviation is 0.65 (see table 4).

Table 4: Culture representation

| Statement                                                                 | strongly disagree | disagree | agree  | strongly agree | mean  | Std. |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|----------|--------|----------------|-------|------|
| 7  The textbooks offer cultural content as accurately as possible.        | 0.00%             | 47.61%   | 42.85% | 9.52%          | 2.61  | 0.66 |
| 8  The textbooks represent cultural content without stereotypes or essentialist perspectives. | 4.76%             | 28.57%   | 63.90% | 4.76%          | 2.66  | 0.65 |
| 9  The book expresses positive views of ethnic origins, occupations, age groups, social groups and disability. | 0.00%             | 14.28%   | 66.66% | 19.04%         | 3.01  | 0.58 |
| 10 The cultural information is relevant and interesting.                  | 0.00%             | 23.80%   | 52.38% | 23.80%         | 3.00  | 0.70 |
| 11 Cultural content is usually presented with a validating context.      | 0.00%             | 42.85%   | 47.61% | 9.52%          | 2.66  | 0.65 |

D. Aims and achievements

Regarding the presentation of the aims and objectives of including cultural content in the textbooks, the majority of the participants, over 62%, either disagrees or strongly disagrees. Only about 38% of the participants support the statement. The mean is 2.28 and the standard deviation is 0.64. Table 5 also indicates that while 57% of the participants perceive the textbooks as not achieving the aims and objectives of including cultural content, 43% of participants think the opposite. The arithmetic mean of this item is 2.48 and the standard deviation is 0.50.

Table 5: Aims and achievements

| Statement                                                                 | strongly disagree | disagree | agree  | strongly agree | mean  | Std. |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|----------|--------|----------------|-------|------|
| 12 The aims and objectives of including cultural content in the textbooks have been presented. | 9.52%             | 52.35%   | 38.09% | 0.00%          | 2.28  | 0.64 |
The aims and objectives of including cultural content in the textbooks have been achieved.

E. Teachability

As table 6 indicates, over 70% of the participants believe that the teachers are comfortable teaching the cultural content of the textbooks. On the other hand, only about one third of the participants do not support the statement, i.e., 28.57% disagree. The arithmetic mean is 2.80 and the standard deviation is 0.60.

A high percentage of the participants are against the statement that the cultural content of the textbooks requires minimal preparation and explanation by the teacher, 42.85% of the participants disagree and 19.04% strongly disagree. Therefore, only 23.80% of the participants agree and 14.28% strongly agree with the statement. The arithmetic mean is 2.23 and the standard deviation is 0.96.

On whether or not the students comfortably learn cultural contexts without any sign of rejection, table 6 shows that over 76% of the participants disagree with this statement. Only almost 24% of the participants perceive that the students comfortably learn cultural contexts without any sign of rejection. The mean score for this item is 2.14 and the standard deviation is 0.57.

Table 6: Teachability

| Statement                                                                 | strongly disagree | disagree | agree | strongly agree | mean | Std. |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|----------|-------|----------------|------|------|
| 14 The teachers are comfortable teaching the cultural content of the textbooks. | 0.00%             | 28.57%   | 63.90%| 9.52%          | 2.80 | 0.60 |
| 15 The cultural content of the textbooks requires minimal preparation and explanation by the teacher. | 19.04%           | 42.85%   | 23.80%| 14.28%         | 2.33 | 0.96 |
| 16 The students comfortably learn cultural contexts without any sign of rejection. | 9.52%             | 66.66%   | 23.80% | 0.00%          | 2.14 | 0.57 |

4.2. The results of per-category analysis

The second part of the data analysis interpreted the data on a per-category level. To do so, the overall mean of each category was computed and the extent to which each category was satisfied in the textbooks was identified. Table 7 shows the mean and standard deviation for each of the main parts of the questionnaire.

Table 7: Arithmetic means and standard deviations of the five categories

| Main categories                              | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|----------------------------------------------|------|----------------|
| A: Intercultural Knowledge and Understanding | 2.66 | 0.66           |
| B. Cultural Awareness                        | 2.61 | 0.65           |
| C. Culture Presentation                      | 2.80 | 0.67           |
| D. Aims and Achievements                     | 2.35 | 0.57           |
| E. Teachability                              | 2.42 | 0.77           |

Table 7 shows that there is a clear dispute over culture presentation and intercultural knowledge and understanding. These are the two categories that had arithmetic means of 2.80 and 2.66, respectively. These categories are considered to be satisfactory but still need some improvement. The table also shows that two
categories, namely aims and achievements and teachability are not approved of by the participants. These had an arithmetic mean less than the average 2.61. The table also shows that the group of statements on culture presentation had the highest mean, while the group on aims and achievements had the lowest mean. Finally, the table indicates that the statements of the category of aims and achievements were the ones answered most consistently. On the other hand, a wider range of answers are given regarding the teachability category. The overall result shows that the general tendency of the participants’ perceptions was toward supporting the cultural content of the Series.

4.3. Comparing the responses of teachers and supervisors
In order to compare the responses of teachers with those of supervisors, first the data were shown on a bar graph (Figure 1), followed by conducting an independent samples t-test (Table 8). In both cases, the results revealed that there is no significant difference between the responses of the two groups of participants with respect to the main categories of the questionnaire.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations
Based on the results obtained from the three different types of computations, that is, a per-item analysis, a per-category analysis, and an independent samples t-test, the following conclusions are drawn:

- The Series satisfies teachers and supervisors’ expectations regarding its intercultural content and the understandability of the socio-cultural contexts presented. In addition, it is believed that cross-cultural perspectives in communication and developing real intercultural communication are emphasized. However, the textbooks need some improvement in the form of including contexts more familiar to the learners’ worldviews and cultural environment.

Figure 1: Summary of supervisors’/teachers’ responses
Table 8: Independent Samples T-test for equality of means

| Category                               | Sig.  | Mean   | Std. Deviation |
|----------------------------------------|-------|--------|----------------|
| A: Intercultural Knowledge and         | 0.698 | Teachers 2.66 | Teachers 0.68  |
| Understanding                          |       | Supervisors 2.75 | Supervisors 0.62 |
| B. Cultural Awareness                  | 0.848 | Teachers 2.68 | Teachers 0.59 |
|                                        |       | Supervisors 2.91 | Supervisors 0.90 |
| C. Culture Presentation                | 0.765 | Teachers 2.78 | Teachers 0.65 |
|                                        |       | Supervisors 2.85 | Supervisors 0.74 |
| D. Aims and Achievements               | 0.136 | Teachers 2.44 | Teachers 0.56 |
|                                        |       | Supervisors 2.00 | Supervisors 0.53 |
| E. Teachability                       | 0.082 | Teachers 2.33 | Teachers 0.71 |
|                                        |       | Supervisors 2.83 | Supervisors 0.93 |

Note: Difference is significant at p < .05

- The participants assume a largely positive view of culture presentation in the textbooks.
- The participants neither strongly approved nor strongly disapproved the textbooks regarding the cultural awareness component. It is recommended that the cultural content of the textbooks promote sensitivity to cultural diversity and tolerance of otherness, without assigning values to cultural differences.
- The textbooks do not set clear aims and objectives in the beginning and also do not satisfy what is aimed at. As a result, clear specification of aims and objectives is required.
- The textbooks in question do not satisfy teachers’ and supervisors’ expectations regarding their teachability. Considering the important role of textbooks in facilitating the process of teaching, it is necessary that the textbooks help teachers to minimize their preparation time, cater for mixed ability students and classes of different sizes.

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