

# Evaluating Iraqi Primary EFL Curriculum and Textbooks

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## ABSTRACT

A textbook is an organized collection of designed material. In Iraq, “Iraq Opportunities” series from Third till Sixth primary grades, Activity book, Teacher’s book, and Curriculum Document, were all prescribed by the Ministry of Education. In order to determine whether textbooks writers are currently meeting the Educational objectives, certain units of the four books being analyzed in terms of a range of effective criteria derived from relevant sections of the curriculum Document. To achieve this, the researcher evaluated the Curriculum Document, the Textbooks, Teacher’s Book and Activity Books to find out whether they match with the expected standards according to Nation’s principles. From the analysis, we have gotten the language content is generally consistent with the Grades 3-6 curriculum Document objectives.

**Keywords** - Nation’s twenty principles, Curriculum Document, EFL teaching materials, Primary curriculum and textbook in Iraq

## INTRODUCTION

What role do textbooks and materials play in language learning/teaching, particularly in delivering a curriculum? Richards (2001) says that careful selection of the right textbook and materials is a pre-requisite for fulfillment of curriculum goals. In recent years, there has been a lot of debate throughout the ELT profession on the actual role of materials in teaching English as a Second/Foreign Language. Arguments have encompassed both the potential and the limitations of materials for guiding students through the learning process and curriculum as well as the needs and preferences of teachers who are using textbooks. Other issues that have arisen in recent years include textbook design and practicality, methodological validity, the role of textbooks in innovation, the authenticity of materials in terms of their representation of language, and the appropriateness of subject matter, and cultural components. Whether or not one accepts the value of textbooks, it must surely be appropriate to the learners for whom they are being used. It is, therefore, essential that we apply a wide variety of relevant and contextually appropriate criteria for the evaluation of the textbooks that we use in language classrooms.

Hutchinson and Torres (1994) argue that the textbook has a vital and positive role to play in the teaching and learning process, especially during periods of change. "Textbooks survive and prosper primarily because they are the most convenient means of providing the structure that the teaching-learning system- particularly the system of change-require"(ibid :317). The situation has shown us that problems do exist with teaching materials, yet the necessity of the textbook cannot be neglected. The situation also implies that, as teachers, it is important for us to evaluate, select and adapt teaching materials to meet teaching and students' learning needs, in order to maximize learning potentials.

Sheldon (1988) suggests that textbooks do not only represent the visible heart of any ELT programme, but also offer considerable advantages for both students and the teachers when they are being used in ESL/EFL classrooms. Cunningsworth (1995) suggest that potential, which textbooks have, in serving several additional roles in ELT curriculum, is an advantage. He argues that textbooks are an effective resource for self directed learning, an effective source for presentational material, a source of ideas and activities, a reference source for students, a syllabus where they reflect pre-determined learning objectives, and support for less experienced teachers who are yet to gain confidence. In addition to that, Hycroft (1998) states that one of the primary advantage of using textbooks is that they are psychologically essential for students since their progress and achievement can be measured concretely when we use them.

Rea-Dickins and Germaine (1994:4) state that “evaluation is an intrinsic part of teaching and learning”. Evaluation plays a key role in education and it is important for the teacher since it can provide valuable information for the future going of classroom practice, the planning of courses and management of learning tasks by students. Finally, evaluation is essential for the use of instructional materials such as textbooks. Cunningsworth (1995:7) suggests that we should ensure that “careful selection is made, and that the materials selected closely reflect [the needs of the learners and] the aims, methods and values of the teaching program”. One other reason for textbook evaluation is that it can be very useful in teachers’ development and professional growth. Ellis (1997) suggests that textbook evaluation helps teachers go beyond impressionistic assessments and it helps them to acquire useful, accurate, systematic and contextual insights into the overall nature of textbook material.

If one accepts the value of textbooks in ELT, then it must surely be with the qualification that they are of an acceptable level of quality, usefulness, and appropriateness for the context and people with whom they are being used. In the literature, the subject of textbook evaluation is not particularly extensive. Preminent theorists in the field of ELT textbook design and analysis such as Williams (1983), Sheldon (1988), Brown (1995), Cunningsworth (1995) and all agree, for instance, that evaluation checklists should have some criteria pertaining to the physical characteristics of textbooks such as layout, organizational, and logistical characteristics. Other important criteria that should be incorporated are those that assess a textbook’s methodology, aims, and approaches and the degree to which a set of materials is not only teachable, but also fits the needs of the individual teacher’s approach as well as the organization’s overall curriculum. Richards (2001) further talks about the role of materials in delivering a curriculum by saying that materials provide the syllabus for a programme and help unify instruction, i.e., when all pupils learn and are tested in the same material. With carefully developed materials, as Richards says, what pupils are presented with is built on sound learning theory, and information is presented at a suitable pace.

As Hutchinson (1987) points out, materials evaluation do not only serves the immediate practical aim of selecting teaching materials, but also plays a critical role in developing teacher’s awareness in a number of ways, which are teachers being able to analyze their own presuppositions about the nature of language and learning, forcing teachers to set their prerequisites and helping them to see materials as an essential part of the whole teaching/ learning situation.

The textbooks and materials in Iraq were prescribed by the Ministry of Education; teachers have no voice in their selection, unlike many other EFL countries where teachers are able to make a choice, e.g. in Taiwan. The aim here is to see whether

the textbooks and other materials fulfill the curriculum goals which stated in the Curriculum Document and the programme objectives, especially those related to developing learners' communicative competence since they seem to be more difficult to implement, and the textbooks/materials mainly focus on practicing forms. The main two general curriculum goals mentioned in the Curriculum ask to develop learner's communicative and linguistic competence in using English fluently and accurately, and to develop learner's self-learning and motivation to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes. Part of the Teacher's Book objectives, pupils have to be able to express opinions about themselves, topics in different courses, understand and discuss longer texts, and give reasons for their opinions.

The textbook "Iraq Opportunities" was suggested and distributed to the primary schools all over Iraq by Ministry of Education (MOE) to be used in 2007 - 2008 academic year. It is hoped that this study will be a preliminary evaluation of the mentioned textbook and it is also expected that the results of this evaluation study will reveal the areas that need to be revised and improved in that particular EFL textbook and the main supporting material, i.e, teacher's book. Furthermore, it is hoped that this study will raise the awareness of textbook writers in considering various criteria for the development of ESL/EFL textbooks for all.

## **THE OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

This work is conducted to achieve the following important and main objective: To examine the curriculum and textbooks of primary schools and its correspondence to Educational objectives. An analysis of the content was carried to find out how the content works towards the fulfillment of the curriculum components.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In order to determine whether textbooks writers are currently meeting these expectations, certain units of the textbooks being analyzed in terms of a range of effectiveness criteria derived from an overview of relevant sections of the curriculum Document. We will take textbooks for Third, Fourth, Fifth and Sixth grades, Activity book for each grade, Teacher's book, the Ministry of Education has chosen for teachers to use, and *Curriculum Document*. Many educationists have set different criteria for evaluating materials (e.g., Cunningsworth, 1995; Nation, 1996; Richards, 2001; Crawford, 2002; Nation and Macalister 2010). In his book *Curriculum Design*, Nation (1996) (See the Appendix) very usefully states twenty general principles based on SLA research and theory that he says will help in guiding teaching and designing

language courses, regardless of age or level. These are related to four areas: planning content, selecting content, ordering content, and finally presenting content. Below I did not discuss all Nation's criteria, but only those that can be matched with the textbooks and other materials.

This study is limited to English textbooks and one of the teaching materials, i.e. teacher's book that are used in grades three, four, five, and six . Therefore, conclusions need to be verified by conducting similar studies at different levels (intermediate and secondary) in Iraq.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First, the principles of **selection** state:

A course should include a roughly even balance of meaning-focused input, language-focused learning, meaning-focused output and fluency activities.

(Nation, 1996:36)

The texts are generally, songs, chants and puzzles, and made up of segments of language introduced in earlier dialogue snippets (with, sometimes, the addition of vocabulary and/ or structures that have not been introduced earlier). In general, communication is confined to a series of illustrations in association with a dialogue include situations that can aid comprehension of the text and encourage reading, as pictures themselves have to be 'read'. The use of illustrative style may facilitate comprehension and encourage textbook use. So far as all four of these textbooks series are concerned, is the fact that the authors often use the illustrations to reinforce meaning. This can be seen in the excerpts below where students learn how to exchange information in the form of questions and answers.

Pictures, songs, and linguistic language games cover more than 75% of the books. The pace of the courses are very gentle, ensuring the pupils will be able to understand and, most importantly, to use the basic introductory elements of English. The materials are written according to a carefully graded structural and communicative syllabus covering topics that are of interest to children of this age.

Another principle states the following:

A language course should progressively cover useful language items, skills, and strategies

(Nation, 1996: 34)

Grade 6:

-What lessons have we got today?

-Today, we've got Maths and English.

-And tomorrow we've got Art and Religion.

-My favourite lessons are English and Music

-What are your favourite lessons?

-My favourite lessons are Arabic and Science.

-I like Tuesdays. Pupil's Book 4, Unit 2, P.8

This criterion tells us that the textbooks present useful vocabulary and structures that pupils need at their different stages, as well as the *Teachers' Books* which list a number of skills and strategies, e. g., telling a story and guessing words from context.

The next principle states that language

'Focus of the course needs to be on the generalisable features of the language.'

(Nation, 1996: 34)

This principle relates to how we help pupils learn the strategies so that they can use them later on to learn by themselves. For example, Nation mentions, instead of teaching pupils just to answer questions after reading, we can teach them how to guess words from context and how to predict events from reading a few lines of a situation, dialogue or a story. This criterion is met as discussed in the *Teacher's Book* above. The last principle under this category states that:

A language course should provide the best possible coverage of language in use through the inclusion of items that occur frequently in the language, so that learners get the best return for their learning effort.

(Nation, 1996: 34)

This applies to the list of vocabulary items and structures where the textbooks should include the most frequent ones in the language so that learners benefit from learning them. Examining the textbooks revealed that they include high frequency of animals, places, home, etc., and low frequency vocabulary of hobbies, tricks, etc. For example, 15% of the *Pupil's Book 4* (Grade six) is presented in the form of Study Boxes which help the teacher to focus on certain lexical structures that are presented in listen and read activity. They are either presented as pictures, dialogues or words divided into categories. They also help pupils with pronunciation, rhythm, word stress and intonation.

The next category is related to **ordering**, and it includes

The teaching of language items should take account of the most favourable sequencing of these items and should take accounts of when the learners are most ready to learn them.

(Nation, 1996: 34)

This means that we should provide learners with structures that move from the simple to the most complex ones. Structures, for example, move from imperatives, demonstrative pronouns, then to more complex. Teachers start with the present simple tense, which is usually acquired first, then move on to the present continuous tense and then the progressive. For example, present simple I'm (Miss Nadia); prepositions: in, on, under; plurals; modal can: I can see a (cat); interrogative: can you see a (cat)?; wh-questions: what can you see(in the picture)?where's the (book)?; prepositions: near, on, in, under; adverb now; imperatives: come here, look; demonstrative adjective: that; present continuous am (eating).

The next principle states that

The course should help the learners to make the most effective use of previous knowledge.

(Nation, 1996: 34)

This criterion can be seen in the textbook as most of the topics are already presented to pupils during their studies in their Science or Geography classes in their LI such as 'Animals', 'Holidays', etc. In **Six Grade Textbook 4, Unit 13** talks about the weather:

Excerpt 2:

-Today our Science lesson is about the weather.

-What's the weather like in winter?

-Spring is my favourite season. It's often windy. It's sometimes sunny.

-It isn't usually cold.

-I prefer the autumn. It isn't very hot. It's often cloudy.

The language items are presented through listening and reading exercises and then offering consolidation and further practice through games, songs, projects and other activities. Textbooks build upon the vocabulary and structures taught in the earlier levels.

The next principle says that the items

in a language course should be sequenced so that items which are learned together have appositive effect on each other for learning and so that interference effects are avoided.

(Nation, 1996: 34)

The teacher can present the simple vocabulary first separately and through repetition students can learn them easily. The criterion is met with the curriculum guidelines because pupils have started to learn English from grade three and they know ,for example, the difference between 'like' and 'dislike' or 'black' and 'white', 'big' and 'small' and here they learn the comparatives.

According to *grade 4 textbook*, it starts with presenting wh-questions and definite articles followed by imperatives like sit down, stand up, close, open, and then it introduces the possessive (s). The order seems to comply with Nation's (1996) suggestion that structures should be introduced in their order of acquisition according to SLA research, that is, when pupils are at the right stage to acquire them which is in accordance with Bailey, Madden, and Krashen's (1974) study, second language learners acquire some structures later than others. For example, possessive are acquired later than both definite articles and imperatives. Additional prepared materials such as the *Activity Book* provide exercises/activities to practice structures, vocabulary, and spelling. It begins with essential directional practice through enjoyable but structured line drawing activities accustom pupils to write from left to right. Pupils are not expected to read whole words at this stage; reading skills will be covered in the following year of the series.

Finally, learners

should have increasingly spaced, repeated opportunities to retrieve and give attention to wanted items in a variety of contexts.

(Nation, 1996: 34)

The criterion in the textbooks includes revision units after every four units. Also, it revises materials and structures introduced to pupils in previous grade levels. For grade Four, *Iraq Opportunities*, the syllabus is designed and graded, presenting language items through the media of listening exercises, games, songs and other activities. Activities throughout the book contain much in-built recycling, and there is regular revision of all vocabulary and structures introduced. The chosen topics include Identity, Family, Home, Food, Clothes, Numbers and Animals.

Nation's criteria were used to give the reader a sense of what they are and whether they are fulfilled in the textbooks/materials. **For planning**, there is one principle and it is related to curriculum design :

The selection, ordering, presentation, and assessment of the material in a language course should be based on a careful consideration of the learners and their needs, the teaching conditions, and the time and resources available.

(Nation, 1996: 34)

Nation includes the need to consider the environment before designing a specific curriculum, where environmental analysis covers three important factors: the teachers, the learners, and the situation.

The last area is **presentation**. The next principle states that

As much as possible, the learners should be interested and excited about learning the language and they should come to value this learning.

(Nation, 1996: 34)

This criterion did not match as the textbooks are full of controlled and guided activities where learners are not left to choose what they would like to say. They are not challenged on the kind of tasks and exercises presented in the textbooks of the four grade levels. This can be seen more in the first two grades 3 & 4 as the

exercises in the activity book are controlled and do not allow pupils to choose what or when to talk, although the Iraqi curriculum goals stress on improving both linguistic and communicative competencies. Here, the focus is on the two skills listening and speaking, although pre-reading and pre-writing activities are introduced through the Activity Book.

Overall, the tasks and activities are likely to be so similar from one unit to the next particularly for grades 3 & 4. Although each of the textbooks claims to include an integrated skills focus, most of the tasks and activities involved listening, speaking, copying letters, and filling in missing letters and words. However, it does not mean that all the skills are presented at the same time and equally. In the early stages of language learning (Grades 3 & 4), oral skills are more important than written ones but little by little the importance of written skills is raised, so it could be argued that in the later stages of primary education (Grades 5 & 6), there would be more emphasis on writing and reading, but during the early stages there is more emphasis on listening and speaking. This also being emphasized in Nation's **principle of presentation**:

The learners should be pushed to produce the language in speaking and writing over a range of discourse types.

(Nation,1996:43)

Although the activities vary (e. g., listen and read, ask and answer, listen, read and match, play, read and write, find the words, trace, draw, match, and sing) and learners have the chance to develop basic skills and practice speaking in pairs, they are made for one reason: to practice the language, as the focus is always on a specific form to be practiced, but have not to go beyond that. This represents a present/practice/produce (PPP) technique. This technique can be used in a weak CLT, where the teacher presents structures and functions and then practices them with pupils who are then given opportunities to produce the same structures and functions in meaning-focused activities. For example, **for grade 3, Book1**, activities are graded from simple, controlled activities to more guided ones. For example, in the unit called 'introductions and instructions' pupils practice saying the phrases 'Hello, I am Laila' and 'Hello, I am Faisal'. Then the same characters are introduced in the exercise using the same words. This ends with an activity where pupils have to look at the picture story in an attempt to make them contextualize the lesson by asking them simple questions. Activities vary (e. g., listen and point, say, listen and point, trace, draw, match, and sing, and learners have the chance to develop further basic skills. Activities in the textbook are mainly function-focused with the purpose of helping pupils master fluency and accuracy in the target language.

The next principle relates to the target language

‘as much time as possible should be spent using and focusing on the second language.’

(Nation, 1996: 34)

This criterion relates to what goes on in the classroom and the time that the teacher should devote during activities to explain and use the second/Foreign language with his/her pupils.

Another principle of Nation’s is that

A course should be presented so that the learners have the most favourable attitudes to the language, to users of the language, to the teacher’s skill in teaching the language, and to their chance of success in learning the language.

(Nation, 1996: 34)

The *Teacher’s Book* asks teachers not to over-correct pupils and to change the base of the lesson, so pupils do not get bored. It asks teachers to use more interesting activities where pupils can solve the puzzles and feel confident about themselves.

The next principle relates to feedback:

Learners should receive helpful feedback which will allow them to improve the quality of their language use.

(Nation, 1996: 34)

This criterion refers to feedback given by the teacher or other pupils and it meets the *Teacher’s Book* which asks teachers to let pupils work individually, then compare their answers with their partners or work in pairs. Some of the exercises in the textbook also allow pupils to interact together where they get feedback from each other. Finally,

There should be opportunity for learners to work with the learning material in ways that most suit their individual leaning style.

(Nation, 1996: 34)

In the Teacher's Book and the textbook activities vary in what pupils are asked to (e. g., complete, draw and colour, say, trace, colour and match), whether these activities are done individually or in pairs or groups. Each of the teachers' Books includes information on lesson staging which takes the form of a reinforcement of the materials order presented in the textbook. We can see, on the other hand, from the analysis of the Teacher's Book there is:

- No discussion of why the materials are organized as they are;
- No discussion of the different ways of presenting materials (e.g., pre-teaching some of the vocabulary);
- No discussion of the distinction between controlled and free practices;
- No discussion of ways in which the new language can be introduced and the meaning clarified;
- Almost no discussion of potential areas of difficulty for learners, typical learner errors, or of when it is appropriate to correct learner errors and how error correction can be approached, just they have been asked to not over-correct pupils;
- There is no clear indication of how to set up, run and timing activities or how to ensure that all learners are given an opportunity to contribute (without putting them under inappropriate pressure);
- There is no indication of how to modulate praise and avoid negative criticism;
- No inbuilt flexibility that allows teachers with differing levels of experience and expertise to deal with the materials in different ways.

The curriculum goals state that the main goal of Iraqi EFL curriculum is to develop learners' communicative and linguistic competence in using English fluently and accurately (Curriculum Document, 2006:6). The document describes a CLT-based learner-centred method where focus on accuracy is stated in the competencies and objectives, and fluency is stated in the standards and benchmarks, and they include the integration of the four language skills to promote students' effective and accurate communication. Even though textbooks and activity books provide exercises and activities to develop both pupils' accuracy and fluency, the amount of exercises that focus on accuracy for its own sake are considerably more numerous compared to those that are meaning oriented. The Teacher's Book strengthens this tendency by asking teachers to plan their lessons with the use of Present, Practice and Produce model. At the presentation stage, teachers introduce new knowledge to learners including language structures and vocabulary. The second stage is to practice under

“the controlled conditions or directed activities” where teachers are the leaders in the practice and learners should practice many times. The last stage is production which is about transfer of learning to a new situation to ensure that learners have memorized and understood what they have practiced. In the end, teachers transfer to learners their knowledge of grammar and learners have to memorize in order to perform in a specific new context.

The language content of the four books is generally consistent with the Grades 3-6 curriculum Document objectives in an overall sense. Most of the tasks and activities in the four textbook series are directly relevant to the main teaching points. They are, generally, involving routine, repetitive verbal drilling, which are presented as games, songs and chants. Although the Curriculum Document guidelines recommend that teaching should promote pupils listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, understanding cultivate communicative ability, which includes various activities, different types of text, and interesting, practical lively topics and themes.

Although the activity books, as well as the pupils' books, introduce structures and notions/functions, the exercises/activities help students practice linguistic forms more than functions/communicative acts. Different topics give context and meaning to activities in the activity book and help to introduce structures and notions/functions in a meaningful context. Most of the textbooks' exercises focus mainly on forms, which are for practicing the language. For example, pupils listen to words in the plural that are written with their pictures and have to decide whether the words are plurals or singulars. This is appropriate to children who are starting to learn the language and need a lot of practice. These exercises try to put the language in context to make it meaningful and easier for young learners, e. g., students fill in letters to form words and are provided with pictures and examples to guide them through the exercises. The exercises in the textbooks 3 & 4, although they suit the pupils' levels, do not seem to involve pupils in writing freely to express themselves. Johnstone (1994) argues that there is a need to give young learners the chance to be creative with language. Most of the exercises are either controlled or guided and do not require much thinking in doing them. For example, to practice vocabulary, Sixth grade pupils are provided with a short text with pictures and they have to substitute the pictures with words. Students do not need to understand the text to guess the missing words. It would take more effort and thinking to guess the word from context and this might be better in helping to remember it. As a result, the analysis of the Textbook, Teacher's Book as well as the *Curriculum Document* state a Weak version of communicative language teaching approach and showed the textbooks to be focusing on accuracy more than fluency.

## CONCLUSION

The above evaluation criteria showed a programme implementation that is weak version of communicative language teaching approach, providing learners with form-focused activities that involved controlled and guided production as well as communicative activities that involved free production. This was in accordance with the Iraqi curriculum where some of the benchmarks for the primary stage are communicative, intended to develop students' fluency, e. g., tell and retell a dialogue or a story, sing while the competencies and objectives are form-focused to develop accuracy, e. g., talk, comprehend, categorize objects and match. Programme objectives stated in the Teachers' Books for the four primary grades include, e. g. understand, repeat, express opinion, discuss, express ability, aiming for a communicative language teaching approach of focusing on both structure and communication.

"Iraq Opportunities" textbook has some notable characteristics. As for notable characteristic, for example, the teacher's book contains guides about how the textbook can be used to the utmost advantage of the students. The activities incorporate individual pair and group work. It also reflects a multi-skills syllabus, and it manages to integrate the four language skills without neglecting other important aspects of ELT such as vocabulary development. With respect to content, content of the textbook is generally realistic. Moreover, it is interesting, challenging and motivating. There are sufficient varieties in the subject and content of the textbook. Despite its strengths points, "Iraq Opportunities" has also some negative characteristics. Grammar points and vocabulary items are not introduced in motivating and realistic context. Many of the activities are repetitive, failed to neither encourage truly meaningful practice, promote realistic discourse, nor lead to the internalization of language.

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