Evaluation of the “IELTS to Success” EAP course book

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Abstract: Course books provide novice teachers with guidance in course and activity design; it assures a measure of structure, consistency, and logical progression in a class. In order to select an appropriate course book, course book evaluation should be implemented. The current study aimed at evaluating the “IELTS to Success” EAP course book based on Cunningsworth’s (1995) checklist. Items of aims, design and organization, language content, skills, topic, methodology, teacher’s book, and practical consideration have been evaluated. This course book was generally found to be appropriate based on the items mentioned above. Curriculum developers, syllabus designers, and EFL teachers may find the findings useful in their language teaching practice.

Index Terms: course book, English for academic purpose, IELTS, textbook evaluation

1. INTRODUCTION

Course books provide novice teachers with guidance in course and activity design; it assures a measure of structure, consistency, and logical progression in a class (Wen, Chien, & Chung, 2011). In order to select an appropriate course book, course book evaluation should be implemented. Based on Belfiore (1996), evaluation is formal interpretation and examination of the elements of a workplace development initiative in order to determine how well it is meeting its goals. Ongoing evaluation, as argued by Belfiore (1996), allows an organization to improve the current initiative and to plan further initiatives, and it enables decisions about support.

In general, evaluation is the systematic gathering of information for decision making. According to Richards and Schmidt (1985), evaluation may apply quantitative methods, such as tests, qualitative methods, such as observations, and value judgment. In language planning, evaluation frequently involves gathering information on patterns of language use, language ability, and attitude towards the foreign language (Richards & Schmidt, 1985). Richards and Schmidt (1985) further contend that in language program evaluation, evaluation pertains to decision making about the quality of program itself and about individuals in the program. Nunan (2004) defines evaluation as “processes and procedures for gathering information about a program or curriculum for purposes of improvement” (p. 214).

Regarding the importance of course book evaluation in language teaching and language syllabus design, the researcher intended to qualitatively evaluate the “IELTS to Success” EAP course book based on Cunningsworth’s (1995) checklist.
2. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

According to Nation and Macalister (2010), a systematic approach to course book evaluation can be based on the parts of the curriculum design process which seeks to answer the following questions: (1) does the course book suit the environment where it will be used? (2) does the course book meet the needs of learners? (3) does the course book adhere to principles of learning and teaching? (4) do the goals of the course book match the goals of the course? (5) does the content of the course book match the proficiency level of the learners and show sensible selection and sequencing principle? (6) Is the course book interesting and does it apply effective techniques? and (7) Does the course book include tests and ways of the process of monitoring?

Cunningsworth (1995, as cited in Richards, 2001) proposes the following four criteria for evaluation of course books: they should correspond to learner’s needs, and they should match the aims and objectives of the language learning program, they should reflect their present and future uses for learners, they should take students’ needs as learners into account, and they should facilitate their learning process, they should have a clear role as a support for learning. Like teachers, they are the mediators between the target language and the learner. Cunningsworth (1995, as cited in Richards, 2001) presents a checklist organized under the following categories: (1) aims, (2) design and organization, (1) language content, (3) skills, (4) topic, (5) methodology, (6) teacher’s book, and (7) practical consideration. Littlejohn (1998, cited in Taylor, et al. 2002) contends that there exists a certain dilemma facing the ones given the task of reviewing text books. The dilemma he refers to is the choice reviewers need to make between the various methods of evaluation. While, according to Taylor et al. (2002), the argument for a systematic and principled approach to evaluation of textbook materials is appealing, it can be encountered by the claim that course book evaluation is fundamentally subjective, which may raise the need for reviews to state at the outset which direction they are moving towards. However, the suggestion they provide to evaluate a coursebook is to investigate the extent to which it has been successful to reach its objectives.

Gearing (1999) argues that there have been a multitude of checklists used for evaluation course books, while only a few of them have focused on teacher guide evaluation. The main reasons for evaluating teacher guides are argued by Gearing (1999) to be as follows: (1) helping teachers to decide on their selection of textbooks with teacher guides, (2) Making them more aware of the content of teacher guide they use, and (3) Helping them to make more effective use of it, apprising them of its deficiencies and advantages.

EAP materials

Brown (2001) defines EAP as a term broadly applied to any course, module, or workshop where learners are taught to deal with academically related language and subject matter. He asserts that EAP is common at the advanced level of pre-academic programs as well as in other institutional settings. Thompson (2001) in order to provide a definition of EAP (English for Academic Purposes), considers it to be a sub-branch of ESP (English for Academic purposes). As he states, one of the features of ESP is the focus it has on meeting the specific needs of the ones learning a foreign language (FL). EAP appears to have pragmatism as its underlying ideology. The reason why EAP is assumed to be pragmatist is the special emphasis it places on learners needs. In main stream courses, however, the emphasis is on what is going to be required. As Thompson states, EAP has the potential to provide foreign language learners with the means allowing them to make their own choices.

Zareva (2005) contends that in EAP literature a great deal of emphasis should put on speaking and writing skills regarding the fact that these skills are supposedly secondary to reading and listening skills in an academic milieu. Students need to be able to communicate what they have learned through speaking, with respect to the yearn for the communicative language teaching which is highly favored in today’s especially language teaching, thereby demanding the learners to be able to exchange ideas through speaking. Needless to say for the information documented and illustrated, it has to be molded in written script, requiring its own skill and genre. Many of the suggestions pertaining to needs analysis can be applicable for the design of an EAP course within a particular context (Nation & Macalister, 2010). According to Nation and
Macalister (2010), when more generic courses are designed, or when information is not locally available, it is possible to look at publicly available corpora, especially specialized corpora, for language needs analysis purposes. These may become an increasingly valuable tool as more and more corpora become available and search engines become more powerful and more user-friendly.

3. METHODOLOGY

Instruments

The book under evaluation was “IELTS to Success” written by Tucker and Bemmel (2002). In order to evaluate something, we need the criteria for evaluation. Therefore, in order for us to evaluate a course book we should base our evaluation on some well-approved and attested criteria. Here, for evaluation of our course book, Cunningsworth’s (1995) checklist was used.

Features of the EAP Course Book under Evaluation (IELTS to Success)

The book “IELTS to Success” was written by Tucker and Bemmel (2002). This book was designed to help learners prepare for the IELTS examination through providing strategies and materials for practice in all areas of the test. This book is aimed at candidates taking the IELTS Academic Module rather than General Training Module. The introduction of this book yields an overview of IELTS for readers who are not familiar with the test, and it contains a breakdown of each section of the examination, including content and procedure. The skills and strategies section discusses skills that are specifically important in sitting IELTS. This section helps candidates become familiar with the kinds of instructions and tasks that are found in the IELTS tests. The listening tasks in this section can be heard in the form of an audio CD.

Of special importance in the skills and strategies section are the pages which focus on the speaking module. The speaking test is performed as a one to one live format in a revised format so as ensure that the interview conditions are the same for all candidates. In this book, the authors claim to have taken a comprehensive look of what is expected of learners in the interview and to have offered various language strategies and tips found to be useful. This book recommends setting up a practice interview with a teacher or a friend who speaks English well and can provide some feedback regarding the performance.

The next sections comprise practice papers for IELTS Listening, Reading, and Writing Modules. There are three complete Practice listening papers, to be done while listening to the audio CDs that accompany this book. They are followed by six Practice Writing papers and six Practice Reading papers. Finally the authors provide answers for the Practice Listening and Reading papers and sample answers for the Practice Writing papers, followed by transcripts for the listening papers. The book ‘IELTS to Success’ is claimed by its authors to contain many ideas and useful practice materials that will help candidates improve their performance on the IELTS test.

4. FINDINGS

Each of the criteria in Cunningsworth’s (1995) checklist was applied for this course book and was investigated in the following detail:

Aims: The aim of this EAP course book is to prepare the candidate to be able to respond their future academic needs. It pursues the slogan of preparing proficient learners who can perform efficiently in the target context. This book is designed to help candidate prepare for the IELTS examination by providing strategies and materials for practice in all areas of the test. This book is aimed at candidates taking the IELTS Academic Module rather than General Training Module. Therefore, the context considered for the takers of this book is university.

Design and organization: This book starts with microskills for every module, or macroskills, and then it provides candidates with some sample tests to take under its guide, which I can call scaffolded sample tests. For instance, for the macroskills of listening, this book instructs the micro skills of understanding the instructions, previewing and predicting, listening for specific information, and checking and rewriting. Besides for each of the microskills some other microskills are
instructed. The order of presentation is as follow: listening, reading, writing, speaking. After instructing the skills through some scaffolded samples, this book includes an authentic sample test section for all four macro skills, aimed at raising test familiarity and automaticity in test taking. However, as I will discuss later in the realm of language content, this is not sufficient.

**Language content:** This book contains an authentic body of language content. Texts are taken from scientific journals written by native speakers, listening is read by native speakers; topics of writing and speaking are also authentic. And by authenticity, we can discuss that the materials chosen are the materials that learners will face in their future academic career. However, the defect this book is suffering from in terms of content is lack of adequate content. Listening is the only skill which seems to be provided by sufficient content. In reading, after the micro skills are instructed, we see an infinitesimal number of samples or content to be practiced by learners. Needless to say, this scant number of samples is not capable of raising learners’ scores up to a decent band score, since it is the practice which ultimately makes perfect. The same is true for writing. For writing task 1, the microskills are introduced and instructed, and then some samples are shown to the learners, which do not represent and cover the miscellaneous types of graphs and charts seen in the real IELTS test and the real future context, university. For writing task 2, which is an argumentative writing, the microskills are first taught, then a sample is shown, and then a small number of topics are introduced. In speaking, although a multitude of topics are introduced, an exiguous amount of content is provided for learners. Learners only know the topics, but they don’t know what answer they can provide for the question asked in the speaking section. It is crystal clear that section 1 and section two of speaking module do not require much feedback to be given or content to be provided because of the fact that these two sections of speaking module deal with concrete aspects of the world and life. However, section three of speaking module, since it involves abstract questions which not everyone, even among native speakers, can answer, leaves the learners in the church. It asks questions of a variety of topics but does not provide enough content for learners to answer the questions.

**Skills:** In this EAP course book the four macroskills of listening, reading, writing, and speaking are dealt with. The book first starts with the macroskill of listening. In this macroskill the microskills of understanding the instruction, previewing and predicting the topic, who is talking, and the situation, listening for specific information, and checking rewriting are taught. In the macroskill of reading, the micro skills of previewing the titles, headings, illustrations, diagrams, and any print in bold type or italics, interpreting the instructions and questions, scanning the text for specific answers, and checking answers are instructed. In the macroskill of writing task 1, the microskills of preparation which includes the subskills of studying the question carefully, thinking carefully about the topic, and arranging ideas carefully, writing which includes writing an introductory sentence, writing body paragraphs, and writing concluding sentences, and editing are instructed. In the macroskill of writing task one the microskills of preparation which includes the subskills of studying the question carefully, thinking carefully about the topic, establishing a point of view and listing some points for development, deciding which points will be written as topic sentences, and ensuring that the points are arranged in a logical order, writing which includes writing the introductory paragraph, body paragraphs, and the conclusion, and editing are instructed. And, finally, in the macroskill of speaking task, the micro skills of using prefabricated patterns, giving relevant factual information, expressing opinions and attitudes without relying on interviewer’s help are instructed, in the macroskill of speaking are instructed. A major advantage of this EAP course is that it instructs skills in detail in a guided way. It first introduces the skills, then provides a sample test, and then provides the answers by explaining about how the subskills are applied. This book provides a good deal of scaffolding in all four skills.

**Topic:** This book provides a vast variety of authentic topics in reading and listening, but it fails to cover a sufficient number of writing and reading topics.

**Methodology:** This EAP book appears to have been following a deductive methodology towards the instruction of skills. It first mentions the skills and then provides some example in which these skills are applied. It seems that this book could have followed an inductive approach towards the instruction of skills inasmuch as the inductive approach may yield a more enduring and a more tangible command of skills.
**Teacher’s book:** This EAP course has suffers from what Gearing (1999) mentioned, lack of a suitable teacher’s guide. Lack of an appropriate teacher’s guide can culminate in the impracticality of the materials because it is the teachers who are going to instruct the course book. We should not consider the answer keys as teacher guide, rather they can be considered as teacher help.

When teacher’s guide does not accompany the course book, the methodology to be followed in the instruction may come to be various, or better said deviant from the methodology the authors intend to be implemented in the instruction of the book. This EAP course book, like a great many other EAP course books, provides teacher with no guides on how to implement the book.

**Practical consideration:** This EAP course book appears to be very practical. It decently represents the topics, content, test format, and situations learners are going to meet, although not sometimes sufficient in amount. Hence it can vigorously be claimed that this course book benefits from topic authenticity, content authenticity, format authenticity, and situation authenticity as far as it takes the target academic situations into account. Besides, we can add the notion of ‘context authenticity’ which is beyond a course book’s ken and is not expected of it. This can be relegated to the institutions implementing a language instruction program or even the instructors who sometimes can manipulate the context into a more authentic one.

**5. CONCLUSION**

The process of language education involves elements in which learners are considered as the center. However, this common belief is rejected when course books, as sources of providing input, are seen to control the instruction to a large extent (Sarem, Hamidi, & Mahmoudie, 2013). It is crystal clear that meeting all requirements of an EAP instruction is beyond a single course book’s ken; there are a great many factors involved. Instructors, institutions, and funding, have proven to have a direct bearing on the quality and authenticity of instruction. What course books should be aimed at doing is to yeard for yielding an authentic language sample and language instruction. That is, the content included in EAP course books should resemble the content the candidates, or learners, are going to meet in the future context. It should be authentic in that it presents an authentic application, use, and execution of language skills learners are expected to be potent over in their future academic life. It is ineluctable that a single course book is not capable of covering all contents, topics, and skills expected of learners in the future.

The course book under the evaluation has proven to have managed to accost authenticity in an EAP instruction so far as it included real future materials and topic candidates will encounter. However, like any other course book this book has been the victim to the phenomenon of fallibility. It has not been able to handle a myriad of academic topics and content, and, more importantly, it has come to a halt in providing the its implementers, instructors, with a cohesive set of guidelines and a linguistically- and psycholinguistically-based methodology guaranteeing a more efficient instruction.

**REFERENCES**


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