



Approaches and Limitations of L2 Textbook Evaluation Research

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Abstract

The evaluation of L2 textbooks is an important aspect of curriculum development in L2 learning and teaching. It has been the subject of research since the 1970s. A large number of studies have been conducted to investigate the language skills, linguistic elements, or/and social factors presented in textbooks. However, even so, the issue of evaluation research approaches has not received very much critical attention. As a result, this research project is concerned with the methodology used in textbook research. It aims to provide an overview of current approaches to L2 textbook evaluation research, as well to highlight their major limitations. It reviews research methods used in previous studies targeting textbooks from grade one to grade twelve in various countries and reveals two main approaches. The first approach seeks to conduct a thorough assessment of one specific English textbook. L2 material researchers often use a Likert scale checklist to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of an entire English language textbook. The second approach evaluates an English textbook from a micro perspective, with a particular emphasis on one single aspect of it, such as reading or writing. These findings may help us to better understand current evaluation approaches used by textbook researchers and their limitations. It shows what needs to be done to improve this evaluation process in the future.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted that educational materials are crucial for the teaching of the English language in the classroom. This is particularly true in K-12 EFL settings. Such educational materials may be broadly defined to include anything utilized in support of the efforts to teach a language, such as a software program, a video presentation, an audio recording, a textbook, a workbook, or a printed handout (Tomlinson, 2011). Of these, L2 textbooks are often the main teaching materials utilized in L2 classrooms (Aljouei & Alsuhaibani, 2018; Alshumaimeri & Alzyadi, 2015; Gholami, Noordin, & Rafik-Galea, 2017; Litz, 2005; Tok, 2010; Vanha, 2017). Consequently, millions of textbooks are sold each year to fulfil this need (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994). English language textbooks can be fundamental building blocks of ELT programs for both students and teachers (Sheldon, 1988). For teachers, they may serve as a guide for instruction. They also can serve as memory support for students which provides them with a continuous record of the lessons learned (Awasthi, 2006). In his pioneering book *Choosing Your Coursebook*, Cunningsworth (1995, p. 7) describes several roles of textbooks:

1. a resource for presentation material (spoken and written)
2. a source of activities for learner practice and communicative interaction
3. a reference source for learners on grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, etc.
4. a source of stimulation and ideas for classroom language activities
5. a syllabus (where they reflect learning objectives which have already been determined)
6. a resource for self-directed learning or self-access work
7. a support for less experienced teachers who have yet to gain in confidence

Various other L2 researchers have also suggested multiple roles for textbooks in L2 classrooms (see Awasthi, 2006; Tomlinson, 2003; Ur, 1996). In practice, L2 textbooks have been accepted as an important component in the education system, and they play a central key role in virtually all L2 classrooms.

The importance of English language textbooks as a major component of the educational system in many countries has resulted in an extensive body of research on textbook evaluation (Abraha, 2007; Ahour, Towhidiyan, & Saeidi, 2014; Al-Alyani, 2017; Alamri, 2008; Albedaiwi, 2014; Alenezi, 2019; Al-Hajailan, 1999; Alhamlan, 2013; Al-Harbi, 2017; Alharbi, 2015; Aljouei & Alsuhaibani, 2018; Allehyani, Burnapp, & Wilson, 2017; Almalki, 2014; Alshumaimeri & Alzyadi, 2015; Al-Sowat, 2012; Dweikat, 2011; Jahangard, 2007; Hammad, 2014; Hanifa, 2018; Henriques, 2009; Madjdi & Rokhayani, 2018; Nguyet & Van Long, 2020; Tok, 2010; Zohrabi, Sabouri & Behroozian, 2012; Omari, 2018; Kalfut, 2020; Kalfut, 2021). However, to date, few studies have thoroughly examined the research methods used to evaluate L2 textbooks. A comprehensive overview of these approaches, in particular, is still obviously missing. The significance of English language textbooks has increased the need for more textbook evaluation studies to educate professionals on this particular topic. With the aim of addressing this gap in the literature, this review investigation intends to contribute to the expanding field of textbook evaluation research.

Most of the earliest research on L2 textbook evaluation was conducted in the 1970s (e.g., Bruder, 1978; Cowles, 1976; Stevick, 1972). This material can be broadly categorized in terms of which of two general approaches it follows. This paper aims to analyze these two major approaches to textbook evaluation research. The first type of study seeks to evaluate an English language textbook from a macro perspective, while the second type seeks to evaluate an English textbook from a micro perspective. Considerable attention will be devoted to L2 writing activities presented in L2 textbooks. This paper will also discuss the major limitations of these two research approaches. Before proceeding, it is important to point out there are a large number of studies on L2 textbook evaluation which target different material, such as college textbooks, textbooks which focus on English for specific purposes, etc. Thus, the following discussion has been narrowed to address only research from the first grade to the twelfth grade.

2. Evaluation of L2 Textbooks from a Macro Perspective

Textbook investigators using the first type of research have examined L2 textbooks from a macro perspective, which uses a broad general analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of an entire English language textbook. Several textbook evaluation studies conducted in the Saudi Arabian context employed a Likert scale checklist to evaluate the weaknesses and strengths of specific English textbooks (Alamri, 2008; Alenezi, 2019; Al-Hajailan, 1999; Alhamlan, 2013; AlHarbi, 2017; Alharbi, 2015; Aljouei & Alsuhaibani, 2018; Almalki, 2014; Al-Sowat, 2012). This type of research into L2 textbook evaluation continues to be performed in multiple L2 contexts around the globe (Ahour, Towhidiyan, & Saeidi, 2014; Dweikat, 2011;

Jahangard, 2007; Hammad, 2014; Hanifa, 2018; Henriques, 2009; Zohrabi, Sabouri, & Behroozian, 2012).

This evaluation approach is now well established and usually follows a more or less standard set of procedures. First of all, an L2 textbook is often evaluated based on a standard checklist criteria proposed by L2 teaching material scholars. A number of checklists have been used over the years, such as by Cowles (1976), Cunningsworth (1995), Harmer (2004), Keban (2012), Littlejohn (1998), Litz (2005), Rivers (1981), Sheldon (1988), Ur (1996), and Williams (1983). The criteria in these checklists address common points, such as learning objectives, learning goals, teaching methods, teaching procedures, activities, skills, content, layout and design, appropriateness, flexibility, and accessibility. Most researchers explicitly state they adapt a checklist from a specific source, but some researchers develop their own checklist criteria and utilize it without describing how they developed it.

Secondly, L2 material researchers generally rely upon the perspectives of L2 teachers to evaluate L2 textbooks. Researchers sometimes obtain additional perceptions from students and/or supervisors for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of school textbooks (e.g., Al-Yousef, 2007; Zohrabi, Sabouri, & Behroozian, 2012).

Thirdly, L2 textbook researchers themselves sometimes implement content analysis of textbooks. For example, Aljouei and Alsuhaibani (2018) conducted a deductive content qualitative analysis of the *Traveller* series textbooks. They used a Likert checklist survey that was adapted from various previous studies to guide their content analysis. Even so, this study did not provide an in-depth explanation of how the content analysis was performed. Furthermore, these researchers seemed to only provide a general description of learning activities, but no information about how checklist items relate to each other.

In general, one of the greatest challenges of this approach is that researchers have not addressed the activities in English textbooks in sufficient detail. Much uncertainty still exists about the interrelationship between many components presented in a Likert scale checklist. Van Lier (2004) proposed examining language learning from an ecological perspective in order to comprehend how context factors interact and how they could affect language learning. During the previous ten years, it appears that Lier's perspective has been incorporated into L2 textbook evaluation research by at least a few researchers, such as Guerrettaz and Johnston (2013), Vanha (2017), and Kalfut (2020). These researchers have examined how different textbook factors relate to one another from an ecological perspective. Even though each of these researchers uses this viewpoint in a different way, they all demonstrate that this method can offer a clearer picture of how textbooks can be successfully used in the classroom.

3. Evaluation of L2 Textbooks from a Micro Perspective

The second research approach for L2 textbook evaluation concentrates on addressing a single aspect of L2 teaching and learning from a micro perspective. Examples of the aspects which particular studies have focused upon include (a) listening (Ahmed, Yaqoob & Yaqoob, 2015), (b) reading (Al-Ghazo & M. Smadi, 2013; Althewini, 2016), (c) speaking (Alkhateeb & Almujaivel, 2018), (d) writing (Al-Qadi & Al-Qadi, 2015; Chang, 2004; Kobayakawa, 2011), (e) vocabulary (Manasrah, Al-Sobh & Al-Jabali, 2013; Mashrah, 2013), (f) culture (Allehyani, Burnapp, Wilson, 2017; Dweikat & Shbeitah, 2013), and (g) pragmatics (Vellenga, 2004). This current study also focuses on examining one single aspect of L2 teaching and learning: L2 writing. Thus, the upcoming discussion is centered upon reviewing and evaluating previous research on the incorporation of writing strategies in L2 textbooks.

Foundational work on the study of L2 writing strategies has investigated ESL textbooks for use within the context of the United States (Raimes, 1986). More recent work has investigated the proportion of writing strategies in EFL textbooks across the globe, such as in

Japan (Kobayakawa, 2011), Jordan (Al-Qadi & Al-Qadi, 2015), Pakistan (Habib & Umar, 2017), Indonesia (Cahyati, Srijono, & Hum, 2018). A summary of these studies can be found in Table 1, which shows that these textbooks do not equally address all aspects of the writing process- with each study tending to emphasize certain components at the expense of others. Prewriting tended to be the most neglected topic. Unfortunately, focusing on certain strategies and neglecting others will not provide learning opportunities for all students to improve their writing strategies. This is because much previous research has shown that successful student writers utilize several different writing strategies throughout the writing process (Brown, 2007; Nunan, 1989).

Table 1. Summary of Studies Examining Writing Strategies in L2 Textbooks

Articles	Textbook Type texts	# of textbooks	Key results
Raimes (1986)	ESL global textbooks	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Five textbooks excluded prewriting strategies. • Six textbooks excluded revision strategy.
Johnston (1996)	ESL global textbooks	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only one textbook provided students with a checklist for feedback sessions.
Kobayakawa (2011)	EFL high school textbooks, Japan	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guided writing and free writing were not frequently offered in the textbooks.
Al-Qadi & Al-Qadi (2015)	10th grade EFL textbook, Jordan	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offers only one prewriting strategy; collecting information from print and electronic sources.
Habib & Umar (2017)	9th & 10th grades EFL textbooks, Pakistan	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absence of prewriting sub-strategies: outlining, clustering, and brainstorming. • Controlled, guided and free writing were neglected. • Opportunities were not provided to write for different purposes. • Guidelines were not provided on how to organize texts and consider rhetorical text patterns
Cahyati, Srijono & Hum (2018)	7th grade EFL textbook Indonesia	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offered limited prewriting strategies (listing and collecting information).

Awareness of which writing strategies may be the focus of certain L2 textbooks could help teachers supplement their classroom with strategy instruction that enables students with a more

balanced set of tools for enhancing their writing proficiency. Thus, the following sections describe what these different writing strategies entail.

3.1. Research on Writing Strategies Implemented in the Prewriting Stage

Prewriting strategies are essential when teaching L2 writing because they provide opportunities for students to lay out a general plan for their documents in advance, including generating ideas, organizing ideas, and setting goals regarding what the document is intended to accomplish (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Research on the inclusion of prewriting strategies in textbooks addresses two main aspects. First, studies examine the types of prewriting strategies offered in textbooks, such as: freewriting, brainstorming, instructions to pose questions about a topic, journal writing (Raimes, 1986), discussion to generate ideas, the making of notes/listing (Johnston, 1996), and the collection of relevant information (Al-Qadi & Al-Qadi, 2015; Cahyati, Srijono, Hum, 2018). Second, research investigates the frequency of prewriting strategies in textbooks. The results revealed that the treatment of prewriting strategies varies greatly from one textbook to another. For example, Raimes (1986) evaluated ten global ESL textbooks, and found that only five of them included sufficient discussion of prewriting activities, while the other five said almost nothing about prewriting strategies. Johnston (1996) reported that two out of seven global L2 textbooks include a discussion strategy.

Some textbooks focus on offering one or two prewriting strategies. For instance, Al-Qadi and Al-Qadi (2015) analyzed one 10th grade L2 textbook which contained 12 units and found that the collecting information strategy was discussed in 7 of those units (14.3%). Cahyati et al. (2018) examined one 7th grade L2 textbook used in Indonesia and reported that it mentioned two types of prewriting strategies: listing of essential ideas and collecting information.

Overall, when a textbook excludes all prewriting strategies - or offers only one or two examples of strategies in the entire textbook - this runs contrary to past research which indicates competent student writers need to employ several different strategies in order to produce high quality documents. It is thus recommended that future research should address the type and frequency of prewriting strategies offered in new English language textbooks that may result in developing student knowledge of prewriting strategies. The question still remains whether theory and research have been sufficiently taken into consideration when textbooks have been written. If so, we might expect new textbooks to include several types of prewriting strategies and offer frequent learning opportunities for students to practice those strategies.

3.2. Research on Writing Strategies Implemented in the During-Writing Stage

Most L2 textbooks provide a writing prompt in the lesson that informs students about what they should write. Previous studies have shown that writing prompts in textbooks focus on providing opportunities for students to practice two levels of writing: sentence-level and discourse-level writing. Cahyati et al (2018) stated that sentence-level activities instruct students to write short sentences, such as to write about their daily lives and complete conversations. Discourse-level activities ask students to write essays, such as asking them to write an essay report about the locations of some public facilities in town. In their study, Cahyati et al (2018) examined one 7th grade L2 textbook from Indonesia. They reported the majority of writing activities focused on sentence-level writing, but little attention was devoted to discourse-level writing. In contrast, a study on textbook evaluation in Jordan reported that discourse-level writing is provided frequently in the writing activities (Al-Qadi & Al-Qadi, 2015).

Similarly, Aljouei and Alsuhaibani (2018) evaluated the *Traveller* series textbooks used in Saudi Arabia and reported that writing activities in these books directed students to express their ideas and opinions. However, they did not address how frequently these activities were found in the text. Instead, their work mostly evaluated several general aspects of the textbooks, such as layout, accessibility, and appropriateness.

Feedback and revision are necessary during writing. It is widely known that good writers do not attempt to write a final draft from the first time. Instead, they engage in a lengthy process (e.g., constant feedback and revising) to reach the final draft. Error feedback assists students to successfully revising their drafts and producing accurate revisions (Ferris, 2014). Considerable research has demonstrated that response and revision strategies are not consistently offered in textbooks. In a study of ten textbooks, Raimes (1986) reported that although revision strategy was presented in four of these, it was scarcely even mentioned in the other six textbooks. Johnston reported the revision strategy was mentioned briefly on only two occasions in the textbook under study. In contrast, Al-Qadi and Al-Qadi (2015) reported that 9 units (18.3%) out of 12 units included revision activities. According to these researchers, the presentation of this strategy in the textbook is sufficient to provide opportunities for students to become familiar with this strategy. Regarding L2 textbooks in Saudi Arabia, little research has been published about whether high school L2 textbooks provide sufficient opportunities for students to receive peer/teacher feedback and then revise their drafts to produce final drafts.

Furthermore, research on textbooks has reported two significant issues regarding feedback and revision. The first is whether feedback focuses on form, content, or both. Johnston (1996) found that revision of content received more consideration than revision of form. Johnston recommends that students should be instructed to exchange drafts to help them distinguish between clear and unclear ideas. Al-Qadi and Al-Qadi (2015) mentioned that peer response focuses on addressing clarity, correctness, and coherence.

The second issue includes methods of feedback. Raimes (1986) reported that L2 textbooks used a very comprehensive guideline which can be used with any piece of student writing. She also reported that one textbook provides students with a composition profile sheet to be used with any assignment for the entire semester. Johnston (1996) claims that textbooks do not provide sufficient information about how students should correct their writing. Al-Qadi and Al-Qadi (2015) provided examples of peer response activities, such as “Exchange instructions with a partner” and “Now check your article and exchange it with a partner” (p. 293). Although it seems these two activities did not provide enough information for students to perform the recommended activities, the researchers nevertheless believed the instructions offered were sufficient and acceptable. Berry (2008) reviewed a beginning-level global L2 textbook and reported that this textbook contained several revising checklists. Berry (2008) reviewed a beginning level global L2 textbook and found that this textbook contained several revising checklists, but this researcher did not provide further information which may educate L2 teachers about the use of these checklists.

3.3. Research on Writing Strategies Implemented in the Post-Writing Stage

Publishing the final drafts has been recommended as the key to developing student writing. Johnson (1996) states that publishing final written drafts of students assists them in developing their awareness of readers. He reported that some textbooks instruct students to publish their final products by posting them on the classroom wall, or collecting all of the student papers to create a “class newspaper.” Johnson argued that the absence of the publishing strategy in several textbooks may severely limit the development of student awareness of their readers.

Overall, considering the second approach (a micro perspective) of research on L2 textbook evaluation, it can be argued that the following points seem to remain unresolved. First, several textbooks exclude all prewriting strategies or provide only one or two prewriting strategies. This may indicate that the research does not take into account pre-existing studies which emphasize the importance of all strategies for producing effective texts. Second, reading passages do not pay attention to purpose and audience. Third, some textbooks do not offer equal opportunities for students to practice both sentence-level and discourse-level writing. Fourth, although feedback and revising strategies are key for improving student writing skills,

several textbooks failed to offer them for students. Fifth, some textbooks present a revision activity in each chapter, but this activity still has serious issues. A textbook contains the same questions in each chapter. Another textbook utilizes the same language (wording) all over the textbook. Furthermore, the revising instructions in some textbooks are very broad. In short, this study has raised various questions in need of further investigation.

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