Evaluation of an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Book for Students of Islamic and Arabic Studies[1]

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Introduction

The English language teaching bookstore contains countless textbooks for the teaching of English as a foreign (TEFL) or second language (ESL). To evaluate them, several EFL experts conduct textbook evaluations to inform professionals in the ELT field about their strengths and weaknesses, and to offer ways for improvement. Since the textbook chosen is an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) textbook, it is in order to give some background on ESP. ESP has become a prominent area of EFL teaching. Its development is reflected in the uncountable ESP textbooks in use all over the world. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, p. 4-5) characterize ESP in terms of absolute and variable characteristics as shown below.

Absolute Characteristics mean that ESP meets specific learners' needs, uses "underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves" (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998, p.4) and is centered on language appropriate to these activities in terms of "grammar, lexis, register, skills, discourse and genre" (p. 5). Variable Characteristics mean that ESP may be designed for specific disciplines, may use "a different methodology from that of general English ...is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level or in a professional work situation" (p.5) and assumes some "basic knowledge of the language system" (p. 5). This movement has led to the production and use of English courses aimed at specific disciplines; for example, English for Medicine, English for Engineering, English for Business, etc. in place of the more traditional 'General English' courses. Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p.19) argue that "ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning."

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Private and public higher educational institutions in the Arab world and everywhere else are using commercial ESP textbooks, whereas others have compiled their in-house designed ESP textbooks. This trend represents what Gatehouse (2001) characterizes as content language acquisition versus general language acquisition. The textbook under evaluation is an example of what Hutchinson & Waters (1987) and Carver (1983) classify as English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The features of ESP are decided according to the interpretation of results from needs analysis of authentic language used in target academic settings. Carver (1983, p. 133-134) states that there are three features common to ESP courses: authentic material, purpose-related orientation, and self-direction. Self-direction means "turning learners into users" (Carver, 1983, p. 134).

Evaluation of an ESP Textbook

In my search for guidelines to use in evaluating the textbook I have chosen, I have found that Baleghizadeh & Rahimi (2011), Brunton (2009), Ellis (1997), and McDonough & Shaw (2003) have proposed and used a scheme for textbook evaluation as shown below:

1. **External Evaluation**

External evaluation examines what the textbook writer(s) say about the book. This is usually explicitly stated in the blurb on the book front and back covers, the introduction and the table of contents. Careful examination of these yields details on:

    1.1 The intended audience and proficiency level

    1.2 The context of use

    1.3 Presentation of materials, grading, layout and methodology

    1.4 Supplementary materials and learning resources

    1.5 Visuals contained

    1.6 Culture

2. **Internal Evaluation**

This covers the following:

    2.1 Skills to be developed and their presentation in the materials

    2.2 Supporting audio or video recordings

2.3 Authenticity of materials

2.4 Suitability of materials for different learning styles

2.5 Individual, pair and group learning activities

The above guidelines are used to assess the ESP textbook under evaluation.

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Textbook Publication Details:

Textbook Title: Practice and Progress: ESP 1

Book 4 (Second Edition)

Authors: Dr. Hachemi Aboubou & Mrs. Bibi Aeysha Faisal

Publisher: College of Islamic and Arabic Studies (CIAS), Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Publication Date: 2010

Blurb on Book covers: None

Price: Not given

Supplementary Materials: None

Teacher's Handbook: None

Students' Practice Book: None

Website: None for the book. Only the publisher's website is given: (www.iacollege.ae).

The Context

Practice and Progress: ESP 2: Book 4, is textbook number 4 in a series of four books. The authors have invested time and exerted great effort in compiling and producing their in-house tailored textbook. It covers a wide variety of topics pertinent to the courses offered by CIAS.

Front and back covers:

Design

The front cover, with its dark blue background, is divided into two halves; the upper one displays CIAS' logo. The logo shows an image of an open book (the Quran), CIAS's name and a Quranic verse urging people to seek knowledge. It also contains the full College's name and the book title. The lower half shows a picture of an ancient house, probably to remind users of the ancient Islamic culture. There is no other writing on this half except the book number; 4.

Materials Development

The writers, probably, could not find a suitable textbook to serve and meet the learning objectives and the learners' needs, and therefore decided to produce their in-house textbook.   It comprises four units and each unit contains three lessons.

- Unit 1 consists of three lessons covering the following: Lesson 1 'Prophets', lesson 2 'Prophet Muhammad's Biography' and lesson 3 discusses the 'Prophet's Farewell Speech'.

- Unit 2 consists of three lessons dealing with the following: Lesson 1 'Language & Communication', lesson 2 'Literature', and lesson 3 introduces 'Mahmoud Darwish'.

- Unit 3 consists of three lessons tackling the following: Lesson 1 'Ferdinand De Saussure', lesson 2 'Leonard Bloomfield', and lesson 3 introduces 'Noam Chomsky'.

- Unit 4 consists of three lessons covering the following: Lesson 1 'The Reasons Behind the Rise of Civilization', lesson 2 'Decline of Civilization', and lesson 3 discusses 'Stages of Civilization'.

It seems that the authors chose and selected the contents to serve the courses taught to the students in CIAS. Students in CIAS study various literary, religious and Arabic courses and this, most probably, was on the authors' mind when selecting the teaching materials. I can safely say that the authors chose the materials that would cover, in English, similar materials to those that the students study in Arabic. Probably, they wanted to familiarize students with how arguments are presented in both Arabic and English. I should also point out that this textbook was not based on a study of the learners' actual needs, but on the authors' perceptions of what the learners should know at this stage of learning. Nowhere in the book did the author mention the criteria on whose basis teaching materials were selected. This, indeed, contradicts the ESP practice that materials should be based on a thorough analysis of the learners' needs (Bruce, 2011). Bojovic

(2006, p. 493) states that ESP materials should be authentic, up-to-date and relevant for the students' specializations. The majority of the reading passages, if not all, are taken from internet sites. Yet, the authors fail to refer the users to any of the countless free internet sites for further readings or language practice, in an age that has always been referred to as the digital age (Jarvis & Pastuszka, 2008).

Appropriateness

Each unit is laid out the same; the sequencing of exercises is identical throughout the whole book. Dudley-Evans & St John (1998, p.171) state that materials need to be "consistent and to have some recognizable pattern" as this will make the students more familiar and accustomed to the book quickly. The book contains a good body of the vocabulary used in the students' field of study. This body is introduced in the brainstorming exercise each lesson starts with. The brainstorming activity requires students to study the meaning of the lexical items, their phonetic transcriptions, number of syllables per word and what part of speech the word is. The grammar structures and vocabulary exercises move from simple to difficult. Although they may be useful in helping students prepare for the reading passage that follows, I still wonder why Islamic and Arabic studies students should be asked to trouble themselves with finding a word's 'phonetic transcription', especially when we know that they never had a chance to study the sound system of the English language which is only taught in the Arab world to students in English language departments. The rest of the exercises in the lesson are geared towards word meanings, antonyms, synonyms, word formation, prepositional phrases, question formation and time adverbs. This purely grammatical approach will not take the "students to the level of near-native control of the language" (p. v) as the authors claim.

Furthermore, it is not clear what the objective behind the inclusion of 'Section E/ Quran and Hadith', which focuses on the translation of some Quranic verses and some of the prophet's sayings, is. Learners need to know what they will achieve from such a translation exercise. The authors claim that their textbook will "take forward the students skills in writing, listening and speaking" (p. v). However, the nature of the exercises used and their superficiality may not help achieve their claim. I do not think inductive grammar exercises will help students develop their writing, listening and speaking skills. Although the authors have remained silent on the students' level in English, it seems from the book contents that the learners' level in English is either intermediate or upper intermediate. In the listening exercises, no clues are given concerning the

nature and level of the listening materials apart from the instructions: "Listen carefully to the piece your teacher plays for you. Then follow the instruction given" (p. 19). What these instructions are, only God knows. They also have included a speaking activity at the end of each lesson designed, according to their claims, to get students engaged in debates. This is in line with researches by Joe, Nation & Newton (1996), Nation (2001), Newton (1995), which emphasize the importance of spoken communicative activities. However, the authors did not explain the nature of these debates. The only thing provided is general theoretical information telling the students how to plan, prepare and give presentations. This theoretical information will not turn students into good speakers as this requires much practice from students and guidance from teachers. Some note-taking exercises could have been included to ensure that students could listen and understand the general meaning of a text, recording or debate. Furthermore, students could have been encouraged to search the WWW for relevant listening and speaking activities or materials.

IT Use

This book does not take into account new technologies. The authors could have designed a DVD/CD to be used for the speaking and listening exercises. Jarvis & Pastuszka (2008, para. 20) convincingly argue that the WWW could have a more useful role in English for Academic Purposes and call for the inclusion of "computing for academic purposes (CAP) as an aspect of EAP …if we are to fully equip our students in a computer-dominated academic environment."

Motivation

The layout is colorful and clear. The textbook contains a variety of authentic pictures illustrating the themes in the lessons. For example, Units 2, 3 and 4 show pictures of known persons such as Noam Chomsky, Bloomfield and Mahmoud Darwish (a famous Arab poet and writer). These pictures give a clear context for the activities and add to authenticity (Nation, 2001; Thornbury, 2002). Variation in exercises, true/false or yes/no, word-matching, word-formation, etc., "increases motivation" (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p.178). However, the texts used do not seem, from my personal perspective, motivating. I wished I had access to the students to ask them their opinion about the materials used and their authenticity. I would like to conclude here with Baleghizadeh and Rahimi's (2011, p.1013) argument that ESP textbooks should be

motivating. They add that "One of the techniques… to achieve this goal is to use pictures, illustrations, tasks, and authentic materials. The materials should include discussion questions, prediction activities, skimming and scanning exercises, and tasks which stimulate critical analysis and evaluation of what they have read". The best description for this book is White's (1988) statement that the functions and content are predetermined and learner involvement is non-interactive.

Methodology

Guided by Richards' (2005) activity types; information-gap activities, task-completion activities, information gathering activities, opinion-sharing activities, information-transfer activities, reasoning-gap activities, role plays, pair work and group work, associated with communicative language teaching (CLT), it can be concluded that the methodology used in this textbook cannot be described as communicatively-based since the main focus is on reading comprehension, vocabulary and grammar rules. Yet, I should say that new vocabulary items are presented, practiced and then used on paper, not in real communicative activities.

Language

The book has focused more on reading comprehension. It is clear that the other three skills, listening, speaking and writing, have been given little attention. An ESP textbook designed for CIAS' students is expected to include issues of style used in literary English. Unfortunately this book does not meet this condition. Besides, it does not make any reference to the students' level in English; therefore, it is difficult to judge the complexity or simplicity of the language with reference to users.

Overall Comments and Conclusion

These evaluation criteria are probably designed for general English language teaching textbooks and therefore, do not dwell much on whether the textbook being evaluated is based on actual learners' needs analysis or not. There might be a need to include some other criteria to account for textbooks in the field of teaching English for Specific Purposes. Besides, we need an evaluation category or criterion that can account for gender bias. All the reading passages in the textbook under evaluation are on famous male writers. There is none on female writers although

the human history is rich with many renowned female writers. ESP is designed for a specific group of learners in a specific context. The materials used should be based on a thorough analysis of the learners' needs and the field of study. The authors, I believe, should have clearly stated the objectives of the book in the preface and what they expected the learners to be able to do after studying it. Moreover, they should have stated the learning objectives. That is, what is required of the students after they graduate? Are they going to use English in teaching Arabic and Islamic studies to non-native speakers of Arabic in English language-medium schools? Furthermore, they should have considered starting each lesson with the 'goals' to be achieved so that the students know what is required of them and become better able to assess their learning.

This textbook may be of little value if used outside the context for which it was designed, as it has very specific cultural items (i.e. Islamic and Arabic heritage). For this reason, some ESP courses, e.g. English for Air-traffic Controllers, may be more marketable than others. This book, although the authors claim it be an ESP textbook aiming at taking the learners to near native speaker competence, still adopts the old conception of ESP as "mostly as a matter of teaching the grammar and vocabulary of specialist registers" (Paltridge, 2009, p. 289).

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