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An evaluation of the 9th grade local and the international English coursebooks in terms of language skills and components

Arif Sariçoban^{a*}, Nilüfer Can^b

^aArif Sariçoban, Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey

^bNilüfer Can, Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey

Abstract

The aim of this study is to evaluate 9th grade local and international English coursebooks used in Turkish high schools in terms of language skills and language components. This study is a replica of the study conducted by the same authors who have previously evaluated the same English coursebooks in terms of aims and methodology. In order to evaluate the specified coursebooks, a comprehensive checklist is designed in terms of language skills and components with reference to some available checklists. Using this checklist, teachers who are the prime users of the coursebooks are asked to evaluate them in terms of language skills and language components. The results are analysed quantitatively and the findings are discussed by considering teacher and student needs. Furthermore, a comparison is made between the local and the international coursebook evaluations and some recommendations are provided relying on the overall findings.

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1. Introduction

In EFL settings such as Turkey, both teachers and students use coursebooks to a great extent in teaching and learning English. In spite of the increasing mobility nowadays and greater contact with people from all over the world, the majority of the English learners at Turkish high schools are found to

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +90312 2 97 85 75
E-mail address: arifs@hacettepe.edu.tr.

use only textbooks in class as the main material and not to seek opportunities to use English as a communication tool outside the classroom (Hatipoğlu & Can, 2010). Therefore, coursebooks are the main determining factors in deciding what to teach, how to teach and in what order to teach (McGrath, 2006). They are even more influential in the case of non-native teachers who usually over-rely on a single textbook (Medgyes, 2001). All this suggests that coursebooks be designed successfully in a way to help language learners achieve communicative competence which is the ultimate goal in language education and in a way to guide teachers to attain their goal. In other words, there should be a match among coursebooks, teachers and students. This, in turn, highlights the importance of coursebook selection which needs to be made after a systematic analysis and evaluation.

Coursebook evaluation, if carried out systematically can have a positive effect on the teaching procedure. For this reason, this study evaluates coursebooks in terms of language skills and components for the purpose of helping stakeholders to make decisions in developing and selecting coursebooks. The assumption is that unlike traditional methods which used to emphasize one language skill or component over others, the currently used coursebooks should emphasize all the language skills and components equally in an integrated way so that communicative competence can be achieved on the part of language learners. With regard to this, Celce-Murcia (2001) asserts that “there is general acceptance of the complexity and interrelatedness of skills in both written and oral communication and of the need for learners to have the experience of communication, to participate in the negotiation of meaning” (p. 15). As a result, this evaluation process is expected to allow the stakeholders to decide whether the coursebook is successful in dealing with language skills and components in an integrated way and whether it is partially suitable and can be used through adaptation.

2. Literature Review

English coursebooks used in English classrooms are evaluated from various perspectives in the literature. While there are some studies which make an overall evaluation of the English coursebooks (e.g. Al-Yousef, 2007; Özdemir, 2007; Tekir & Arikan, 2007), there are others which evaluate English coursebooks in terms of specific language components and skills such as vocabulary, speech acts and cultural elements (e.g. Campillo, 2008; Çakır, 2010; Delen & Tavit, 2010; Nemati, 2009). In the context of Turkey, to the best knowledge of the researchers, studies on the overall English coursebook evaluation is limited to primary education (e.g. Tekir & Arikan, 2007; Özdemir, 2007; Çakır, 2010). With respect to the purpose of this study, there seems to be no research that focuses on the evaluation of 9th grade English coursebooks used in Turkish high schools in terms of language skills and components. The same researchers previously conducted a parallel study in which they evaluated the same coursebooks in terms of aims and methodology and revealed the insufficiency of local coursebooks in comparison to the international ones.

3. Research Questions

The research questions are as follows:

- a) Is there any difference between the preferences of foreign language teachers with special reference to the use of foreign English coursebooks and local English coursebooks in terms of language components?
- b) Is there any difference between the preferences of foreign language teachers with special reference to the use of foreign English coursebooks and local English coursebooks in terms of language skills?

4. Method

English teachers, who are the prime users of coursebooks, were asked to evaluate the specified coursebooks. Fifteen English teachers from five different high schools in Ankara participated in the study. They were all teaching English to 9th grade students at the time. As for their gender, one of them was a male while others were females and their age ranged from 31 to 55 years. More than half of the teachers (53.3%) had language teaching experience from 11 to 20 years and some (40%) had language teaching experience for more than 20 years. Furthermore, four of the teachers held a master's degree.

As for the instrument used for teachers to evaluate the coursebooks that they were using, a comprehensive checklist was designed in terms of (a) language skills and (b) language components with reference to some available checklists (Al-Yousef, 2007; Celce-Murcia, 2001; Cunningsworth, 1995; Harmer, 1991; McGrath, 2002; Tomlinson, 2003). Important and relevant items from the available checklists were combined and other items related to the learning and teaching context and items that were found significant were added. A scale ranging from 1 to 3 was used. Checklists were given to the teachers who were teaching English in 9th Grade and were asked to fill in the checklists both for the local and the international coursebooks that they were using in terms of language skills and components. A checklist method was used so that a more objective and principled evaluation of the coursebooks could be achieved. Regarding this, Tomlinson (2003) states that "making an evaluation criterion-referenced can reduce subjectivity and can certainly help to make an evaluation more principled, rigorous, systematic and reliable" (p. 23). Lastly, SPSS as a statistical program was used in analyzing the questionnaires and descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean) was carried out.

The reliability level for both local coursebooks ($r = .929$) and foreign ones ($r = .956$) are found high enough to conduct the current study.

5. Results and Discussion

Research Question 1: Is there any difference between the preferences of foreign language teachers with special reference to the use of foreign English coursebooks and local English coursebooks in terms of language components?

A careful analysis of Table 1 simply indicates that the preference of foreign English coursebooks (FEC) ($m = 2.39$) is higher than that of local English coursebooks (LEC) ($m = 1.63$) with special reference to language components in those books.

Table 1: Mean scores for language component

	FEC Total Mean	LEC Total Mean
Grammar	2.55	1.97
Vocabulary	2.4	1.63
Phonology	2.24	1.29
Overall Mean	2.39	1.63

The mostly agreed aspect of both the foreign ($m = 2.93$) and the local coursebooks ($m = 2.50$) in terms of grammar teaching is that they all give importance to the teaching of language functions although the former are much better than the latter in this respect. With regard to grammar teaching, the foreign coursebooks ($m = 2.67$) are thought to be much better than the local English coursebooks ($m = 1.78$) in

terms of (1) the appropriate sequence of grammatical points, (2) the increasing complexity of the structures to suit the growing reading ability of the students, (3) introducing the linguistic items in meaningful situations and (4) including meaningful exercises on grammar points. As for vocabulary teaching, the highest mean difference between the foreign ($m=2.42$) and the local ($m=1.38$) English coursebooks are found to be in the vocabulary load that is reasonable for the level of the students, in presenting vocabulary learning strategies and in emphasizing semantic relationships of words. Lastly, in terms of phonology which is the least emphasized language component in all the coursebooks, the foreign coursebooks ($m=2.60$) are thought to be better than the local ones ($m=1.25$) in teaching stress and intonation and in providing CDs for pronunciation practice.

Research Question 2. Is there any difference between the preferences of foreign language teachers with special reference to the use of foreign English coursebooks and local English coursebooks in terms of language skills?

As reported in Table 2 and 3, the preference of foreign English coursebooks (FEC) ($m=2.50$) is higher than that of local English coursebooks (LEC) ($m=1.59$) with special reference to language skills.

Table 2: Mean scores for language skills

	FEC Total Mean	LEC Total Mean
Language Skills (General)	2.5	1.59
Listening	2.44	1.55
Speaking	2.67	1.83
Reading	2.51	1.86
Writing	2.51	2

Table 3: Mean scores for language skills from specific aspects

Language Skills	FEC Mean	LEC Mean
1 Are the four skills <i>equally presented</i> ?	2.60	1.50
2 Are there enough reading study?	2.87	2.38
3 Are there <i>enough speaking study</i> ?	2.60	1.38
4 Are there <i>enough listening study</i> ?	2.80	1.38
5 Are there <i>enough writing study</i> ?	2.73	1.88
6 Are the skills your students need included?	2.53	2.00
7 Are the four skills <i>integrated</i> ?	2.47	1.38
8 Is <i>integration natural</i> ?	2.40	1.50
9 Do the presentation and practice activities include the <i>integration of skills in realistic contexts</i> ?	2.33	1.38
10 Is the teaching of <i>communicative interaction</i> given importance?	2.40	1.63
11 Are there <i>note taking</i> exercises?	2.33	1.63
12 Are the <i>communication strategies</i> presented?	2.47	1.75
13 Are the <i>strategies for each skill presented and taught</i> ?	2.47	1.75
14 Does the textbook use <i>authentic reading and listening materials</i> at an appropriate level?	2.33	1.50
15 If <i>non-authentic material</i> is used, is it <i>nevertheless a good model</i> for learners to follow?	2.00	1.25
16 Does it deal with the structuring and conventions of language use <i>above sentence level</i> e.g. How to take part in conversations, how to structure a piece of extended writing, how to identify the main points in a reading passage?	2.60	1.50
17 Does it allow for students to <i>develop their language comprehension</i> abilities at the required level?	2.60	1.38
18 Does it allow for students to <i>develop their language production</i> abilities at the required level?	2.53	1.38
19 Are the activities on <i>four language skills relevant to students' needs</i> ?	2.53	1.63

Compared to the local English coursebooks ($m=1.38$), the foreign ones ($m=2.63$) are indicated to include more speaking and listening study and to better allow students to develop their language

comprehension and production abilities at the required level. More specifically, the foreign English coursebooks ($m=2.58$) are thought to be more sufficient than the local ones ($m=1.60$) in terms of (1) appropriate language and length of the listening and reading texts, (2) emphasis on spoken language such as discourse markers, fixed expressions and idiomatic language and (3) presenting the conventions of different sorts of writing.

6. Conclusion

Teachers evaluated foreign English coursebooks to be better and more sufficient in all the language skills and components. Within each group of coursebooks, both the foreign and the local English coursebooks are rated to be good in grammar. Language skills specifically speaking, reading, writing have the high means both for foreign and local English coursebooks although the former is much better than the latter in those language skills and components. All this highlights the need to improve local coursebooks in terms of language skills and components, which requires collaboration between researchers, coursebooks writers, administrators, teachers and students.

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