

# **Investigating the usefulness of exercises in English language teaching materials through textbook evaluation**

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## **Abstract**

The article determines how much the exercises in the textbooks for primary classroom learners are useful to enhance the formation and development of knowledge, skill, and habit in English according to the requirements of the Core Curriculum. The author develops the modern trends for textbook evaluation and criteria for analysis.

**Keywords:** core curriculum, textbook analysis, textbook evaluation, system of exercises, variety of exercises, scaffolding model,

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## Introduction

As indicated by the recent Uzbek national curriculum guidelines, the main purpose of teaching and learning modern foreign languages in Uzbekistan aims to help pupils develop cultural and language skills to enable them to communicate effectively with foreigners on general everyday topics [4: 21].

In this context, the present study aims to examine how much the exercises in the above mentioned textbooks are useful for learning to take place in the classrooms. The following research questions are addressed in the study.

- a. Quality of practical material (Do the exercises or tasks in the textbooks truly foster and support language learning?)
- b. Do the exercises or tasks provide enough variety to meet the needs of different kinds of learners in the classes?

## Literature review

Since English is a foreign language in Uzbekistan, classroom serves as the main source of exposure to English for young learners. Therefore, materials, especially textbooks play a vital role in language input. This implies that it is the textbook which determines the classroom activities, influences teachers' teaching methods, and the pupils' roles. It should be mentioned that the main material which is used in primary classrooms in Uzbekistan is the textbook. As Richards maintains, materials provide the main input for the students and the type of the "language practice that occurs in the classroom [21: 251]." Nunan believes that textbook is the main element of any curriculum and "it is difficult to imagine a class without books ..." It is the textbook which enhances the learning process by mediating between the teachers and students and "offers a coherent syllabus, satisfactory language control ... [19: 98]". Although materials do not usually represent the actual process of teaching, they "represent plans for teaching" [21: 260]. In this regard, Robinson argues that textbooks provide "a framework for a course, forming in essence a syllabus [22: 57]." Meanwhile, she maintains that using a textbook has positive psychological effects on the learners because textbooks provide the whole semester's course to them. At this juncture, Hedge states that when we choose a textbook, we, in fact, choose a "planned sequence of items to be taught [16: 358]." In this regards, we offer four main reasons for using materials in the classroom: "as a source of language, as a learning support, for motivation and stimulation, and for reference." Cunningsworth believes that textbooks have multiple roles in English language classes and can help to present the written and spoken material, provide activities, promote interaction, serve as a reference on vocabulary and grammar, act as a source for classroom activities, serve as a syllabus, and offer self-access work or self-directed learning [14: 7]. Richards and Rodgers suggest that the main aim of materials is to present and practice content, ease interaction between students, and promote learner autonomy [21, 30]. However, as Hutchinson and Waters (1989) argue, the primary role of materials is to facilitate the learning process because useful materials do not teach rather they encourage learning [17: 315-328]. Hedge maintains that good materials allow the learners to prepare in advance by offering a grammatical and functional framework that provide for their common needs and wants [16: 36]. Mainly, materials provide students with the main source of contact with the language, the content of lessons, the balance of skills taught, and the type of practice learners participate in [21: 252]. Finally, the first president of Uzbekistan assumes that textbooks should demonstrate the nation's wisdom, reflect the people's intelligence and meet the requirements indicated in the national core curriculum [1: 42].

Problems of textbooks evaluation for young learners were investigated by many scholars. For instance, in Jarova's investigations three textbooks: "Angliskiy yazik" for 2, 3, 4 grades (V.P.Kuzoblev et.al.), "Enjoy English" for 1, 2, 3, 4 grades (M.Z.Biboletova et. al.), "English" for 1, 2, 3, 4 grades (I.N.Vereshagina et.al.) have been comparatively analyzed the usefulness of the exercises in the textbooks to provide cognitive learning in the primary classrooms [7: 216-217]. Thorough investigations of textbooks have been carried out, and several comprehensive textbook evaluation checklists were developed by different scholars [13: 192].

An exercise (Uzbek – mashq) – a series of actions, movements, or tasks performed repeatedly or regularly as a way of practicing and improving a skill or procedure [3: 562]. The experts suggested various definitions of the terminology: (a) learning activity accomplished in the foreign language; learning unit which consists of task and material [6: 400]; (b) - obtaining knowledge about the target language, formation of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation skills, using above mentioned skills correctly in practice [11: 156]; (c) - repeatedly organized mental activity according to the certain structure and focused on habit formation to accomplish different tasks [10: 460]; (d) - facilitating means for competency acquisition [20: 4].

Equally relevant to the issue are the questions of system of exercises. The system of exercises, its structural parts and definitions have been exhaustively investigated by many scholars on psycholinguistic, didactic and pedagogic perspective. For instance Rakhmanov categorized the exercises based on the linguistic theory and divided them into (a) language focused and (b) speech focused exercises.

I.A.Gruzinskaya evaluated the textbook exercises according to their usefulness for teaching and mastering language skills. A.M.Jarova investigated the usefulness of the ration of textbook exercises to develop young learners' awareness about cognitive learning [7: 214-218]. Sh.Ubaydullayev classified the system of exercises for: (a) teaching and learning language materials such as phonetic, vocabulary, and grammar; (b) teaching and learning speech materials such as listening, speaking and writing; (c) teaching and learning the linguistic skills; (d) exercises for preparing and practicing exercises [9: 145].

Some experts who advocate communicative approach argue that these exercises do not make communication happen in the classroom and therefore dead-end [8: 10]. But, it would be unfair not to mention the fact that young learners enjoy drilling exercises because they like imitating and besides they fill compensated and free of stress [12: 248]. However, we also agree that drilling exercises are effective for mustering linguistic structures and avoiding language interference.

### The Study

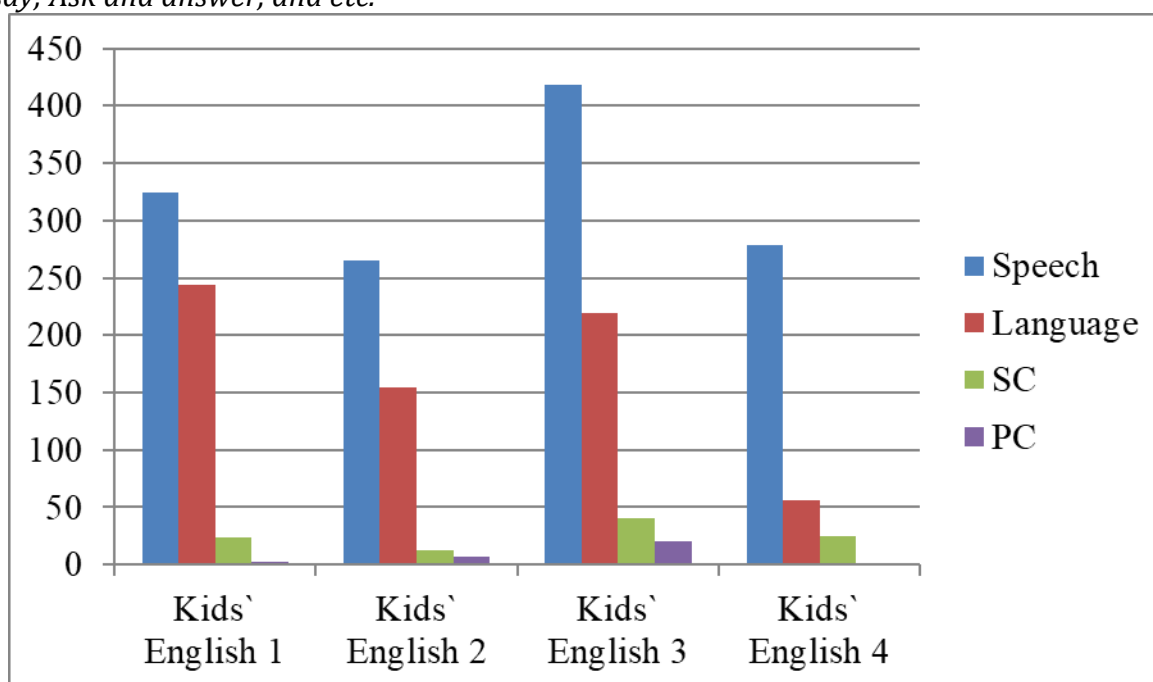
Generally, the first area addressed in textbook evaluation was an analysis of the fit between materials and curriculum. But, in countries with centralized educational planning units, curricular fit is more controlled. Such is the case in Uzbekistan, for example, where the Ministry of Public Education arranges for publication of its own textbooks, and educators here can be sure that the materials are appropriate for the setting and that they carry out specified curricular goals.

The textbooks under study were developed for A1 level course. The A1 which is a limited amount of time spent on foreign languages (on average, pupils in grade 1 have two 40-minute foreign language lessons per week (66 hours a year), pupils in grades 2-4 have two 45-minute lessons per week (68 hours a year), pupils in grades 5-9 have three 45-minute lessons per week (102 hours a year). Therefore, since the objective of the course is

developing listening and speaking skills and strategies, this textbook was prepared to meet the young learners' needs. These textbooks are nicely colored and care has been taken to use activities familiar to pupils. For the moment, we will ignore the issue of how the teacher might use the course book in the lesson to get pupils started.

The text books consist of fourteen units each deals with different general topics such as greeting, classroom objects, my family, my friend, toys and colors, parts of the body, seasons, weather, domestic animals, wild animals, vegetables, fruits, things we can do, and fairy world. Each unit consists of listening and speaking activities followed by various exercises and tasks. The major purpose of the textbook is to increase the learners' vocabulary domain and enhance their pronunciation. It attempts to prepare the learners to tackle their everyday life communication requirements and fulfill their general needs on listening and speaking.

In traditional textbooks there are texts like «*This is our classroom. It is large and light. There is a door and two windows in it. The walls in the classroom are white, the floor is brown*». Such texts might be less useful for teaching reading as they are hardly ever able to motivate the learners. Young learners usually have to read such texts not for pleasure but to please their teachers or parents [16, 55-56]. The textbooks under the investigation seem to be developed in accordance to this old fashioned frame of reference. Every unit of the above mentioned textbooks contain the same structure and exercises like: *Look and say (colour, tick); Look, listen and repeat (do); Listen and guess (tick); Look at the pictures and match; Point and say; Ask and answer, and etc.*



**Figure 2:** Ration of exercises in Kids' English for primary classroom learners

One can mention that the majority of the exercises are focused on developing learners' language competence. For instance, Kids' English 1,2,3,4 contains 1286 exercises focused on developing speech (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) competence, 673 exercises focused on developing language competence (vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, and grammar), 107 exercises which are might be useful to teach sociolinguistic awareness, and 46 exercises for teaching pragmatic competence (see figure 2).

## Conclusion

The findings in this study suggest that the designers may have done an unsatisfactory job in specifying consistently useful exercises. As Sinclair recommends, materials writers need to begin with attested language data as their starting point [23: 39]. If this is too much to ask, then course designers might at least confirm their intuitively-based data with textbook evaluation criteria.

As a recommendation we provide an abridged evaluation form that can be practical set of criteria for either (a) choosing a textbook for a course or (b) evaluating the textbooks for further investigations.

1. Will the textbook help to accomplish the course goals?
2. Does the textbook fit the learners' background (age related psychological (intellectual development, memory, attention span, and etc.) and physiological factors, native language (language interference, focalization) and culture, educational background, motivation or purpose for learning English)?
3. Does the theoretical approach reflected in the textbook reflect a philosophy that the target learners can easily identify with (theory of learning and theory of language)?
4. Does the textbook integrate the "four skills"? Is there a balanced approach towards the skills? Does the textbook emphasize skills which the curriculum also emphasizes (listening, speaking, reading, and writing)?
5. Does the textbook reflect what is now known about language and language learning? (a. validity – does the textbook accomplish what it purports to? b. authenticity of language; c. appropriateness and currency of topics, situations, and contexts; d. proficiency level – is it pitched for the right level?)
6. Is the practice material of high quality and adequately rationalized? (a. exercises – is there a variety form knowledge formation, habit formation, and skill formation? b. exercises – can they create the environment for learning opportunities by adjusting the balance between demands and support, and how, if teachers have clear learning goals, this can be done more effectively. c. clarity of directions – are they clear to both learners and teachers? d. active participation of learners – is this encouraged effectively? e. grammatical and other linguistic explanations – inductive or deductive? f. Review material – are there sufficient spiraling and review exercises?)
7. How is the textbook sequenced (by grammatical structures, by skills, by situations, by some combination of them)?
8. Are there useful supplementary materials (teachers' book, workbook, grammar exercise book, vocabulary recycling book, audio and/or video tapes, DVD/CDs, posters, flash cards, set of tests, Internet web site)?

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