

Visual Elements Used in Iran EFL High School Textbooks

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Abstract

The present study investigates the central concerns of the use of visuals within the four EFL textbooks taught at Iranian high schools which have been prescribed by the Ministry of Education. To do this, the four EFL textbooks were evaluated and analyzed. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze data quantitatively. The analysis indicated that over the four textbooks, 95.71 percent of all visuals were drawings and 4.29 percent were photos. The analysis revealed, then, among three fundamental categories of pictures function (i.e. Illustrative, Stimulus-Response, and Student-Generated), stimulus-response pictures constituted the largest percentage (70.50%) which tend to focus on low-level language skills; illustrative pictures constituted 29.49%, while none of them were used for the student-generated purposes. The visuals, furthermore, were largely being used for fairly grammatical part of language practice (87.45%). Moreover, all the pictures within each of the four textbooks under consideration were used for the purpose of 'talking about a picture'; no exercises were found to meet the 'talking with the picture' criterion. Findings of the study pedagogically call for using appropriate pictures of real people and real environment which provide sufficient input for language learners.

Keywords: Textbooks, visual elements, functions of visuals

One of the most important aspects of language teaching is the vital role of pictures and other visual materials: the importance of using pictures, visual materials, and even simple drawings to make one's teaching more effective, communicative and interesting is well-known. Similar to language they support the message and provide another dimension of authenticity through realistic, accurate, and knowledgeable impressions of people, cultural artifacts, places, geographical maps, and scientific and mathematical objects. "Visual materials can be defined as the facilities that can be employed by teachers and learners to enhance language learning in classrooms" (Jahangard, 2007, p. 139). They can act as powerful forms of communication; they have the ability to communicate. Andrew Wright (1989) has argued that visuals can provide real opportunities for students to communicate in the classroom, whether they are working as a class, in groups or in pairs.

If one compares pictures in modern textbooks to those published, say, 25 years ago, then one can see that they certainly look a lot better and more interesting. They are full colour, with photos, cartoons, diagrams, illustrations. They are accompanied by video, audio tape, CDROM and more recently material on the Internet. And yet there are still complaints about 'glossy' photos in textbooks because most of them rely heavily on stock or archive photography banks. It is this that gives ELT materials appear artificial. These pictures have a subliminal effect, in fact.

Nowadays, with advances in technology it opens up possibilities of teachers and students personalized much more easily. For example, there are many alternative versions on the subject of maps which are far more interesting [see www.worldmapper.org]. Likewise, students can create their own maps of the world at www.world66.com/myworld66/ visited

Countries, where they can tick off any countries they wish and their personalized map of the world is created in seconds. This is also a really good way for students to teach each other world facts through English.

But the situation in Iran schools is somehow different. Except some of the schools, especially in big cities which are mostly private schools, most of the schools, mainly public schools, are not fully equipped with modern technologies. Furthermore, while some of the students take advantage of using VCD and video tapes, and go to private language schools, most of the students just have their textbooks as the only source of learning English and the major source of contact they have with the language apart from the input provided by the teacher. In Iran, textbooks serve as the basis for much of the language input learners receive and the language practice that takes place in the classroom. It is possible to say that textbooks are the only materials which are available in all schools all over Iran schools, the ones which all students can use effortlessly. In other words, textbooks play a very important role in English teaching in Iran.

This point, along with the paucity of research on the analysis of the visuals of the EFL textbooks as the review of most of previously conducted textbook evaluation studies in literature review indicates, led the researcher to focus on the visual aspects of English textbooks currently in use in Iranian high-schools and pre-university. In other words, in spite of this fact that these textbooks have been evaluated quite extensively, the corresponding research specifically about the visual aspects of such texts is rather poor and fragmented. It is therefore evident that there is a need for a more systematic research effort concerning the visual aspects of these texts. Therefore, the importance of utilizing the visuals in textbooks prompted the researcher to evaluate the visual aspects of English textbooks currently in use in Iranian high-schools and pre-university.

Background of the Study

Visual Elements

Using a variety of teaching aids to explain language meaning and construction engages students in a topic. Visuals aids are one of these teaching aids which can be helpful both for practical and for motivational reasons.

Wright (1989) noted that the outside world must be simulated in the classroom. If students understand the reference and representation to the outside world, they will hopefully understand the new language associated with these representations. Visual aids can be used to represent these simulations and nonverbal information. Read (2000) noted that the function of visual aids is to add information to what is given by the discourse; as a result we find visual aids only in conjunction with other theoretical features. So, due to their function in discourse, visuals are examples of what is being described in their accompanying texts (as cited in Fakher Ajabshir, 2011, pp.49-50).

There are many types of visual such as are pictures, drawings, photos or images and each has its own kind of information for the observer. Visuals, for example, "for a lesson on vacations might include pictures of different vacations spots" (Nunan, 2003, p. 236).

In 1975, Zebrowska noted that "Visuals help students associate presented material in a meaningful way and incorporate it into their system of values" (as cited in Fakher Ajabshir, 2011, p.50). They stimulate visual and cultural interest in a lesson. They can prepare students for an activity or prepare students to supplement or extend an activity. Visuals are hugely influential and create a more immediate impact on the viewer than a piece of text could ever do.

Sources of Visuals

As usual, teachers are the main source of the visuals. But, they should not be the only source of these supplementary materials. Learners can be another source who are asked to bring visuals to the classrooms. In addition to teachers and also students themselves, textbooks must be another source of the visuals. Most people studied English have used a textbook during their studies in the school. As Hutchinson and Torres (1994) suggest:

The textbook is an almost universal element of [English language] teaching. Millions of copies are sold every year, and numerous aid projects have been set up to produce them in [various] countries...No teaching-learning situation, it seems, is complete until it has its relevant textbook. (p. 315)

According to Riazi and Mosalanejad (2010), proponents of using textbooks argue that "textbooks are the most convenient form of presenting materials because they give consistency, systematicity, cohesion, continuation, and progression" (Introduction, para. 4). They believe that textbooks provide a plan for learning, an outline of what is to be learned, and a needed structure for interaction in the classroom. Ur (1996) believes that textbooks provide a clear framework and a sense of structure and progress. Furthermore, most learners "see the textbook as a 'framework' or 'guide' that helps them to organize their learning both inside and outside the classroom" (Hutchinson and Torres, 1994, p. 318) which help them to know where they are going and what is coming next.

Many students working with a coursebook feel secure. They always have a book to relate to; they are not groping in the dark. Consequently, they become more confident and satisfied, as they tackle the target language within a certain framework. Furthermore, a textbook provides them with the opportunity to go back and revise. They can also use the textbook for self-study and as a reference tool (Razmjoo, 2007, Introduction, para. 5).

'Talk about' versus 'Talk with'. The last category regarding pictures, proposed, to Hill's knowledge, by Pit Corder (1966) as cited in Tomlinson (2003), is the distinction between 'talking about' a picture and 'talking with' a picture. If learners 'talk about' a picture they talk about factual and visible that they see in the picture. In other words, in 'talking about' a picture, they are limited and constrained by what is seen in the picture. If, however, learners 'talk with' a picture, they are not limited by the factual elements in the pictures; rather the pictures allow them to bring their reality to the lesson and stimulate their own inner meanings.

The Functionality of Visuals Within the Texts

The functionality of the visuals presented within the texts can be categorized into three categories: Illustrative, Stimulus-Response and Student-Generated.

Illustrative. Illustrative visuals have a passive function in a text in a sense that "they do not require the learner to consciously articulate a response in a written, spoken or kinetic form, they appear to be used for their ability to give context, aid comprehension, and increase motivation" (Eyles, n.d., para. 5).

Stimulus-response. "Stimulus-Response visuals are used for specific learning outcomes, which require an active response from the learner in a spoken, written or kinetic form" (Eyles, n.d., para. 6). Examples of stimulus-response activities include: describing a picture; spot the difference between two almost identical pictures; sequencing pictures to create a story; matching words to pictures; matching pictures to text; using pictures as prompts for words, phrases or role-plays; and using pictures to elicit specific language structures or functions.

Student-generated. "Student-Generated visuals are defined as those in which the learner has been given the autonomy to select or create visuals for themselves for use as tools to language learning" (Eyles, n.d., para. 7), as opposed to visuals pre-determined and prescribed for them by the teacher or text.

Textbook Evaluation Research Studies

Various textbook evaluation studies carried out in Iran focusing on EFL textbooks that have been used in the Iranian high schools by the Ministry of Education. Some studies have studied discourse features such as speech acts, intertextuality and the representation of discourse elements in the EFL textbooks. Tavakoli (1995) used Searle's (1976) model of speech act to analyze dialogues excerpted from high-school English textbooks in order to investigate different forms of speech acts. The researcher concluded that only three language functions (representative, directive, and expressive) were introduced in the textbooks, while others were completely ignored (as cited in Riazi & Mosalanejad, 2010). One study by Talebinejad and Namdar (2011) has investigated the reading comprehension sections of Iranian high school English textbooks to find out the extent of using Discourse Markers (DM) and their types, based on Fraser's (1999) category. The results showed that there was a significant difference between the frequency of DMs.

Some studies have evaluated the EFL textbooks for their strength and weaknesses. In 2007, Jahangard has evaluated the high school and pre-university English textbooks for their merits and demerits with reference to 13 common features extracted from different material evaluation checklists to find their advantages and shortcomings. The researcher concluded that the tasks and topics introduced in each lesson are interesting and hence attractive to learners in EFL classes. However, there are shortcomings with regard to vocabulary explanation and the practice of listening skill. Ghorbani (2011) also conducted a study to investigate the research question, "To what extent does the EFL textbook (English 1) used in Iranian senior high schools conform to the common consensus-reached and universal characteristics of EFL/ESL textbooks?" (p. 513). He concluded that "only 63% percent of the book conforms to the universal characteristics of textbooks". (p. 511)

Riazi and Aryasholouh (2007) also studied the high school and pre-university English textbooks focusing on the consciousness-raising aspect of vocabulary exercises. They found that only one percent of all exercises in the four books could be categorized as consciousness-raising (as cited in Riazi & Mosalanejad, 2010). Riazi and Mosalanejad (2010) conducted a study that evaluated three high-school textbooks and the sole pre-university textbook in order to investigate how the content of textbooks represents Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives. The findings showed that a logical sequence of difficulty was noticed in the textbooks, in terms of level of difficulty and text length. Moreover, the most prevalent learning objectives in the textbooks were lower-order cognitive skills.

In one study, Talebinezhad and Mahmoodzadeh (2011) attempted to investigate the pedagogical applications of bimodality theory in both internationally-developed (namely, Interchange 3, American Headway 4, & Summit 1) and locally-developed ELT textbooks (namely, the English textbooks used in Iranian high schools). They concluded that pedagogical principles of bimodality theory appear to be significantly more applied in the design of the internationally-developed ELT textbooks than the locally-developed ones.

Other studies attempted to examine the authenticity of EFL textbooks. Abdollahi-Guilani, Yasin, and Hua (2011) have evaluated the Iranian high school English textbooks based on Dougills' textbook evaluation checklist in order to see how far the textbooks can prepare learners to go with the language skills needed for a learner of English as a foreign language. They concluded:

The home-made textbooks lack the authenticity of natural English in terms of content and presentation. They are short in the variety and attractiveness in the passages. The materials are not generally presented from the easy to hard order and they are mainly void of cultural and communicative points (Abdollahi-Guilani, et al., 2011, p. 25).

Some studies have attempted to investigate the place of culture in EFL textbooks. In 2004, Aliakbari has investigated the way culture is addressed in ELT at the high school level of education. He concluded that "the current textbooks are inadequate to the task of teaching culture specifics in the deeper sense (values, norms, beliefs, etc.) or culture-general skills such as intercultural communication and understanding (p.1)."

Razmjoo (2007) analyzed the content of the textbooks of the Iranian high schools and private institutes descriptively and inferentially to investigate the extent to which they represent CLT principles. The analysis of the data indicated that high school textbooks do not represent the CLT principles; while private institute textbooks highly represent these principles.

Azizfar, Koosha, and Lotfi (2010) carried out an evaluation of two series of locally produced English language text books used in Iranian high schools from 1970 to the present (series of *Graded English GE*) books published by the Ministry of Education in 1970 and the series of *Right Path to English (RPE)* books by Birjandi, Nowrozi, and Mahmodi in 2002), based on Tucker's (1975) textbook evaluation model. They concluded that there are not considerable differences between GE and RPE and RPE does not correct most of the inadequacies and deficiencies of GE.

Objective of the Study

The purpose of this study was to evaluate Iranian high school English textbooks with regard to their visual aspects. The study, therefore, aimed to find answer to the following question: How are the books evaluated in terms of the use of visuals?

Regarding the context of the study, it should be stated that the average instruction time, according to the high school regulations prescribed by the Ministry of Education in Iran, is three to four hours per week in high schools.

Methodology

Materials

The investigation is provided with an applied focus on the four EFL textbooks used by high schools in Iran:

- Birjandy et al., (2006). *English Book 1*. Tehran: Textbook Publishing Company of Iran.
- Birjandy et al., (2005). *English Book 2*. Tehran: Textbook Publishing Company of Iran.
- Birjandy et al., (2007). *English Book 3*. Tehran: Textbook Publishing Company of Iran.
- Birjandy et al., (2005). *English for Pre-university Students*. Tehran: Textbook Publishing Company of Iran.

Procedure

To explore what the current situation is with regard to the use of visuals within EFL high school textbooks in Iran, the researcher evaluated and analyzed the four textbooks taught at Iranian high schools which have been prescribed by the Ministry of Education. Initially the attempt was to find out the balance between black-and-white and color visuals, and between drawings and photographs within each of the four textbooks under consideration. Secondly an analysis was carried out to find out the percentage of each category of the functionality of pictures: i.e. Illustrative, Stimulus-Response and Student-Generated. And lastly, it was tried to find a balance between 'talking about' a picture and 'talking with' a picture.

Results

The results of the analysis of the four EFL high school textbooks were summarized below. The visuals were scored manually and the percentage for each of the four textbooks under consideration was computed. These tables only show the existence of a separate, individual visual, regardless of size.

Table 1. *The Balance between Black-and-White (B&W) and Color, and between Drawings and Photos*

| | English Book 1 | English Book 2 | English Book 3 | English for Pre-University Students | Totals |
|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------------------------|------------|
| Pages of Text | 130 | 106 | 108 | 97 | 441 |
| Color Drawings | 0 | 0 | 91 | 7 | 98 |
| B&W Drawings | 136 | 119 | 1 | 3 | 259 |
| Total Drawings | 136 | 119 | 92 | 10 | 357 |
| Color Photos | 0 | 0 | 0 | 15 | 15 |
| B&W Photos | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Total Photos | 0 | 0 | 0 | 16 | 16 |
| Total Pictures | 136 | 119 | 92 | 26 | 373 |

Results of Table 1 reveal the balance between black-and-white and color visuals, and between drawings and photographs within each of the four textbooks under consideration. The analysis revealed that the number of visuals is decreased in these books: i.e. *English Book 1* contains 136 pictures, *English Book 2* has 119, *English Book 3* has 92, and *English for Pre-university Student* only contains 26 pictures. Moreover, all the visuals of *English Book 3* except one were categorized as color drawings. In addition, the analysis of pictures showed that the bulk of the pictures within the four EFL high school textbooks were drawings, and the bulk of drawings were Black-and-White drawings (see Figure 1, 2 and 3).

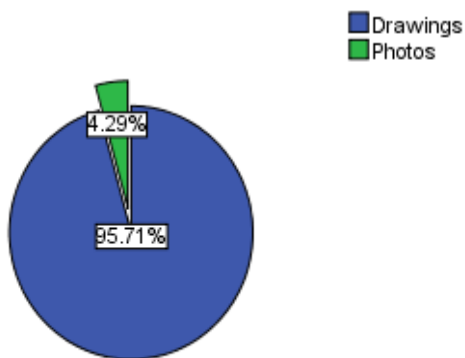


Figure 1: The Percentage of Pictures for Four EFL Public High School Textbooks

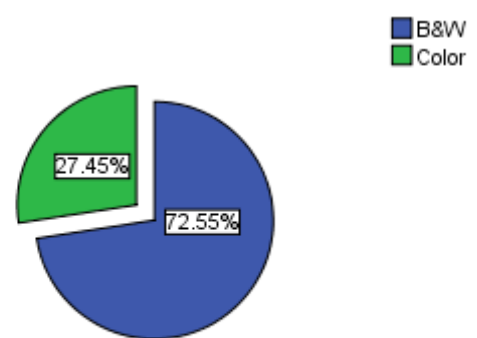


Figure 2: The Percentage of Black-and-White and Color Drawings for Four EFL Public High School Textbooks

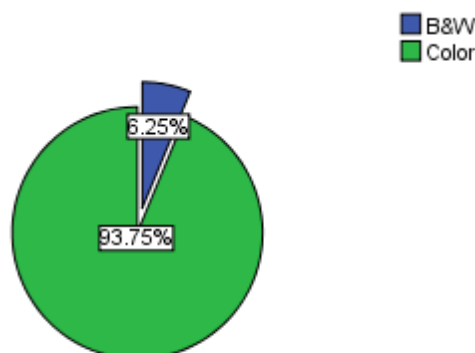


Figure 3: The Percentage of Black-and-White and Color Photos for Four EFL Public High School Textbooks

Table 2. An Analysis of Visuals with Regard to the Functionality of Pictures (Illustrative (I), Stimulus-Response (S-R) and Student-Generated (S-G))

| | English Book 1 | English Book 2 | English Book 3 | English for Pre-University Students | Totals |
|-------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------------------------|------------|
| Illustrative | 45 | 29 | 14 | 22 | 110 |
| Stimulus-Response | 91 | 90 | 78 | 4 | 263 |
| Student-Generated | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Totals | 136 | 119 | 92 | 26 | 373 |

Results of Table 2 reveal ‘what kind of use is being made of visuals’ within each of the four textbooks under consideration. The analysis of three first book, *English Book 1*, *English Book 2*, and *English Book 3*, indicated that Stimulus-Response pictures constituted the largest percentage among three fundamental categories of pictures function; i.e. 259/373 pictures (= %69.43). The analysis of *English for Pre-university Student*, on the other hand, indicated that illustrative pictures constituted the largest percentage among three fundamental categories of pictures function; i.e. 22/26 pictures (= %84.61). In other words, 84.61 percent of visuals were used for their illustrative capacity, with students not asked to use them in any way. Furthermore, only 4/26 pictures (= %15.38) were used for the Stimulus-Response functions and none of them were used for the Student-Generated purposes. The analysis of the four EFL high school textbooks, moreover, revealed that no exercises were found to meet the Student-Generated criterion (see Figure 4).

Results of Table 3 revealed that all the pictures within each of the four textbooks under consideration were used for the purpose of ‘talking about a picture’ and none of the pictures are used for the purpose of ‘talking with a picture’ (see Figure 6).

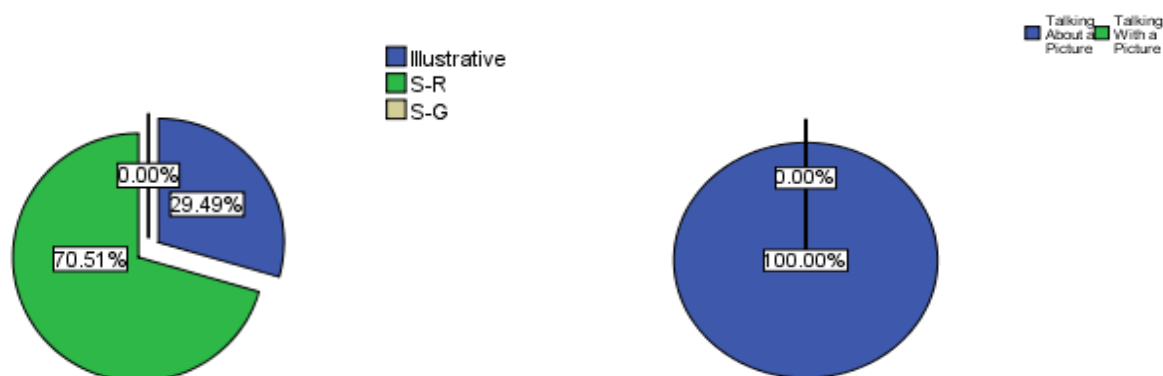


Figure 4: The Percentage of the Functionality of Pictures for Four EFL Public High School Textbooks

Figure 6: The Percentage of Pictures with Regard to ‘Talking About’ a Picture and ‘Talking With’ a Picture for Four EFL Public High School Textbooks

Table 3. An Analysis of Pictures with Regard to ‘Talking about’ a Picture and ‘Talking with’ a Picture

| | English Book 1 | English Book 2 | English Book 3 | English for Pre-University Students | Totals |
|----------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------------------------|------------|
| Talk about a Picture | 136 | 119 | 92 | 26 | 373 |
| Talk with a Picture | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Table 4. An Analysis of Stimulus-Response Pictures

| | English Book 1 | English Book 2 | English Book 3 | English for Pre-University Students | Totals |
|---|----------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------------------------|------------|
| Spot the Difference | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Sequencing Pictures | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 4 |
| Matching Pictures | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 4 |
| Using Pictures as Prompts | 6 | 14 | 5 | 0 | 25 |
| Using Pictures for Elicitation Purposes | 85 | 76 | 69 | 0 | 230 |
| Totals | 91 | 90 | 78 | 4 | 263 |

Results of Table 4 indicated that 230/263 pictures (=87.45%) were used to 'elicit specific language structures or functions', while 25/263 pictures (=9.50%) were used to 'as prompts for words, phrases, role-plays'. 'Matching words to pictures' 4/263 (=1.52%), and 'sequencing pictures to create a story' 4/263 (=1.52%) were much less frequent (also see Figure 5). Other functions of the pictures were not used; e.g. 'describing a picture', 'spot the difference', 'matching pictures to text, and etc.

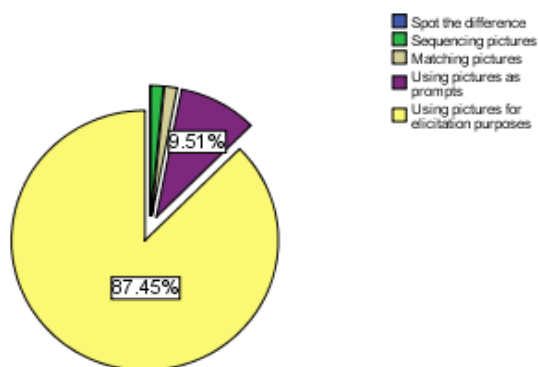


Figure 5: The Percentage of Different Subcategories of Stimulus-Response Pictures for Four EFL Public High School Textbooks

Discussion

As it is clear from literature, well-selected or well-constructed pictures reliably improve the learning process. It seems that pictures, especially student-generated ones, have the potential to broaden learner's views of the world (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) and allow for the exploration and questioning of cultural norms between all participants and may lead to greater understanding and mutual respect of difference. However, as the results revealed the current practice in the use of visuals within the four EFL high school textbooks under consideration is prescriptive, used in a limited manner. The textbook is good in physical qualities like paper quality, binding, printing, etc. But it appears that, few activities aimed at stimulating students to use pictures creatively. They were largely being used for fairly grammatical part of language practice.

We do no doubt that many teachers use the illustrative pictures for increasing motivation, aiding comprehension, and giving context. In other words, photographs, drawings, photos, and paintings give visual representation to stories, situations, objects and people. They, however, may be passive in the sense that they do not require the learner to consciously articulate a response in a written, spoken or kinetic form. It appears to us that they don't act

as powerful forms of communication. Perhaps, they stimulate no interest in students. Furthermore, it appears that these textbooks do not propose to the learners any activity to give them autonomy to select or create pictures for themselves for use as tools to language learning. In other words, the learners confronted with the pre-determined and prescribed pictures by the books. As Jahangard (2007) believes it would be more appealing if colorful pictures of real people and real environment were used in the books.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to show the current situation with regard to EFL high school textbooks visuals in Iran. It has shown that a majority of visuals included are used for Stimulus-Response purposes which tend to focus on low-level language skills. The writer of the paper suggests that the EFL materials currently taught at high schools requires a deeper and more exhaustive analysis and scrutiny with regard to their visual elements, and it is essential to improve the materials which are necessary for a meaningful, negotiated kind of language learning experience and meet the teachers' and learners' expectations. The results expand the existing research in the area of textbook selection and evaluation in our country. However, in order to be able to make more sound judgments about different characteristics of these textbooks, more research of this kind needs to be conducted.

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