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DON'T JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS COVER: TEXT BOOK EVALUATION IN THE EFL SETTINGS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to evaluate Top Notch, Interchange, Headway, and On Your Mark, the four most widely instructed EFL course books in Iranian English institutes. ELT materials (textbooks) play a very important role in many language classrooms. As such, material used must surely be with the qualification that they are of an acceptable standard or level of quality and appropriate to the learners for whom they are being used. It is absolutely essential, therefore, that we establish and apply a wide variety of relevant and contextually appropriate criteria for the evaluation of the textbooks that we use in our language classrooms. The course books under study all claim to be the most useful, but the question is which one is the best. Thus, this study evaluates the intended course books in two stages based on Mcdonough and Shaw's division of course book evaluation into internal evaluation and external evaluation; an overview of the cover, introduction, and table of contents followed by a closer and more detailed look at the actual material in the course books. After thorough examinations, this study came to a conclusion that Top Notch best suits Mcdonough and Shaw's evaluative criteria.

Key Words: Top Notch, Interchange, Headway, EFL Course.

Introduction

Materials development and evaluation is a relatively young phenomenon in the field of language teaching. In the practical sense, it includes the production, evaluation and adaptation of materials. Tomlinson (2001, p.66) defines materials as "anything which can be used to facilitate the learning of a language."

Although textbooks can be affected by other aspects of an instructional situation (for instance by the teacher's use of different approaches, by students' preferences for one part over another, or other environmental factors), the effect of these instructional materials on the other components is more significant as texts have the potential to change the objectives of the situation or alter students' motivation. Nevertheless, it seems that all the components involved in teaching and learning situations are in constant interaction to enhance learning achievement. As Hutchinson and Torres (1994 cited in Litz, 2005) 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).

Vellenga (2004) was concerned with how pragmatics was presented in EFL/ESL textbooks. She studied eight English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks to determine the amount and quality of pragmatic information included. She focused mainly on the use of meta-

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language, explicit treatment of speech acts, and meta-pragmatic information, including discussion(s) of register, illocutionary force, politeness, appropriation and usage, and found that textbooks included a lack of explicit meta-pragmatic information, and teachers' manuals rarely supplemented adequately. The researcher also found that teachers rarely brought outside materials related to pragmatics into the classroom and concluded that learning pragmatics from textbooks would be highly unlikely.

Few teachers enter class without a course book- often a required course book- that provides content and teaching/learning activities that shape much of what happens in that classroom. In today's classrooms, textbooks play a very crucial role in the realm of language teaching and learning. And after teachers, they are considered to be the next important factor in the second/foreign language classroom. McDonough and Shaw (2003) believe that there are some situations that we need to evaluate materials. In the first situation the teachers might be given the choice to adopt or develop their materials and in the second the teachers are just consumers of other peoples' products. In both of these situations some degree of evaluation is needed. Therefore, selecting a proper textbook for a class has been one of the most important tasks for teachers. For teachers, use of a course book involves first the selection of a book and then steps taken to implement the book in class. Whether the teacher should have the freedom to select the materials for evaluation and adaptation or not still remains controversial. One thing is clear, however, and that is evaluation is usually done and no one denies its' necessity.

English language instruction has many important components but the essential constituents to many ESL/EFL classrooms and programs are the textbooks and instruction materials that are often used by language instructors. As Hutchinson and Torres (1994) suggest:

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According to Ur (1996) the term 'course book' means a textbook of which the teacher and, usually, each student has a copy, and which is in principle to be followed systematically as the basis for a language course. In some cases course books are taken for granted. In others they may not be used at all. Still in some places a textbook is used selectively, not necessarily in sequence, and is extensively supplemented by other materials.

Many theorists and researchers have stated some advantages and disadvantages of using a course book. Sheldon (1988) agrees that textbooks not only represent the visible heart of any ELT program but also offer considerable advantages - for both the student and the teacher - when they are being used in the ESL/EFL classroom. Haycroft (1998), for example, suggests that one of the primary advantages of using textbooks is that they are psychologically essential for students since their progress and achievement can be measured concretely when we use them. O'Neill (1982) has indicated textbooks are generally sensitive to students' needs, even if they are not designed specifically for them, they are efficient in terms of time and money, and they can and should allow for adaptation and improvisation. Cunningsworth (1995) mentions the potential which textbooks have for serving several additional roles in the ELT curriculum. He argues that they are an effective resource for self-directed learning, an effective resource for presentation material, a source of ideas and activities, a reference source for students, a syllabus where they reflect pre-determined learning objectives, and support for less experienced teachers who have yet to gain in confidence. To give an overall view of the advantages of course books we refer to Ur's table (p.184) in favor of using a course book. This researcher categorizes the advantages of course books into 7 parts: 1) Framework- the teacher and learners know where they are going and what is coming next, so that there is a sense of structure and progress; 2) syllabus- if followed systematically a course book can serve as a syllabus; 3) ready-made texts and tasks- by providing these material the course books save time for the teacher; 4) Economy- a course book is cheaper than alternative materials like kits, sets of photocopied papers or computer software; 5) convenience- a course book is light and easy to carry around; 6) Guidance- a course book can be a useful guidance for inexperienced teachers; 7) autonomy- the learner can be more independent with a course book.

While many of the aforementioned theorists are quick to point out the extensive benefits of using ESL/EFL textbooks, there are many other researchers and practitioners who do not necessarily accept this view and retain some well-founded reservations on the subject. The critiques of course book use look at the disadvantages of course books from many perspectives. Ur (1996) has mentioned five general points against using a course book. 1) Inadequacy- every learner has his/her own learning needs which cannot be satisfactorily supplied by a course book; 2) irrelevance, lack of interest- in regards to topics presented in course books; 3) limitations- it may inhibit a teacher's creativity; 4) homogeneity- course books do not cater for the variety of levels of ability and knowledge or of learning styles and strategies; 5) over-easiness- it is too easily for teachers to follow a course book without initiative. Some authors have criticized course books for their cultural or social biases. Carrell and Korwitz (1994), and Renner (1997) have demonstrated that many EFL/ESL textbooks still contain rampant examples of gender bias, sexism, and stereotyping. Some proponents of authentic classroom language models have argued that the problems with many textbooks are not necessarily the fact that they are culturally or socially biased but that they are actually too contrived and artificial in their presentation of the target language. They argue that it is crucial to introduce learners to the fundamental characteristics of authentic real life examples of both spoken and written discourse (Levis, 1999). A final reason for disappointment and skepticism with many ELT textbooks is the fact that they are often regarded as the "...tainted end-product of an author's or a publisher's desire for quick profit" (Sheldon, 1988 p.239). Too many textbooks are often marketed with grand artificial claims by their authors and publishers yet these same books tend to contain serious theoretical problems, design flaws, and practical shortcomings. They also present disjointed material that is either too limited or too generalized in a superficial and flashy manner and the vast array of "...single edition, now defunct [text]books produced during the past ten years testifies to the market consequences of teachers' verdicts on such practices" (Sheldon, 1988 p.239).

Evaluating ELT Materials

The ability to evaluate teaching materials effectively is a very important professional activity for all EFL teachers. No course book or set of materials is likely to be perfect and even though it is clear that course book assessment is fundamentally a subjective, rule-of-thumb activity, and that no neat formula, grid or system will ever provide a definite yardstick (Sheldon, 1988), we nonetheless need some model for hard pressed teachers or course planners that will be brief, practical to use and yet comprehensive in its coverage of criteria, given that everyone in the field will need to evaluate materials at some time or other.

Cunningsworth (1995) and Ellis (1997) suggest that textbook evaluation helps teachers move beyond impressionistic assessments and it helps them to acquire useful, accurate, systematic, and contextual insights into the overall nature of textbook material. Textbook evaluation, therefore, can potentially be a particularly worthwhile means of conducting action research as well as a form of professional empowerment and improvement. Similarly, textbook evaluation can also be a valuable component of teacher training programs for it serves the dual purpose of making student teachers aware of important features to look for in textbooks while familiarizing them with a wide range of published language instruction materials.

According to Cunningsworth (1995) the number of criteria and the number of questions asked should be limited to a manageable proportion. Following Brown and Rodgers (2002), the authors of the present study would like to emphasize the significance of evaluation studies, pointing out three areas of benefits evaluation research can bring: first, it is needed for educational planning; second, it uses both qualitative and quantitative research techniques; finally, its results can be immediately applied in school reality - the producers of the materials used for educational purposes can immediately take advantage of evaluation research findings and introduce the changes into newly published course books.

Thus this study evaluates the intended course books in two stages based on McDonough and Shaw's (2003) division. However as Tomlinson (1991) suggests, there can be no one model framework for the evaluation of materials.

The two stages are external evaluation and internal evaluation. An external evaluation which offers a brief overview of the materials from outside (cover, introduction, table of contents), which is then followed by a closer and more detailed internal evaluation. Of course the evaluation process is never static; when

materials are deemed appropriate for a particular course after a preliminary evaluation, their ultimate success or failure may only be determined after a certain amount of classroom use.

The External Evaluation

At this stage we will be examining the materials as stated explicitly by the author/publisher, which are the claims made on the cover of the teacher's/student's book and also the introduction and table of contents. Therefore the evaluator can assess what Cunningsworth(1984) has termed what the books say about themselves. The table of contents is a bridge between the external claim made for the material and what will actually be presented inside the materials themselves. Claims made by the author/publisher can be quite strong and will need critical evaluation in order to see if their claims can be justified. From the cover of the book and the introduction we can normally expect comments on some/all of the following (McDonough and Shaw, 2003):

- *The intended audience:* Who the materials are written for?
- *The proficiency level:* What level is the material suitable for?
- *The context in which material are to be used:* Whether the materials are for teaching general learners or perhaps for teaching English for Specific Purposes.
- *How the language has been presented and organized into teachable units/lessons:* Whether the material fits into an educational program in relation to time.
- *The author's views on language and methodology*
- *Are the materials to be used as the main 'core' course or to be supplementary to it?*
- *Is a teacher's book in print and locally available?*
- *Is a vocabulary list/index included?*
- *What visual material does the book contain and is it there for cosmetic value only or is it integrated into the text?*
- *Is the layout and presentation clear or cluttered?*
- *Is the material too culturally biased or specific?*
- *Do the materials represent minority groups and/or women in negative way? Do they present a 'balanced' picture of a particular country/society?*
- *The inclusion of audio/video material and resultant cost. Is it essential to possess this extra material in order to use the course book successfully?*
- *The inclusion of tests in the teaching materials, would they be useful for your particular learners?*

After going through an external evaluation, if the course book or other supplementary material prove to be appropriate, we can go on with a more detailed evaluation.

The Internal Evaluation

The essential issue at this stage is for us to analyze the extent to which the aforementioned factors in the external evaluation stage match up with the internal consistency and organization of the materials as stated by the author/publisher. In order to perform an effective internal inspection of the materials, we need to examine at least two units (preferably more) of a book or set of materials to investigate the following factors:

- *The presentation of the skills in the materials.*
- *The grading and sequencing of the materials.*
- *Where reading skills are involved, is there much in the way of appropriate text beyond the sentence?*
- *Where listening skills are involved, are recordings 'authentic' or artificial?*
- *Do speaking materials incorporate what we know about the nature of real interaction or are artificial dialogues offered instead?*
- *The relationship of tests and exercises to (a) learner needs, and (b) what is taught by the course material.*
- *Do you feel that the material is suitable for different learning styles? Is a claim and provision made for self-study and is such a claim justified?*
- *Are the materials sufficiently 'transparent' to motivate both students and teachers alike, or would you foresee a student/teacher mismatch?*

Methodology

The present study aims at exploring and evaluating the four most frequently used course books in English Institutes in the Iranian context. The course books which will be evaluated in terms of external evaluation and internal evaluation are the introductory levels of: New Interchange, Top Notch, Headway, and On Your Mark. In the following section the books will just be evaluated based on the framework that has been chosen for this study. No remarks will be made by the researchers in this section. The researchers' final insights and overall evaluation of the course books will be made in the conclusion of this article. One of the course books will be introduced as the most reliable based on the framework chosen for course book evaluation.

The study seeks answers to the following questions:

RQ1: How are the books rated based on the external and internal evaluation framework adopted from McDonough and Shaw?

RQ2: What are the strengths and weaknesses of the four course books examined in this study?

On Your Mark

On your mark 1, the second edition written by Karen Davy, is the introductory level of the new edition of Scott Foresman English. The series is a theme-based, integrated skills program for secondary and adult students. According to the author it is a unique and flexible series with multiple entry levels. The components can be used together as a comprehensive, eight-level course or individually as separate mini-courses.

The key features of the book are thematic units, grammar presentations and practice, listening and speaking skills in real-life contexts, learning strategies, reading and writing skills, and achievement tests.

External evaluation

1. The intended audiences are secondary and adult students.
2. This book is the first introductory book of the series. So it is appropriate for beginners, those who have not been exposed to English before.
3. The material of this book is used for teaching general English.
4. The book consists of 12 units. Each unit is made up of four general parts: theme, vocabulary and grammar, listening and speaking, reading and writing. So oral skills are followed by written skills.
5. The author believes this book to be unique and flexible with multiple entry levels. The books in the series can be used together as a comprehensive, eight-level course or individually as separate mini-courses.
6. The features present in the book are not supplementary and are the core ones. The key features of the book consist of thematic units, grammar presentations and practice, listening and speaking skills in real-life contexts, learning strategies which help students manage their language study effectively and independently, reading and writing skills, review sections, and achievement tests.
7. A teacher's book is not locally available.
8. At the end of the book the vocabulary covered in the book are presented. The vocabulary are not alphabetically presented but rather categorized based on the units of the book.
9. The book is covered with colorful pictures. Visual material can be seen on almost all the pages. The pictures are related to the context of the book. Although the book is filled with pictures, but they are mostly drawings, they are not authentic pictures.
10. The layout of the book is very clear. The start of a new feature is shown by a bold and colorful heading, which separates it from the preceding part. The headings of key features are presented in fixed colors. The theme is presented in blue, vocabulary and grammar in red, listening and speaking in green, and reading and writing in orange.
11. I think this book does not acquaint the learners with different cultures. The examples all give examples from the western culture. Cultural features such as clothing, food, money (currency), and ... are all based on the western culture.
12. The book does not express negative feelings towards a specific group or gender.

13. This book is provided with audio material. It is useful since the learners can be exposed to authentic listening and pronunciation.
14. There is a review section after every three unit in order to reinforce the key grammar and vocabulary points. This might not be profitable since grammar and vocabulary are features which are memorized by the students, unless learners use them in authentic situations.

Internal evaluation

1. The 4 skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing are presented in every unit. Listening and speaking section precedes the reading and writing section of each unit. This sequence might indicate that the author believes in acquisition of L2 skills in the same order as L1 acquisition. Since the introductory books have been examined in this study, it is difficult to examine the authenticity of the material in these 2 sections covering the four skills. Without taking into consideration the level of the book, the exercises in the listening and speaking section are not really authentic and they are not contextualized.
2. The material is presented in the same order in each unit. Each unit starts off with a conversation based on the theme of the unit. The steps for working through the conversation are explicitly mentioned under the sub-heading of 'warm up'. The steps are: Listen, Listen and repeat, and Work with a partner.
Next there is Building vocabulary, the heading which shows the starting point of vocabulary learning in each unit. The first activity under this heading is for the students to listen and repeat the new words. So the new vocabulary is learned through drilling.
The second activity is to work with a partner and ask/answer questions regarding the words covered. The third activity is vocabulary check. A point about the vocabulary section of the book is that the activities under this heading are not consistent throughout the book. For example in unit one the sub-headings under the heading Building vocabulary are: the classroom written in bold font and three sections relating to this concept: 1) listen and repeat, 2) work with a partner. Look at the picture. Ask and answer questions, 3) vocabulary check.
The second part of vocabulary building is based on numbers written in bold and the exercises follow: 4) listen and repeat. Practice with a partner, 5) vocabulary check, 6) work with a partner. Say the numbers, 7) write the numbers, 8) look at the picture. Count. Write the numbers, 9) count write the numbers.
Now the vocabulary again shifts focus into the third concept the alphabet again written in bold: 10) listen and repeat, 11) listen and repeat, 12) vocabulary check. Listen. Circle the letter. The last section of Building Vocabulary of unit one is countries again written in bold and followed with the instruction to 13) listen. Write the country. Whereas the sub-heading in unit 3 for example, follows a different order.
Next we have Grammar which is the third major part of the unit. A grammatical point is presented and some exercises are followed by it. After that there is Listening and Speaking. The listening section consists of circling the appropriate object based on what has been said. For the speaking section a conversation is worked on. Reading and writing are the last part of the unit.
3. Yes, the reading sections are contextualized and beyond sentence level.
4. Listening exercises are authentic.
5. Speaking materials are not authentic in that pauses, fillers, hedging and other communicative component are not embedded in the conversations. Therefore the conversations are artificial.
6. Since a needs analysis is not run by the instructor it is not evident whether the needs of learners come true or not.
7. No. It is not available.
8. Since it is the introductory book it doesn't seem like motivating for the teacher but it is probably suitable for the students since they learn the fundamental aspects of foreign language.

Top Notch

Top Notch is provided by Longman publications and written by Joan Saslow and Allen Ascher. Top Notch, a dynamic 6-level course for international communication, sets a new standard, using the natural

language that people really speak. With a rock-solid learner-centered approach, Top Notch provides students an opportunity to confirm their own progress at the end of every easy-to-teach two-page lesson.

Internal Evaluation

1. The intended audiences are adults and young adults. However, there are two beginning entry levels for true beginner.
2. This book is the second fundamentals (fundamentals B) book of a 6-level course. As a result it is useful for absolute beginners, while false beginners can begin with Top Notch 1, i.e. the other beginning level test.
3. This book aims at teaching general English.
The book consists of 7 units. Each unit is made up of 6 pages, i.e. easy-to-teach two-page lesson. Each two-page lesson is designed for one class session and begins with a clearly stated communication goal and ends with controlled or free communication practice. Each lesson provides vocabulary, grammar, and social language contextualized in all four skills, keeping the pace of a class session lively and varied. Skills are integrated with each other.
4. The authors believe that Top Notch prepares students to interact successfully and confidently with both native and non-native speakers of English and is a six-level communicative English course book. It demonstrably brings students to a "Top Notch" level of communicative competence.
5. The material in this book is used as the core for the course.
6. Since the non-native teachers may have difficulty in implementing and using this course book, teacher's book is locally available.
7. There are two sections devoted to vocabulary in this book. The 'vocabulary booster' which consists of extra vocabulary for each unit. The vocabulary index consisting of the words covered in the book except for the words provided in the vocabulary booster section. New vocabulary is not only introduced in the 'Vocabulary' sub-headings, but also enriched by addition of new words and reinforced by repetition in all other areas of language skills, namely Conversation, Listening, Grammar, Reading, and Writing. A wide variety of practice opportunities are provided in the Interaction, Discussion, and Pair-Work sub-headings with an array of exercises such as using the new vocabulary, role-playing, filling-in the blanks, making sentences, and responding to questions.
8. The book contains authentic pictures in the form of photographs and charts which are not only for cosmetic value but also integrated into the text. These colorful pictures help understanding some parts of the book especially the vocabulary.
10. The layout and presentation of the book is very clear. It is well-organized and the materials are presented in a fixed order.
11. Top Notch treats English as an international language, rather than the language of a particular country or region. It tries to develop cultural awareness without being offensive.
12. The materials represent both genders equally balanced out through different sections of the book. Pictures and maps of different parts of the world are seen in the book. No special intention has been implemented in this book to consider one country as dominant over other nations. Pictures of people from different nationalities are evident on different pages.
13. The book comes with audio CD and DVDs. These extra materials are useful in that they provide authentic material for foreign students. The price of the book seems to be affordable since audio/visual materials are supplemented.
14. There are two review sections in this book. They cover the units preceding them. Other than this, after every two pages of the book there is a kind of self-evaluation section based on production skills. A conversation in which the learners must expand and a writing task based on the vocabulary and grammatical points covered on the prior pages.

Internal evaluation:

1. This book tries to cover all the four skills in an integrated way. But there are parts in which one skill or the other is not thoroughly presented.

2. The book obeys a special criterion and there exists the grading of the materials through each unit and through the whole book.
Each unit consists of six pages: each easy-to-teach two-page lesson is designed for one class session. It begins with clearly stated unit goals and ends with controlled or free communication practice. After the goals the vocabularies will be presented through pictures, text and listening task. The next part is grammar which is introduced through using two different colors: black and blue. After grammar is the pronunciation part and it is presented through text and listening. The next section is completing a conversation and reading it aloud which is followed by the writing task. A conversation will be introduced through text and listening. Then there would be some practice on intonation and rhythm.
At the end of the two-page lesson, a conversation should be completed and continued based on the introduced conversation. Little by little the listening comprehension tasks and speaking tasks will be more. After the three two-page lessons Top Notch activities are presented: a) reading and listening, b) writing, c) discussion. Top Notch songs and Top Notch websites are introduced as well. The unit warm-up is presented in the Top Notch activities to make learners use the pictures and vocabularies to tell a story
3. There are parts on reading in each unit: two of them are presented in the two-page lessons and the other one is presented on Top Notch activities page at the end of each unit. The passages are either authentic or artificial.
4. The listening and speaking skills are integrated and presented in the same section of each unit. There is a part in the book in which authentic unrehearsed interviews with English speakers from around the world are presented.
5. The dialogues presented in the listening and speaking sections of the book are very useful for everyday communication.
6. The exercises of the book are based on the content of the book, in other words the material taught by the course instructor. Since the aim of most English students is to use language communicatively, the exercises of the book are in parallel with this need.
7. Students cannot cover this book on their own since it is filled with group work and pair work. The learners are not autonomous and are dependent on a learning situation since no answer keys are provided at the back of the book. However no claim is made about this matter.
8. Overall this book seems to be motivating for both the instructors and students, because of the colorful layout and well-organized presentation of the material on the one hand and authentic language provided in most sections of the course book on the other hand.

Headway

Headway is a 1990 course book written by John Soars. This book combines traditional methods of teaching with more recent communicative approaches. The aim of the book is to provide comprehensive language for the L2 learners.

External evaluation:

1. This book is provided for young adults and adults who want to use English accurately and fluently.
2. Headway elementary is more suitable for students just starting out with English as a second/foreign language.
3. The material of this book can be used in any context wishing to teach English for general purposes.
4. Headway elementary contains 15 units, providing material for 90 hours of teaching.
5. This course book combines traditional methods of language teaching and more recent communicative approaches.
6. The parts of the course book are used as the core materials, they are not supplementary.
7. The teacher's book is locally available. It is easy to use by non-native teachers in a foreign context.
8. There is a reference list at the end of the book referring to the vocabulary, irregular verbs, verb patterns. Phonetic symbols and transcripts covered throughout the book.
9. The pictures are integrated into the context of the book.
10. The layout of the book is clear and well-organized.

11. Some of the materials presented in the book are not culturally acceptable in the Iranian culture such as some beverages or ways of clothing.
12. There is no any specific impression towards any specific gender. Equality towards people or among different cultures have been obeyed. Students show interest when they read culturally different texts.
13. The course book comes with two cassettes, a workbook, some pronunciation activities, and a video cassette. This extra material will surely help students feel more acquainted with the new language.
14. At the end of each unit there is a *grammar summery section*. It summarizes grammatical points for each unit .Besides, at the end of each unit there is a section called *every day English*. At this stage, they can enhance their productive skills which were explained earlier in the unit.

Internal evaluation:

1. All four skills consisting of listening, speaking, reading, and writing are presented systematically in the course book.
2. The amount of material presented in relation to each skill is not equally divided. Thus the materials are graded across the units, allowing a progression of difficulty in a linear fashion.
3. Reading is presented in context beyond the sentence level.
4. Please complete
5. The material presented in the section on speaking is not based on artificial dialogues instead they resemble authentic interaction.
6. The exercises are in line with student's needs. The book covers all skills and sub skills needed for a successful communication. As far as forgetting is inevitable, during incoming units, exercises related to previous units are reviewed.
7. This is teacher-dependant course book. Students cannot work through this book without the help of a proficient in the field of language teaching.
8. The material and overall the course book is motivating, since it takes account of the students' needs as learners and facilitates their learning processes without dogmatically imposing a rigid method on them.

New Interchange

New interchange is the second edition of interchange, one of the world's most successful English courses for adult and young adult learners at the beginning to intermediate levels. The author is professor Jack C. Richards, an internationally recognized authority on methodology, teacher development, and materials design. New interchange intro which is the introductory level of the series, examined in this study, is designed for beginners and for learners needing a thorough review of basic structures and vocabulary. New interchange intro provides a smooth transition to new interchange levels 1, 2, and 3.

New interchange intro incorporates suggestions from around the world, offered by students and teachers using the first edition. It includes fresh new content, more visuals to introduce vocabulary, more opportunities to build fluency, and up-to-date art and design.

According to the author of this book the major features of the series include: an integrated multi-skills syllabus, contemporary real-world topics, conversational language, grammar in communicative contexts, natural recordings with a variety of accents, task-based listening activities, opportunities to share opinions and ideas, student-centered fluency activities, a thorough treatment of pronunciation, vocabulary-building exercises, high-interest reading passages, and review units at regular intervals.

These are of course big claims made by the author about the interchange series. Through the external/internal evaluation we will examine to what extent these ends have been reached.

External evaluation:

1. This book is for adult and young adult learners at the beginning level.
2. New interchange intro, the introductory level of the series, is designed for beginners and for learners needing a thorough review of basic structures and vocabulary.
3. The materials of this book are for teaching general learners.

4. The book contains 16 six-page units; each eight units are taught in two separate courses. Each unit contains several parts including: snapshot, conversation, grammar focus, fluency exercises, pronunciation, listening, word power, reading, writing, and interchange activities which are pair work, group work, or whole class activities involving information sharing and role playing to encourage real communication.
5. According to the author this book teaches students how to use English for everyday situations and purposes. The underlying philosophy is that learning a second or foreign language is more rewarding, meaningful, and effective when the language is used for authentic communication. In this book students have the opportunity to personalize the language they learn, make use of their own knowledge and express their own ideas. The author also believes that the series has an integrated, multi-skills syllabus that links topics, communicative functions, and grammar.
6. The book is the core material for an English course.
7. There is a teacher's book available. It contains detailed suggestions on how to teach the course, lesson by lesson notes, transcript of the listening activities, and complete answer keys.
8. The key vocabulary presented throughout the book is categorized based on each unit at the end of the book. The new vocabulary is subdivided into nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, verbs, and prepositions which make it convenient for the students.
9. The book contains colorful pictures; both drawings and real-life. It also includes charts for students to fill in. Some visual material are more relevant and concrete than others.
10. The layout and presentation of the material is clear. The information is not packed or cluttered on each page, they are evenly distributed throughout the six pages of each unit.
11. The author himself mentions that although the language used in the book is American English, it is also the language of international communication and is not limited to any one country, region, or culture.
12. The content of the material presented in the book are all familiar for an American citizen, but are new for others. This is more evident in the snapshot section of the book.
13. The book includes audio cassettes or CDs. They contain recordings of the conversations, pronunciation exercises, and grammar focus models.
14. The course book contains a review unit after every four units. There is also a placement test to help teachers and administrators place their students at the most appropriate level of new interchange.

Internal evaluation:

1. All four skills are covered by this book. The content of each unit is divided into five sections: functions, grammar focus, listening/pronunciation, writing/reading, and the interchange activity which is brought at the end of the book. The function section includes conversation and snapshot. The conversation has two parts. The first part requires the students to listen and practice the conversation. The second part is usually a shorter extension of the first conversation. The conversations introduce the new grammar of each unit in a communicative context and present functional and conversational expressions. The snapshots graphically present interesting real-world information. The grammar of each unit is presented in color boxes in the grammar focus section. The listening activities develop a wide variety of listening skills. Charts or graphics often accompany these task-based exercises to lend support to students. These exercises focus on important features of spoken English, including stress, rhythm, intonation, reduction, blending, and sound contrasts. In this book the reading passages start from unit 5. The writing tasks extend and reinforce the teaching points in the unit.
2. New interchange intro is designed for beginners and for learners needing a thorough review of basic structures and vocabulary. According to the author there is a smooth transition from this book through the other three levels. The difficulty level of the material presented here progresses in a linear fashion. As we proceed from unit one to unit sixteen the grammatical points become more complicated, the conversations become longer and more complex, and starting from unit 5 reading passages are embedded at the end of the units.
3. The claims made by the author of this book about the reading passages, are not quite tangible. He mentions some features of the reading passages at the beginning of the book; they develop a variety of reading skills, including reading for details, skimming, scanning, and making inferences. Various

text types adapted from authentic sources are included. To be honest, we believe on the one hand no reading skill or strategy is worked on during instruction. The steps used for teaching reading in the Iranian context is as follows: First some pre-reading questions are asked to activate students background knowledge, then the passage is read by the teacher or volunteering students and the problematic vocabulary are worked on, and finally post-reading questions are asked. On the other hand the passages do not seem to be authentic at all.

4. Since this book is written for beginners it is odd to expect to see any authentic recordings with spontaneous speech integrated into it. Since the recordings are very short and artificial, it is a way of familiarizing the L2 learners with aspects of English such as pronunciation, consonant clusters, intonation, and spoken L2 in general. Although the author claims that the book provides a wide variety of listening skills, including listening for gist, listening for details, and inferring meaning from context, in our opinion none of these can be reached in a beginner's class.
5. In real-life communication we see aspects such as silent pauses, pause fillers, ellipsis, formulaic language use like stock phrases, repetition, reformulation, rephrasing, and many other devices. We cannot expect to find these in speaking/listening material presented in course books especially those prepared for beginners. Thus the dialogues and conversations in the book are artificial, prepared to suit the level of the students understanding.
6. Exercises are a central part of the course book and to some extent (depending on the teacher and the students themselves) allow students to personalize what they have learned in each unit.
7. The way in which material are presented in the new interchange series, somehow allows self-study by students and independence from teachers, meaning that they can work on their own without a real need for a teacher.
8. This book seems to be motivating for both teachers and students.

Discussion

The four course books examined in this study were each separately evaluated in the previous parts. Now we want to compare the course books in parallel in order to determine which one is the better option for an EFL classroom based on the external/internal evaluation.

Since the books chosen for evaluation in this study were all the elementary levels of the series, accordingly the authors claimed they were all intended for young adult and adult beginners.

However, the themes and topics students find in Top Notch seem to motivate the audience more than the other three books. The title/topic of the units found in Top Notch are more tangible and worldly, for instance Names and occupations, directions and transportation, whereas in New interchange the title/topic of each unit is presented in the form of a short phrase such as It's nice to meet you, What's this, or we live in the suburbs.

The same is true for On Your Mark. Headway on the other hand has a completely different order in introducing the material covered in the book. In the table of contents, the first column is titled 'structure', then 'use', and after 'vocabulary' and 'skill' the 'topic' is mentioned. So we got the impression that grammar and vocabulary seem to be emphasized in Headway. To get a full picture of the table of contents the headings of the first unit of each book in shown below:

Vocabulary	Vocabulary Booster	Conversation Strategies	Grammar	Speaking	Pronunciation	Listening	Reading and writing
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Top Notch

Unit one It's nice to meet you	Functions	Grammar	Listening/Pronunciation	Writing/Reading	Interchange Activity
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New Interchange

Unit one What's your name?	Vocabulary and Grammar	Listening and Speaking	Reading and Writing
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On Your Mark

Unit one Structure	Use	Vocabulary	Reading	Speaking	Listening	Writing
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Headway

Although all four course books are written for beginners, or let's say people just starting to study English as a foreign language for the first time in an institute, the material presented seem to be a bit complicated for a novice beginner. The best book for a true beginner is On Your Mark. The dialogues are very short and comprehensive, the vocabulary is concrete and preliminary, the reading and writing activities also follow an easy to do framework.

The context of the four course books is not suitable for any ESP program. They all suit a general course on English. The themes and topics of the units throughout the books clearly indicate this fact.

Top Notch consists of 14 units. Half of the units are covered in Fundamental A and the other half in Fundamental B. Each unit is covered in three sessions. Each unit is made up of three two-page lessons, in which every two-page lesson is designed for one class session. Each lesson provides vocabulary, grammar, and social language contextualized in all four skills, keeping the pace of a class session lively and varied. A negative point about the organization of the material in this book is that the layout of each unit is not parallel to what has been mentioned in the table of contents. Whereas in the other three books this problem is not evident. The new interchange is made up of sixteen units. In most institutes each eight unit is taught in one term. Each unit consists of six pages. Most often each unit is covered in two and a half to three sessions. Each unit is made up of two grammar focus and two conversation activities. From unit five a reading passage is included at the last section of each unit. ----

It is always expected of a producer or manufacturer to advertise to the benefit of their product. The authors' claims about their personal books are no exception. Authors usually make big claims about their books but the important part is to see to what extent these claims are met in the actual classroom. All four course books under study meet to expectation of the audience to some extent. However some parts seem to be in contrary to the authors' claims.

In Top Notch for instance, the author mentions one of the key features at the back of the book: "Essential model conversations that make key social language unforgettable and easy to personalize", but we think the conversations are not authentic but rather fake things that usually do not occur in real day to day interactions. On the other hand they are not long enough. But we must confess that among the four books, Top Notch meets the claims of the authors more than the other books.

Just like the authors say, the texts are created for the true beginners, the vocabulary is intensive and the words are up-to-date in comparison to the other books.

In the other book, New Interchange, the author's claims are really high and not really met through teaching the material of the book. The biggest claim of Jack C. Richards in regards to the intro book is that the materials are presented in communicative contexts which is not really seen throughout the book. Another criticism towards the book is that the recordings are not natural as the author refers to 'natural recordings' at the back of the book. Since a natural recording must consist of hesitation markers, pauses, time-creating devices, repetitions, and many other aspects seen in authentic interaction, we cannot approve of this claim. The other point we don't agree with is the claim made about the reading passages that are of 'high-interest'. Actually the topics of the four reading passages covered in the first section of the book are: It's Saturday what are you doing, What's your schedule like, Two special houses in the American Southwest, What do you do exactly. In our opinion these are not interesting topics especially for beginners.

On Your Mark seems like a book that has been written without much put into it. Very general claims are made by the author of the book. For instance, as a description of the listening and speaking skills

of the book the author has said, "allows students to develop effective communication strategies." We think the author has exaggerated to some extent since communicative strategies are a complex concept for students to be able to handle in the first term studying English through this book or any other book. The author mentions that learning strategies which are included in some parts of the book in the form of hints or clues, help students manage their language study effectively and independently.

To give you a better picture an example from the book will be provided below. Use punctuation mark is written in bold font as a sub-heading and indicated that this is a strategy. We think this is a clue or additional help rather than a strategy, because according to Oxford (1990) strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations. Another claim made by the author which we cannot accept is that 'grammar presentation and practice allow students to focus on form, meaning, and use. Grammar is thought through focus on form and usage, but nothing in relation to use is mentioned in the content of the book.

The material in the four course books are all core rather than supplementary material. The price of the books is affordable since they include a course book, a work book, and audio materials.

In Top Notch there is an alphabetical word list for the whole book at the end of the book, which is very convenient because of being presented alphabetically. In addition there is a section called Vocabulary Booster which presents additional vocabulary. In the New Interchange however, the key vocabulary for each unit is presented under the heading of each unit separately at the end of the book. Both books also provide the students the expressions/social language used throughout the book. The list of vocabulary in On Your Mark is exactly the same as Interchange. The last part of Headway is dedicated to the structures covered throughout the book and the transcription of the listening activities, but nothing is devoted to vocabulary. It seems as though the most convenient list is provided in Top Notch.

The most lively, colorful, and authentic photographs and pictures are seen in Top Notch. Although Headway is filled with authentic pictures, they are mostly in black and very dull. Rather than motivating the students it kind of puts them to sleep. More over the only book that is printed in glossy paper is Top Notch.

Other than Headway which has a cluttered organization, the other three books have an organized presentation and layout. In headway the pages are cluttered with information on every page that teachers/learners find them practically unusable.

Neither of the books are culturally biased in anyway. They try to use a variety of information from different cultures and nationalities. One point to be mentioned about New Interchange in general is that, the topics covered in snapshot are usually based on American culture. They usually present unfamiliar and new concepts for foreign English learners.

In all four course books there are some review sections, assessing the previous aspects worked on in the preceding sections. This type of assessment is not a test per se but it is more like a class-activity, but it can be useful for the learners to see what they've accomplished and what problems they still have.

The presentation of the material in the Intro course book follows a fixed order to some extent. The first section of each unit either starts with a snapshot or a word power. Next there is a conversation based on the theme/topic of the unit. Grammar focus follows the conversation. There is one listening activity midway in each unit. In every unit two separate sections are devoted to conversation and two separate sections are devoted to grammar focus. In On Your Mark the presentation of material is also fixed, with one difference. The quantity of material presented in different sections of a unit varies from one unit to the next. So the students don't have an idea of the amount of material presented under each heading, before going through the unit. In Top Notch as we mentioned before in the article each unit is made-up of 2 page-lessons. On every two page-lesson conversation and vocabulary sections are seen. So to some extent the organization of the material is predictable.

Among the four books, in our perspective, Top Notch seems to be the most systematic; grading the material from easy to difficult.

The reading sections in On Your Mark are very preliminary, and we cannot really call them reading activities. Perhaps they fit the needs of the beginners, which are the true audience of this book. All the other course books have a section on reading mainly at the end of each unit. But the texts found in Top Notch are more appealing to students than the ones in Interchange. The reading passages in Interchange don't follow a well-structured plan, some passages are easier than others while some are more difficult, but it does not move along a continuum from the easiest to the most difficult. Some of the passages are not interesting at all for the reader. For instance in unit 10 there is a reading passage called "Race the U.S.". This passage is filled with numbers, nothing intriguing for the students; they are also forced to read something they are not attracted to.

The only book which contains authentic listening is Headway. Most of the dialogues are artificial, since the books under study are the beginning levels.

The most interesting book for both teachers and students seems to be Top Notch, for its' appearance and content.

Conclusion

According to the in-depth examination of the most used books of Top Notch, the New Interchange, On Your Mark, and Headway in most institutes in Iran, the researchers concluded that overall Top Notch a book written by Joan Saslow and Allen Ascher and a Pearson Longman publication, met most of the criteria to be labeled better than the other four books. However, this does not mean that the other books should not be used, but rather the weak points can be modified according to the leading course books.

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