



Post-Evaluation on New Edition of PEP: A Small Case Study of Grade 3 Textbook

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Abstract

English teaching is popular in Chinese teaching context, especially teaching reading. With respect to the teaching materials, it is common that both teachers and students greatly depend on textbooks. However, textbooks are not perfect and there are potential limitations. Considering a specific teaching setting, this study conducted an after-use evaluation to examine teachers' perceptions of the new editions of *Peoples' Education Press (PEP) for Grade 3* with the purpose of extending the understanding of the textbook and identifying strengths and limitations which could have pedagogical implications. A case study was conducted with fifteen teachers in Primary School A. All the data was collected by means of qualitative interviews. According to the research findings, teachers hold positive attitudes towards this textbook. However, there are still some deficiencies which cannot satisfy participants' needs. For these limitations, participants present valuable suggestions on textbook development.

Subject Areas

Sociology

Keywords

Textbook, Post-Use Evaluation

1. Introduction

In China, the teaching of English is a key component of the curriculum of most schools. According to McGrath's [1] statements, the quality of teaching depends on many factors, such as teachers and teaching materials. Although "selecting an appropriate textbook is a necessary and heavy responsibility that any ESL/EFL teach must bear" [2], teachers have no autonomy in tailoring textbooks in Chinese educational context. It is because the implementation of the three-level (national,

provincial and school level) curriculum management policy under the New Curriculum Reform decentralises teachers' right in terms of curriculum decision-making [3]. On the other hand, although the current textbooks are recommended by the Ministry of Education, there could be some limitations in specific teaching context. As stated by McDonough and Shaw [4], no textbook will be absolutely ideal for a particular teaching context.

2. Conceptions of Textbooks

Textbook is defined as multimodal resource that presents materials in spoken, visual, audio forms on which a course is based [5]. It has been regarded as an important component and the most common form of teaching materials in language instruction, and it can serve many roles in both language teaching and learning [1]. In particular, it is found that a great number of teachers and students rely heavily on textbooks. The current research released that 78% of teachers in OECD countries spend over 40 minutes per lesson on using the textbooks [6]. Moreover, Zhang and Chen [7] note that 81% of teachers use textbooks as the primary source of teaching. This might be because textbook provides a structural tool for teaching [8] [9] which serves as "an idea bank" [10] in offering teachers models of ideas for teaching specific themes or designing activities. Further, the textbook functions as the primary source for exam preparation and can increase the exam success by 22% - 31% [7].

However, no teaching resource can be totally suited for the unique teaching context [11]. The textbook has its potential limitations. As Richard [9] states, pre-arranged and printed materials may lack reference to current issues or be out-of-date. Furthermore, McDonough and Shaw [4] claim that some prepared reading materials in the textbook seem artificial, which can be over-familiar to students. Therefore, there might be a significant risk if teachers rely too heavily on the textbook since it diminishes student engagement and critical thinking ability [12].

3. Conceptions of Textbook Evaluation

Textbook evaluation is defined as a procedure for measuring the value or potential value of the materials [13]. Many researchers [4] [11] [14] maintain that no textbook is likely to be perfect. Thus, valuing the suitability of textbooks plays a significant role in teaching and learning. As Johnson [15] notes that the textbook suitability assessment improves students' learning outcomes. On the one hand, textbook evaluation helps teachers to judge the fitness of the textbook and gain information of making adjustment or adaptation [11]. On the other hand, textbook evaluation can help teachers identify the strengths and weaknesses of the textbooks [14]. According to different time of conducting an evaluation, Tomlinson [16] and Rea-Dickins [17] categorise three types of evaluation: pre-use, in-use/whilst-use and post-use evaluation. Particularly, post-use evaluation, which is taken after the use of the teaching materials, is viewed as the most valuable evaluation since it not only can measure the actual effects of the materials on the users,

but also can measure the short-term effect as well as the long-term effect [4].

3.1. Evaluation Criteria

An evaluation criterion is regarded as a basis for making judgments in textbook evaluation. Tomlinson [13] puts forwards that “all teachers develop theories of learning and teaching which they apply in their classrooms”, and make use of them to construct criteria for evaluation.

Grant [18] addresses that textbook should suit students’ learning needs, teachers’ teaching needs, and meet the needs of the official public teaching syllabuses or examinations.

Similar to Grant’s [18] principles, Cunningsworth [10] proposes four principles for materials evaluation, which are listed as follows:

- Relate the teaching materials to your aims and objectives.
- Be aware of what language is for and select teaching materials which will help equip your students to use language effectively for their own purposes.
- Keep your students’ learning needs in mind.
- Consider the relationship between language, the learning process and the learner.

Besides the above mentioned criteria, Hutchinson & Waters [19] also design the following four valuable principles:

- The fit between students and reading texts.
- The fit between teachers and texts.
- The fit between texts and teaching syllabus published by the official authority.
- The fit between curriculum and texts.

In addition, Chinese researchers also design principles underlying evaluation criteria. Zhang [20] outlines four principles for conducting textbooks evaluation in Chinese context.

- Match the methods of ESL/EFL teaching.
- Be in accordance with the teaching syllabus.
- Fit learners’ needs.
- Involve interesting and various tasks and exercises.

From examining the above principles designed by both western and Chinese researchers, the basic principles for textbook evaluation can be categorised into four aspects: 1) fit learners’ needs; 2) fit teachers’ needs; 3) fit the curriculum; and 4) fit the teaching syllabus.

3.2. Checklist as an Evaluation Instrument

The evaluation criteria are usually in the form of a checklist. The checklist helps evaluators to apply some important principles and remind them of certain issues that they should take into account when conducting the evaluation. McGrath [1] states, when making an in-depth evaluation on close analysis of the textbook, adopting the checklist method has its advantages. McGrath [1] also notes that the checklist method “is systematic” and can ensure “all elements that are deemed to be important are considered”.

The design of the checklists can be categorised from various dimensions, such as teachers' perspectives, learners' perspectives and whether the textbook design aligns with the statements stipulated in the national Curriculum Standards.

Concerning whether the design of the textbook meets the needs of learners, Cunningsworth [14] presents a checklist as follows:

- The need to communicate effectively.
- The need to be familiar with the language system.
- The need for challenge.
- The need to take on more responsibility for their own learning.
- The need for cross-cultural awareness.

In addition, Grant [18] lists four criteria for evaluation which take learners' needs into consideration:

- The age of the students.
- Is it culturally acceptable?
- Is it about the right level of difficult?
- It is about the right length?

Regarding the checklist from teachers' perceptions, Cunningsworth [14] concentrates on three categories:

- The role of teachers.
- The methodological approach they use.
- Do they have the right to adapt or supplement the standard coursebook?

In terms of regarding the relationship between the curriculum and the textbook, Williams [21] designed a checklist for reading which focuses on the design of the exercises, background information provided, the vocabulary and the variety of passages. Cunningsworth [14] also points out that evaluators should analyse the reading content of the textbook, the types of reading material, the exercises and activities accompanying the reading texts.

However, as McGrath [1] states, "the checklist method is not watertight", the checklist has its potential limitations. Williams [21] notes that a checklist cannot be a static phenomenon since it will be changed according to the specific context. Therefore, when designing the checklists for evaluation, particular requirements as interesting, readability, generality, usability should be taken into consideration.

4. Research Methodology

With the purpose of exploring teachers' perspectives on the use of PEP textbooks for Grade 3 students, two research questions are designed as follows:

What are the attitudes of the teachers towards the textbook for teaching reading?

What are teachers' needs towards the target textbook?

How might the target textbook be improved?

4.1. Participants

A qualitative approach enables researchers to interpret multifaceted and in-depth

understandings [22]. Cohen, Manion and Morrison [23] claim that “the quality of a piece of research not only stands or falls by the appropriateness of methodology and instrumentation but also by the suitability of the sampling strategy that has been adopted”. Convenient sampling strategy and purposive sampling strategy are adopted. There are two reasons for choosing these teachers as the subjects for this study. First, I am the college English teacher for these participants which makes more convenient to contact with them. As Stake [24] suggests, the researcher could pick cases which are “easy to get to and hospitable to the inquiry” (p. 4). Second, since this study aims at conducting after-use evaluation, these respondents are teachers who have used the new edition of PEP and could more or less have their own understanding of the textbook and be able to provide valuable information for the study. Thus, adopting this technique seems appropriate for the purpose of the research since it is widely used in qualitative research for identifying and selecting the information-rich cases. As Cohen *et al.* [23] suggest, a case study data elicited from respondents’ experiences and practices is seen to be strong in reality.

4.2. Data Collection and Data Analysis

In this study, a semi-structured interview was adopted which allows interviewers to probe in-depth information about the teaching context through iterative questioning [25]. The design of the teachers’ interview based on the post-use evaluation checklist which mainly includes the following two issues, namely, teachers’ perceptions of the textbook and teachers’ suggestions on textbook development. Specifically, the evaluation focuses on the internal, external as well as the overall evaluation of the textbook. The interview data, which consisted of recordings of the interviews with fifteen teachers, was transcribed firstly. The transcription is of great significance to the research. As Chen, Wang and Zhang [26] suggest, transcribing interviews allows more thorough examination of participants’ data by “identifying subtle shift in language use”.

Secondly, coding was used to analyse interview data. Bryman [27] defines coding as “the process whereby data are broken down into component parts, which are given names”. Bryman [27] also suggests coding is a key process in qualitative data analysis since transforming information into a numerical value will facilitate the computer to process the information.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Participants’ Attitudes towards the Textbook

The following parts will describe and discuss the findings from three aspects: the external, internal and overall evaluation.

Concerning teachers’ perceptions towards the external evaluation of the textbook, it mainly shows that they are satisfied with the layout of the textbook, especially the illustrations in the textbook. T1 stated that.

This new version of English Textbooks features numerous illustrations with vi-

brant color palettes. Also, the design of the illustration closely related to the teaching content. These features significantly enhance students' learning interests.

This finding aligns with the statements that coursebook illustrations serve as visual stimuli that attract learners' attention and foster engagement in learning [28]. As Thompson [29] explains, illustrations play an important role since they can carry meaning and make the materials less daunting.

On the other hand, some teachers noted that the new edition deletes the learning objectives in each unit which brings difficulties for novice teachers who are less experienced in teaching. T5 claimed:

In the first edition of the textbook, the teaching objectives are listed. However, in the second edition, these objectives are deleted. I heard that this adjustment was made due to experts claiming that teaching and learning objectives are difficult for students to understand.

This finding contradicts the claim that the textbook should articulate the teaching objectives to guide instructional practice and ensure alignment with students' cognitive development [30].

Regarding teachers' perceptions toward the internal evaluation of the textbook, findings will be examined mainly from the topics, teaching contents and the design of the exercises.

Firstly, findings indicate that teachers hold positive attitudes towards the topics chosen in this textbook. In the interview, teacher participants reveal that most topics can be accepted since they can foster students' interests. T3 states that

"There are various topics which include themes of 'Man and Nature', 'Man and Self' and 'Man and Society'. Some topics sound interesting, such as 'Different families', 'Amazing animals', 'The colourful world' which can attract students' attention".

Further, T5 adds that:

The topics chosen are close to students' lives, which can make them more engaged in learning.

As evidenced by Liu's [31] and Chen's [32] statements, life-relevant textbook topics demonstrably enhance students' motivational engagement and cognitive outcomes.

Secondly, in terms of the textbook's teaching content, teachers report that the texts present conceptual challenges for students' cognitive development. As T9 states.

The linguistic complexity of the current textbook exceeds that of the previous edition, particularly for Grade 3 English beginners. For example, the current textbook contains more turning-takings in the dialogue which enhances the difficulties in English acquisition and decreases learners learning motivation. These findings are identical to Zhang, Liu and Li' [33] statements that the excessive complexity of textbook language negatively impacts students' motivational engagement and adversely affects their learning outcomes.

Finally, in terms of the design of the activities in this textbook, most teacher interviewees give positive comments on the exercises designed in this textbook.

T1 mentions that:

There are interesting activities, such as the “Sing and role-play”, “Sing and play”, “Guess and Check” and “Play with hand shadows”, which enable the students to have fun in language learning.

Besides, findings indicate that the new edition has various types of activities designed for students, which can improve students’ language competence. As T3 mentions.

The design of the activities can improve students’ language skills. For example, the activities of “Ask and answer” and “Look and discuss” can improve speaking skill. “Start to read” and “Reading time” can improve reading skills. “Listen and do” and “Listen and chant” can improve their listening ability.

On the other hand, some teachers acknowledged the complexity in certain practice activities decreases students’ learning motivation. T4 states:

From my viewpoints, students only can say “Hello” “My name is...” and “I am...” after completing Unit 1. Activities like discussion, self-assessment or making mind map may not suit them.

It can be concluded that the activity design in the textbook are various and interesting which can increase students’ learning motivation and increase their engagement with activities [33]. Some activities, however, are rather complex that negatively impacts students’ motivational engagement [34].

Referring teachers’ perceptions towards the overall evaluation of the target textbook, the interview data reveals that teachers give positive comments. For example, the textbook’s design precisely aligns with the requirements stipulated in New English Curriculum Standards (2022) version. And all teachers agree that this new edition not only can enrich students’ language knowledge as discourse knowledge, grammar knowledge, vocabulary knowledge, and pronunciation knowledge, but also can improve students’ language skills as well as learning strategies, such as cognitive strategy, communicative strategy and meta-cognitive strategy.

In sum, from the discussion of teachers’ attitudes towards the textbook, it can be concluded that there are both advantages and disadvantages in the textbook. As stated by Cunningsworth [14], no textbook will be absolutely ideal for a particular context.

5.2. Suggestions for Textbook Improvement

Cunningsworth [10] states, no textbook could totally suit a particular teaching situation. Due to this limitation, this study designed research question, “How might the target textbook be improved?”, to collect information of suggestions for textbook improvement.

Concerning the external aspect of the textbook, one suggestion is to explicitly articulate unit teaching objectives. As T3 states, explicitly presenting unit-level teaching objectives within Grade 3 textbooks functions as critical pedagogical scaffolding that enhances instructional coherence and cognitive accessibility for teachers. This aligns with Liu’s [31] findings that explicitly presenting unit-level

teaching objectives enhances instructional coherence, which in turn improves teachers' cognitive accessibility during lesson planning.

As for the internal characteristics of the textbook, teacher-generated feedback reveals that textbook content complexity and activity difficulty are critical constraints for cognitive accessibility in instruction. T10 states,

Given that many students are beginners in English learning, the current texts' complexity presents significant cognitive challenges. I suggest textbook designers should maintain dialogue turn-takings at 1 - 2 per early unit or initiating activities with foundational tasks rather than discussion-based tasks. This approach aligns with cognitive accessibility principles, as initial activity complexity must correspond to learners' developmental capacity to prevent overwhelming cognitive load.

From the discussion on students' and teachers' suggestions, it can be concluded that teachers' main concern is the difficulty of the language and the exercises designed in the textbook, which are in accordance with the criteria of a good textbook.

6. Conclusions

This study attempted to evaluate the new edition of Grade 3 English textbook published by PEP. All the findings are examined from three aspects: the external, internal and overall evaluation.

In general, teacher participants hold positive attitudes towards this textbook. These elements encompass typographic features (e.g., font size), structural designations (e.g., table of contents formatting), and protocol-driven reading activities. However, participants identified a critical limitation: the absence of explicit teaching objectives. Concerning the findings of internal evaluation, findings reveal that the instructional content exhibits excessive difficulty, while activity design demonstrates undue complexity. As for the overall evaluation, although participants indicate that the textbook has many advantages, it still needs to be improved.

Additionally, considering the textbook has its limitations, this study probes into participants' suggestions on textbook development. Two suggestions are highlighted: adding the teaching objectives in each unit and decreasing the difficulties and complexity of the texts as well as the exercises.

However, this research has its limitations. This research is a small-scale study conducted with only ten teacher participants who are purposively selected. Thus, the findings can be generalized only to this target school. According to Bryman's [27] statement, "when a sample has been selected using probability sampling, any findings can be generalized only to the population from which that sample was taken". Further, this research only adopted semi-structured interview to collect the data. As Cohen *et al.* [23] state, observation method is a helpful tool for gaining insight into a case. This research did not adopt classroom observation which could enable me to generate more detailed data.

Richards and McGrath [1] [9] highlight that textbooks can serve many roles in both English language teaching and learning. However, no textbook is completely suited to all teaching settings. Using textbook has advantages and negative effects, therefore, conducting a textbook evaluation seems significant to teachers since teachers could understand more about the textbook they use, especially the limitations, which will help them to make adaptations and improve the teaching quality.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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