

Saleem Arif

Evaluating Textbooks and Their Potential for EFL Learning and Teaching. A Case Study

Master's Thesis

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1. INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies like computers, smartphones and the internet have changed modern society in the 21st century considerably. Especially for children, teenagers, young adults, the use of digital devices connected to the internet is a defining feature of their lives. The internet has become the number one source for gathering or looking up information. Nevertheless, the reality in schools is still different. In contrast to the reality outside of school, textbooks, especially in the context of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), are still the most important medium for language learning purposes in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom today (cf. e.g. Elsner 2016, p.442; Gehring 2012, p.357).

However, the academic evaluation of textbooks – that examines a specific textbook by its quality and whether it meets its intended aims (e.g. promoting effective learning employing modern principles of foreign language teaching) is surprisingly a rather neglected field of study (Fuchs et al. 2010, p.7). Furthermore, it is striking that the very few studies that evaluate an EFL-textbook mostly only consider the technical dimension of analysis, i.e. the theoretical perspective of EFL methodology. This theoretical perspective is, indeed, important for evaluating the quality of a textbook. Yet, in order to gain a more holistic and maybe even more realistic impression of the textbook in question, one should also include the practical perspective of EFL teachers who use that textbook in their day to day teaching practice asking the question, how these practitioners assess the textbook and how useful it is for them in teaching EFL.

Therefore, the present case study will critically evaluate one exemplary textbook from two perspectives. It will combine the theoretical perspective of EFL methodology and the practical perspective of EFL teachers on the textbook. The TEFL textbook chosen for this case study is titled “English G21 A5” and published by Cornelsen in 2010. It is designed for grade 9 at *Gymnasium* in North Rhine-Westphalia and other federal states of Germany. Taking Unit 1 of this textbook as an example, this paper aims at examining the potential of this textbook for EFL learning and teaching. The central question that this paper attempts to answer is whether the textbook meets the various requirements and expectations posed to a textbook including the numerous features and principles that are part of contemporary EFL methodology and central educational standards.

In the first part of the analysis (chapter 4) the question is in how far the textbook meets the theoretical requirements of TEFL. For the second part of the analysis (chapter 5) a small survey was carried out conducting qualitative interviews with four different

teachers of the same school. The four interviews are further accompanied by a questionnaire to add a quantitative dimension to the survey. The survey intends to find out about the teachers' opinion on the textbook. Hence, this part of the analysis focuses on the question, how the teachers assess the value of the textbook for their teaching practice in terms of functionality and potential of support in preparing and conducting a good lesson. Both perspectives, the theoretical and the practical, will be evaluated separately first, but put into relation when presenting and discussing the results in chapter 6.

Prior to the analysis it is, however, necessary to elaborate on some theoretical background (chapter 2). On the one hand, this involves describing the main principles and paradigms of contemporary EFL methodology. On the other hand, it includes illustrating relevant theoretical context in relation to the term textbook and textbook evaluation revealing the central requirements EFL textbooks need to fulfil. Finally, the aim of this twofold description of theoretical context is to develop a list of criteria (section 2.2.4) that will be used as the foundation of the textbook evaluation. After laying out the theoretical background, the selected textbook will be introduced in more detail in chapter 3, since it is important to know about the textbook in order to critically evaluate it afterwards.

2. THEORETICAL CONTEXT

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part (section 2.1 and its subsections) will provide an overview of the most influential concepts and paradigms of modern TEFL mainly addressing the question how English as a foreign language is learned effectively. Then, the second part of this chapter (section 2.2 and its subsections) will focus on textbooks. First, it will define the term 'textbook' and explain the role of the textbook and its functions in the EFL classroom. Secondly, it will briefly outline the current state of academic research related to textbooks. Thirdly, the expectations and requirements posed to an EFL textbook will be described aiming at summarising the core criteria and categories for textbook evaluation. Finally, this twofold theoretical background is used to develop a distinct set of criteria that will serve as the basis for the analysis in chapter 4 and 5.