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TEXTBOOK EVALUATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: SOLUTIONS, PRE-INTERMEDIATE

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Abstract

The aim of the present study is to examine an EFL textbook that is used in a private secondary school in Ankara, Turkey. First two units of the Oxford University Press textbook *Solutions* were evaluated in terms of their appropriateness, completeness, and utility for 23 false beginner English language learners. The evaluation was carried out in two steps: (1) external evaluation, (2) internal evaluation via semi-structured interviews with the classroom teacher and student questionnaires. The evaluation results have revealed that the students and the teacher were satisfied with the textbook; however, they criticized the following points: (i) the same order of presentation of the units, (ii) the cultural contents were biased, (iii) the aim of the book was not appropriate, (iv) the high-speed of native speaker talks in the CD's. In addition, the classroom teacher reported that she would quit using the textbook with false beginners.

Keywords: *Textbooks, Evaluation, ELT, EFL, False Beginners*

İNGİLİZ DİLİ ÖĞRETİMİNDE DERS KİTABI DEĞERLENDİRMESİ: SOLUTIONS, PRE-INTERMEDIATE

Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Türkiye'de özel bir ortaokulda İngilizce öğretiminde kullanılan bir ders kitabını incelemektir. *Solutions* ders kitabının ilk iki ünitesi, 23 adet İngilizce bilgisi olan ancak başlangıç seviyesinden yeniden başlaması gereken öğrenciler için uygunluğu, eksiksizliği ve faydası açısından değerlendirildi. Değerlendirme iki adımda gerçekleştirildi: (1) Dış değerlendirme, (2) Sınıf öğretmeni ve öğrenci anketleriyle yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yoluyla iç değerlendirme. Değerlendirme sonuçları, öğrenci ve öğretmenin ders kitabından memnun olduğunu ortaya koymuştur ancak öğretmen ve öğrenciler aşağıdaki noktaları eleştirmişlerdir: (i) Ünitelerin hep aynı sırayı takip etmesi, (ii) Kültürel içeriklerin önyargılı olması, (iii) Kitabın amacına uygun olmaması, (iv) CD'lerdeki seslendiricilerin hızlı konuşması. Ayrıca, sınıf öğretmeni, söz konusu ders kitabını bu grup öğrencilerle kullanmaktan vazgeçeceğini bildirmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Ders Kitabı, Değerlendirme, İngiliz Dili Öğretimi*

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Introduction

Although in recent years there has been a renewed debate about whether it is worth having ELT textbooks that would facilitate teaching and learning of English (Rubdy, 2003), the proponents of using a textbook agree that it provides the teacher and learners with great facility. In Turkey, textbooks are widely used in EFL classes both in private and state schools. EFL teachers in state schools are not involved in the selection process of the textbooks in general because they are expected to use the local textbook published by Turkish Ministry of Education. On the other hand, other EFL teachers working at private schools or institutions select their own textbooks.

In the selection process, one of the most fundamental issues is the selection criteria. In this respect, teachers should conduct an external evaluation of the textbooks in order to choose the most appropriate textbooks for their learners. However, more in-depth evaluation is required in order to get feedback from its in-action use in the classroom. As Tomlinson (2003:16) stated “an evaluation focuses on the users of the materials and makes judgments about their effects”. A textbook should be evaluated from multiple aspects in order to decide whether it is appropriate for that specific group of learners or not. These criteria should range from the layout and the design of the textbook to the skills, activities, language type with its subject and content.

That kind of evaluation can be of two types as suggested by (McDonough & Shaw, 1993): external and internal evaluation. External evaluation should precede internal evaluation but it does not supply enough information alone about the appropriateness of that textbook under study. For this reason, internal evaluation which is the evaluation of the material in use to get in-depth information.

The current study has been framed around these two phases: external and internal evaluation of the *Solutions Pre-Intermediate*. In the first phase of the study, external evaluation was carried out by the researcher with a pilot observation and informal talk with the teacher. Second, the data were collected via observations, student questionnaire and teacher interview for internal evaluation. The study was of great help particularly for the teacher, for it provided an insight and the teacher decided to give up using the textbook at the end of the study.

1. Description of Solutions Pre-Intermediate

As Richards (2005) stated, before the evaluation of a textbook, basic information is required about the role of the textbook, teachers and learners in the program. For this aim, the researcher observed one class hour and received information from the teacher. After obtaining the basic information, external evaluation was conducted based on McDonough & Shaw (1993) external evaluation criteria:

1. a. *The intended audience*: The intended audience in the book is the secondary-school students between fourteen and nineteen years old.

1. b. The proficiency level: There are five levels of the book. The present one is for pre-intermediate level students and it aims to bring these students up to a B1 level.

1. c. The context in which the materials are to be used: As stated in the blurb, “*Solutions* is designed for students who need every day English and exam preparation”. It is clarified in the web site that the exam refers to school-leaving exam. As for the exam, it states that “typical exam requirements are reflected throughout the course in the choice of topics, task-types, texts and grammar structures” (p. 5). It is also stated that “the workbook provides further practice for both oral and the written exam” (p. 5).

1. d. How the language has been presented and organized into teachable units/lessons: As stated in the *Components of the Course* section, the book contains ten topic-based units, each covering seven lessons. Each lesson provides material for one classroom lesson of approximately forty-five minutes. As stated in the teacher’s book, these seven lessons include:

Lesson A. Vocabulary and listening—introduces the topic of the unit, presents the main vocabulary set, and practices it through listening and other activities.

Lesson B. Grammar — presents and practices the first main grammar point of the unit.

Lesson C. Culture — has a reading text which provides cultural information about Britain, the USA or other English-speaking countries.

Lesson D. Grammar — presents and practices the second main grammar point of the unit.

Lesson E. Reading — contains the main reading text of the unit.

Lesson F. Everyday English — presents a functional dialogue.

Lesson G. Writing — focuses on writing and normally involves one of the text types required for the students’ final exam.

It also contains:

- . 5 *Language Review/Skills Round-up* sections, providing a language test of the previous two units and a cumulative skills-based review

- . 10 *Get ready for your exam* lessons providing typical tasks and preparation for the students’ final exam

- . 10 *Vocabulary Builders* with practice and extension options

- . 10 *Grammar Builders* containing grammar reference and further exercises

- . Tip boxes throughout giving advice on specific skills and how best to approach different task types in all four main skills

2. The author’s views on language and methodology:

As explained by the authors, “*Solutions* is a 5-level course written for secondary students who need every day English and exam preparation. It supplies the language, teaches the skills and provides the support to get students using English confidently”. The authors also

took into consideration the following criteria based on their trips to different cities and across Central and Eastern Europe:

- . A clear focus on exam topics and tasks
- . Easy-to-follow lessons which have a clear outcome
- . Plenty of support for speaking and writing
- . Plenty of extra practice material

The above guiding principles show that the authors give emphasis on practicality issue. One lesson in the book corresponds to one lesson in the classroom to make the lessons easy to follow. Another issue is flexibility. For that purpose, they included twenty pages of extra vocabulary and grammar practice in the student's book. They also added speaking and writing activities which are 'achievable' in order to help learners overcome the difficulties they have with these skills.

It can be inferred from the above points that it is based on 'multi-syllabus' approach which aims to serve both communicative and formal functions of language. Practice of language areas (grammar and vocabulary) and productive skills (speaking and writing) have been given priority. Particularly every student is expected to speak with the help of this course book.

3. Are the materials to be used as the main 'core' course or to be supplementary to it?

The student's book has been designed for classroom use, indicating that one lesson in the book is equal to one lesson in the classroom which is approximately forty-five minutes. The main course book is aimed to be used as a core material in the classroom. However, workbook can be used as a supplementary source because it is stated that "work in class can be followed up with Workbook tasks done as homework" (p. 5).

4. Is the teacher's book in print and locally available?

The teacher's book is in print and sold in multiple cities of Turkey.

5. Is a vocabulary list/index included?

There is a *Vocabulary Builder* section at the end of the student's book. This section is available for practice and the exercises are prepared based on each unit. The workbook has both an irregular verbs list and a *Wordlist* which contains the vocabulary activated in the student's book units.

6. What visual materials does the book contain and is it actually integrated into the text?

Photographs, pictures, charts, graphs, drawings are available related to the content of the texts and exercises. There are also survey templates and multiple styles of writing to attract the attention of the learners. Particularly for reading and listening sections of each unit, it is advised in the teacher's book that the teacher asks students to look at the picture and tell what they can see or what is happening and predict the content via these pictures. Teachers are also encouraged to get the students to refer to the pictures especially for difficult vocabulary.

7. Is the layout and presentation clear or cluttered?

The layout and presentation of the units are clear. Each unit follows the same format and there are ten pages in each unit.

8. Is the material too culturally biased or specific?

It is stated in the teacher's book that information was gathered around UK and across Central and Eastern Europe in order to write *Solutions*. On the other hand, inclusion of *10 Get ready for your exam lessons* is intended for secondary school students who would have school-leaving exam not available in Turkey. In addition, nearly all of the topics in the culture section in each unit aim to provide information about British culture.

9. Does the material represent minority groups and/or women in a negative way?

The pictures about the texts or listening transcripts seem to have equal gender roles. There seems not to be an exercise, text or task that favor a minority group over others.

The external evaluation showed that the textbook is possibly appropriate for the intended group of learners. Consequently, the researcher found it necessary to continue research with internal evaluation which would provide detailed information about how it is used in the classroom and whether it meets the needs of the learners and the teacher. Hence, in the second phase of the study, three instruments were used in order to collect data for an internal evaluation of the book. In the following section, the methodology of this internal evaluation is provided.

2. Methodology

In this section, data collection instruments and the participants of the study will be explained in detail. This section ends with data collection and procedure.

2.1 Participants

The participants of the study are twenty-three secondary-school false beginner EFL learners in a private school and their teacher. All of the learners are coming from a state primary school and they are all 6th grade EFL learners at the age of thirteen. The teacher has had seventeen years of experience in total, fifteen of which has been in the school under study.

2.2 Instruments

Two main instruments were used to collect data for the study. These are student questionnaire and teacher interview.

2.3 Student Questionnaire

As Mackey and Gass (2005) have pointed out, with the help of questionnaires learners can provide information about themselves and their learning motivations and beliefs or their attitudes toward learning and the instruction in the classroom – the information that cannot be provided via production. For the purpose of identifying the learners' attitudes, reactions and motivations toward the textbook, a questionnaire was prepared. The questionnaire consisted of twenty-six questions composed of seven categories. These are *layout and design, skills,*

activities, language type, subject and content, supplementary materials and general opinion. The questionnaire was based on five-point Likert-scale ranging from (1) *Totally Agree*, (2) *Agree*, (3) *Not sure*, (4) *Do not Agree* and (5) *Do not Agree at All*.

As the concepts in the questionnaire would be unfamiliar to the students, it was translated into Turkish and administered to the participants. During the administration, both the researcher and the teacher of the students clarified each statement providing the definitions of the concepts, their descriptions and examples where necessary.

The student questionnaire was adapted from the study of Arıkan, 2008¹. During the adaptation process, some items were divided into two different questions. In terms of wording and structure of the items, some of the concepts were simplified or replaced with similar word or statements. For the validity of the questionnaire, the Turkish translation was discussed with the teacher. One by one explanation of the items provided both by the teacher and the researcher during the administration was also intended to increase the validity of the questionnaire. As for the reliability, Cronbah's Alpha was implemented and the coefficient of the questionnaire was, 83.

2.4 Semi-Structured Interview

As MacKey (2006) has pointed out one of the many purposes interviews can serve is to design questions in order to learn more about teachers' and learners' opinions and attitudes about multidimensional language learning directions, such as their emotions toward certain classroom activities or the content of classroom materials. A semi-structured interview was conducted with the teacher of the classroom at the end of the second phase of the study. The aim of the interview was to find out the teacher's ideas about the seven categories available in students' questionnaire. Furthermore, the teacher was expected to make an overall evaluation of the textbook which would give the researcher an idea of what kind of strengths and weaknesses the book may have for her false beginner secondary school learners of English. In this respect, six open-ended questions for the semi-structured interview were prepared as a guide. The interview was tape-recorded and it took twenty-two minutes.

2.5 Data Collection and Procedure

The study was conducted in two phases. First of all, the researcher observed one class and had a personal talk with the teacher in the piloting phase. After obtaining necessary information both for the external and internal evaluation, she evaluated the textbook externally. At the end of this external evaluation, she found out that the intended book required further examination and evaluation in order to decide whether it is appropriate for the learners. For this reason, in the second phase of the study, four class hour observations were made. The observations were arranged according to the units that were being taught at the time of observations. In this respect, two class hours were devoted to the first unit and the rest two for the second unit. Next, a questionnaire was administered to the learners and lastly, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the teacher.

¹ Güncel Arıkan, *Textbook Evaluation in Foreign Language Teaching: Time for English, Grade 4, Teachers' and Students' Views*, Unpublished Master's Thesis, Adana, Çukurova University, 2008, pp. 89-90.

3. Findings and Discussion

The results of the questionnaires and teacher interview were interpreted in line with the observation notes. In addition, the findings from the data collected for the internal evaluation were discussed by comparing the results of the external evaluation.

3.1 Findings from the Student Questionnaire

In terms of questionnaires, means and standard deviations for each statement were reckoned. As provided in the following two tables (Table 1 and 2), all of the mean values are below 3.00. As number 1 and 2 refer to Totally Agree and Agree scales in the questionnaire, when the mean value is below 3.00, it shows that the learners have positive attitudes toward the statement. Accordingly, these results show that learners are satisfied with the textbook.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Students' Views for 3 Subparts

	A1	A2	B1	B2	B3	B4	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6
N	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23
Mean	1,5	*1,1	1,7	1,3	1,7	1,8	1,8	2,3	1,2	1,3	1,8	1,6
Std. Deviation	,94	,34	,96	,55	,85	1,1	1,0	1,6	,51	,89	,98	,78

*indicates the most positive statement rate

According to the Table 1 and 2, learners' attitudes are most positive toward the layout and design of the textbook (which refers to A1 and A2). As displayed above, the mean value of statement A2 is the lowest (M=1,13) which shows that all of the students find the printing and illustrations of high quality. As it is also specified in 10.a. of the external evaluation, the layout of the book was clear. In addition, the teacher mentioned during the interview that layout is clear and attractive for her students.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Students' Views for 4 Subparts

	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	E1	E2	E3	E4	F1	F2	F3	G1	G2
N	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23
Mean	1,2	1,5	1,3	2,0	1,6	1,5	1,3	1,7	1,4	1,6	2,1	2,7	1,7	2,0
Std. Deviation	,54	,72	,64	1,4	,87	,66	,63	,99	,79	1,0	1,3	1,4	1,4	1,0

In terms of other subparts of the questionnaire which are skills, activities, language type, subject and content, supplementary materials and general opinion, learners are also satisfied with the issues related to these subcategories of the textbook (as displayed in Table 2 above).

These results are mostly consistent with both the interview report and external evaluation. The analysis showed that the teacher and the learners were satisfied with the textbook Solutions Pre-Intermediate.

3.2 Strengths and Weaknesses of Solutions Pre-Intermediate

Student questionnaires and teacher interview showed that both learners and teachers had positive attitudes toward the textbook. On the other hand, it received some criticisms either by the teacher or the learners and the both. The following section of the study, these strengths and weaknesses of the textbook were discussed based on the student questionnaires and interview with the teacher.

3.2.1 Strengths

As mentioned in the previous section, the student questionnaire showed that almost all of the learners are satisfied with the textbook in terms of all seven subcategories provided.

In terms of teacher's views, the strengths of the textbook can be grouped as follows:

1. The age factor: As specified in the external evaluation, the textbook has been intended for learners between fourteen and nineteen years old. The participant learners in the study are at the age of 13. From the perspective of the teacher, the visuals and the topics in the textbook are appropriate for her learners. The learners find the topics interesting and enjoyable. For instance, they are motivated to take part in the discussions about the issues raised in the reading texts or speaking tasks.

2. The proficiency level factor: The book is intended for pre-intermediate students and the group of learners involved in the study is at the same proficiency level. According to the teacher's opinion, the learners are able to handle the texts which are nearly at the same level of her students. In addition, she mentioned that the grammar and vocabulary in the book are also treated appropriately for her learners.

3. The methodology factor: In order to make the lessons easy to follow in the classroom, one lesson in the book corresponds to one lesson in the classroom which refers to nearly forty-five minutes of class hour. This issue was emphasized by the teacher when she was asked about how much of the aims of the textbook meet the needs of her class.

3.2.2 Weaknesses

The weaknesses of the textbook that are believed to require elaboration have been identified as a result of the observations, student questionnaire and the teacher interview. In that vein, the discussions that follow will be provided in harmony with all these three data collection results.

1. Presentation of the units: According to the teacher, the disadvantage of the textbook was that each unit follows the same sequence. She mentioned that it is boring for her learners and they feel that they are doing the same tasks in an order only with minor differences among the units such as the topics. Following a sequence could make a textbook systematized; however, it could also cause boredom as in this case. It is required here to mention that the teacher was observed to make adaptations where she found it necessary. For example, though not available in the textbook, she had made revision of the past session about Unit 1 before she moved onto the next activities in the same unit. In addition, she skipped the comprehension questions of the reading passage and asked students more personal questions instead about the topic which is about 'wearing a hoodie' in Unit 1 such as 'Would you like to

wear a hoodie? ‘Do you like to wear a hoodie? Why?’

2. Cultural elements: One of the criticisms was made by the researcher during the external evaluation. Although the book has been intended to be used globally, the issues in the textbook were related to British and American culture. A student reported that s/he was not sure about the variety of the subject and content of the textbook and another did not agree that there are sufficient variety in the subject and content of the book. In addition, the reactions of the students to the book during the observation show their attitudes to the cultural elements in the textbook. For example, 2 students criticized the book about focusing too much on the sports that are done in only Britain or America while they were discussing a passage and related pictures about ‘boat race’ in Unit 2.

3. The aim of the book: Another issue that would be inappropriate for the intended learners was about one of the aim of the textbook. The book has asserted that the textbook had a clear focus on exam topics and tasks because one of the main aims of the textbook is to get the students ready for exam. Although it was not explained in detail, the intended exams are school-leaving exams. However, Turkish students are not required to pass an English exam in order to continue their education or to graduate. In this respect, this aim did not seem to be compatible with the learning aims of EFL students. The point was also mentioned by the teacher during the interview when she was asked the following question: ‘Do you think the aims of the textbook written in the teacher’s book meet the needs of your students?’ She mentioned that the solution could be skip Get ready for your exam sections of each unit which she did so.

4. CD as a supplementary material: As observed, students complained about the native speakers who spoke so fast in the CDs. They mentioned that they could not follow the dialog between the two native speakers. For this reason, they did not want to continue listening till the end of the talk. It was also uttered by few students that they felt bad when they did not understand the content of the dialogs, the interviews and such in the CDs of the book.

Conclusion

As each learning context is independent, the textbooks should be evaluated considering the particular learning environment. The evaluation of a textbook is fundamental in that it provides data about its efficiency for the stakeholders such as administrators, textbook writers and the users of the textbook who are the learners and the teachers. For this reason, the present study aimed to evaluate an EFL textbook which has been used in a secondary private school by 6th grade false beginner EFL learners. The textbook used was an Oxford University Press textbook which was *Solutions Pre-Intermediate*. The study was designed dividing the process into two parallel phases: external and internal evaluation of the textbook. The external evaluation showed that the book was possibly suitable for the group. In order to find out more about the use of the textbook in context and judge its effects on the learners and the teacher, an internal evaluation was conducted via collecting data. The results of the student questionnaires and teacher interview displayed harmony with the external evaluation. In other words, the learners and teacher both were satisfied with the textbook. On the other hand, there were also criticisms made by the learners and the teacher. These criticisms centered around the presentation of the units, the cultural elements, the aim of the textbook and its

questionable appropriateness for the aim of the learners in the present study and also about the CDs as supplementary material available in the pack of the textbook.

In terms of presentation of the units, the textbook may provide alternative activities for each unit which would also increase the flexibility of the textbook. As the textbook was written for global use, it requires flexibility and should offer options to the teachers. As for the cultural elements in the book, both the external evaluation and student questionnaire showed that the textbook owns only cultural elements from Britain. The textbook writers should take into account that an EFL learner may get bored and lose his/her motivation to the textbook because of the lack of traces of local elements of their country. In order to prevent this and to increase learners' interest in the textbook, as a global EFL textbook, it should involve multicultural topics and visuals. One other suggestion could be made to the teachers of the school that the research has been conducted. As they are involved in the process of selecting their own textbooks from the beginning, they should be careful in identifying the aims of the textbook and try to detect how suitable the aims would be for their own groups. The teacher has the responsibility of adapting and replacing the material where necessary. If the supplementary materials lack appropriate requirements that would help learners develop their English, the teacher's job is to compensate for these inefficiencies.

Consequently, the *Solutions Pre-Intermediate* textbook has been found to be suitable with reservations. Although the teacher applied the adaptation techniques well, using this book with these 23 false beginners would require more elaboration. At the end of the study, the teacher notified the researcher that she gained an insight about the use of the textbook and evaluate its negative and positive consequences in her context. As a result, she decided that she would stop using the book at the end of the semester and would seek for more appropriate EFL textbooks for her learners.

Extended Abstract

The current study intends to evaluate Oxford University Press Textbook *Solutions Pre-Intermediate* which has been used by 23 false-beginner English language learners in a private school in Turkey. The textbooks are widely used in Turkey and the private school teachers are allowed to select their own textbooks. The present study aimed to find out whether the aforementioned textbook has been appropriate for the learners.

As part of the study, the first two units of the textbook have been evaluated because only these two units have been covered by the students before the study has begun. The units of the textbook have been evaluated both externally and internally in order to get more in-depth information. In the first phase of the study, an external evaluation was carried out through a pilot observation and informal teacher talk. Then, the textbook was evaluated for its basic information based on McDonough & Shaw (1993) external evaluation criteria. The external evaluation showed that the textbook was possibly appropriate for the intended group of learners. In the second phase of the study, the textbook has been evaluated internally in order to find out how it has been used in the classroom and whether it meets the needs of the learners as well as the teacher.

The study was conducted in two phases. First of all, the researcher observed one class and had a personal talk with the teacher in the piloting phase. After obtaining necessary information both for the external and internal evaluation, she evaluated the textbook externally. At the end of this external evaluation, she found out that the intended book required further examination and evaluation in order to decide whether it was appropriate for the learners. For this reason, in the second phase of the study, four class hour observations were set. The observations were arranged according to the units that were being taught at the time of the observations. In this respect, two class hours were devoted to the first unit and the rest two for the second unit. Then the data were collected through student questionnaire and semi-structured interview with the teacher.

The questionnaire consisted of twenty-six questions and it was divided into 7 categories. These are layout and design, skills, activities, language type, subject and content, supplementary materials and general opinion. The questionnaire was based on five-point Likert-scale. The semi-structured interview was conducted with the teacher to find out her ideas about the seven categories available in students' questionnaire. Furthermore, the teacher was expected to make an overall evaluation of the textbook as well as the strengths and weaknesses the book would have for her false beginner secondary school learners of English. In this respect, six open-ended questions for the semi-structured interview were prepared as a guide. The interview took twenty-two minutes.

The results of the questionnaires and teacher interview were interpreted in line with the observation notes. In addition, the findings from the data collected for the internal evaluation were discussed by comparing the results of the external evaluation. The analysis showed that the teacher and the learners were satisfied with the textbook *Solutions Pre-Intermediate*. The results were mostly consistent with both the interview report and external evaluation. On the other hand, the textbook received some criticisms by the teacher and/or the learners. The criticisms centered around the problems in the presentation of the units, cultural elements as

well as the incompatibility of the aim of the book with the target learners, and the high-speed of the audio recordings. All in all, the teacher decided to stop using the textbook at the end of the semester and would seek for more appropriate EFL textbooks for her learners.

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