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Teachers' Perceptions of the New English Textbooks in Iranian Junior High Schools

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Introduction

English language teaching reform is one of the focal points of Iran's education system restructuring. To improve the education system, the Educational Department brought reforms to its curricula and textbooks. In Iran, the new national curriculum was approved in 2012. Shortly thereafter, the new textbooks were published and presented to schools. Among the different textbooks, English language textbooks were faced with significant changes regarding the materials, methods, and teaching principles.

Textbooks are influential tools that help students recognize and learn about society. Textbooks provide the means for achieving educational aims. Textbooks provide support for acquiring different levels and categories of knowledge. Among the elements of English Language Teaching (ELT) programs, textbooks are the main resources in reaching objectives (Litz, 2001, as cited in Rashidi & Kehtarfard, 2014). According to Riazi (2003, as cited in Razmjoo, 2007), "textbooks play a very crucial role in the realm of language teaching and learning and are considered the next important factor (*element*) [emphasis added] in the second/ foreign language classroom after the teacher" (p. 52).

Therefore, developing a new curriculum and corresponding textbooks is not an easy job. Each country has its own policy in curriculum development and in Iran most curricula are developed by principals and educational policy makers. However, even in a principals-made curriculum, the teachers' central role cannot be ignored. They play the vital role of implementing textbooks in the educational system.

In Iran, the Ministry of Education plans English language programs for public schools nationwide. The English textbooks are used by all students throughout the country as the only reliable resource available to the population.

Handler (2010) considered teachers as curriculum leaders, and Haberman (1992) named teachers as the most important actors in classrooms who had powerful influence on students' learning. In contrast with expressions such as "leader" or "important actor", in Iran, teachers are passive and their voices were not even considered by the Educational Department. As a result, the present study aims at analyzing the new textbooks from the teachers' point of view.

Literature Review

In non-English-speaking countries, EFL textbooks may have a huge impact on how future generations conceive the roles of English and their relationships with it as the language gains increasing importance in education systems. Rashidi and Safari (2010) developed a model for EFL materials within the framework of critical pedagogy. The model considers "the particularities of the local context and to the learner's problems and concerns. It offers ways to help the learners to improve their second language skills while developing a sense of critical consciousness of issues of social structures in the world around them" (p. 250).

However, according to teachers' views of multiple intelligences in Iranian English textbooks, Yeganeh and Bakhtiari (2014) declared that "either the multiple intelligences are not covered in the mentioned textbooks or they're poorly used in the textbooks" (p. 11).

Masoumpanah and Zarei (2014) analyzed English teachers' professional identity and investigated "how the notions of EIL interact with Iranian language teachers' identity" (p. 1100). The researchers found that teachers "had a strong sense of professional identity. They perceived that teaching English was a respectable job in Iranian society, and they felt that students and the management appreciate their contribution."(p. 1107)

In another study, Ramazani (2013) tried to find influencing factors of textbooks on teaching English. He mentioned that teachers' ideas are related to what happened within and beyond the classrooms.

Turkish teachers and students evaluated their English textbooks and raised some problems with the books. In this study, Tosun (2013) stated a need for materials adaptation.

In 2012, the new national curriculum in Iran was approved. Accordingly, the new textbooks were written and presented to the various entities in the education system. However, teachers' perceptions about the new textbooks have not been previously analyzed; therefore, this study was designed to fill this gap.

Research Questions

1. What are teachers' perceptions of the new English textbooks?
2. What factors facilitate or inhibit the implementation of the new English textbooks?

Methodology

Site

This study was conducted in an urban public school system in various cities of Iran including Ahwaz, Hamadan, Dezful, Abadan, Isfahan, Shiraz, Khoram Abad, and Yasouj. The reasons behind choosing these geographical areas were their proximity to the researcher's hometown, because of the researcher's connection to other teacher directors in other cities, and the researcher's connection to student teachers from other cities in Ahwaz. The schools under study are junior high schools, which include Grades 7, 8, and 9.

Participants

The population of this study was all English teachers implementing the Iranian national English language curriculum offered at the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades of public schools during the 2015-2016 school year.

Three-hundred and six English language teachers participated in the study: 254 of the participants were female and 52 were male. All of them were in-service teachers with different levels of education, teaching experience, and workplaces (urban or rural). Four-hundred English language teachers received the questionnaire based on the availability of their workplace to researchers; 94 teachers did not complete it.

Instrument

In relation to the purpose of the study, a questionnaire (based on an unpublished study) was administered to answer both research questions. It was made up of eight sections: general information, theoretical considerations, organizational features and practical considerations, content, skills, vocabulary, structure, and activities. The questionnaire concentrated on the textbooks, which had been changed after the national curriculum revisions. On the necessity scale, the participants were required to mark the options 1 (not necessary), 2 (almost necessary), 3 (necessary), or 4 (highly necessary). On the present condition scale, they were required to mark 1 (totally lacking), 2 (poor), 3 (adequate), 4 (good), or 5 (excellent). The reliability index was .96 for the necessity scale and .94 for the present condition scale.

Data Analysis

After participants completed and returned the questionnaire, the data were analyzed with SPSS 21. For the analysis, bar charts were drawn to see whether the differences between the necessity results and the present condition results were significant or not. Paired t-tests were also run to compare the two scales.

Results

In each part of the questionnaire, participants considered both the present condition and necessity of the current textbooks. Results of the eight sections are presented below.

General Information

This section consists of five subparts: teacher's manuals, student workbooks, audio files, video files, and assessment materials. To know if there is any difference between the present condition and necessity, paired samples statistics and correlations were analyzed. Results are presented in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1
Mean, Correlation, and t-Test of General Information

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig.	r	M
	M	SD	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference						
				Lower	Upper					
PC	-4.88	3.81	.226	-5.32	-4.44	-21.61	284	.000	-.115	9.65
NEC										14.53

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

As shown in Table 1, there was a big difference between the present condition's mean (9.65) and the necessities' mean (14.53). Their correlation was negative. Therefore, to know if their difference is significant, t-tests were calculated. As shown in Table 1, the significance for the paired t-test was .000, which is less than determined significance level ($p<.05$). As a result, there was a significant difference found between the current situation and necessary conditions.

Theoretical Condition

The second part of the questionnaire asked teachers about the new textbooks' aims and methodological considerations. The results are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Mean, Correlation, and t-Test of Theoretical Condition

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig.	r	M
	M	SD	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference						
				Lower	Upper					
PC	-2.75278	3.93396	.23941	-3.22414	-2.28142	-11.498	269	.000	-.096	8.6806
NEC										11.4333

As shown in Table 2, there is a difference between the present condition (M=8.6) and necessities (M=11.4) in Theoretical Condition. On the other hand, the correlation was negative. To reach a clear understanding, a t-test was run. The difference between the present condition and necessities was significant ($p<.05$).

Organizational Features

The third part of the questionnaire consisted of twelve subparts, which ask about the quality of books (e.g., its cover, size, and price) and its practical consideration (e.g., appendix, tables, references, and unit arrangement). The results are shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3
Mean, Correlation, and t-Test of Organizational Features

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig.	r	M
	M	SD	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference						
				Lower	Upper					
PC	-6.41338	7.66712	.50777	-7.41392	-5.41284	-12.631	227	.000	.074	32.6700.
NEC										39.0833.

As was shown in Table 3, the present condition's mean was 32.67, while the necessities' mean was 39.08. Moreover, the correlation was .07. These results were analyzed with a t- test which showed that the difference between the present condition and necessities was significant at the .05 level.

Content

The content section was made up of fourteen statements. Teachers' ideas are analyzed in Table 4.

TABLE 4
Mean, Correlation, and t-Test of Content

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig.	r	M
	M	SD	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference						
				Lower	Upper					
PC	-13.83302	9.77561	.64319	-15.10032	-12.56573	-21.507	230	.000	.080	33.6948
NEC										47.5278

Based on Table 4, there is a difference between the present condition's mean (33.69) and the necessities' mean (47.52). The correlation was .08. Therefore, a t-test was run to have a clearer understanding. As shown in Table 4, the t value is negative, and the difference was significant ($p<.05$). In other words, teachers found that the content of the new textbooks were not at the appropriate level for teaching students.

Skills

Activities and techniques in language learning based on the new textbooks were under question. Teachers chose their answers in both present conditions and necessities. Table 5 demonstrated the results.

TABLE 5
Mean, Correlation, and t-Test of Skills

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig.	r	M
	M	SD	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference						
				Lower	Upper					
PC	-9.75070	8.81404	.60393	-10.94118	-8.56023	-16.145	212	.000	.162	24.3197
NEC										34.0704

The difference between the means of the present conditions and necessities under the skills part of the questionnaire was nearly 10. Moreover, the correlation was .16. To further elaborate the result, a t-test was run. The t value showed that the difference between the present conditions and necessities was significant at the .05 level under the skills part of the questionnaire.

Vocabulary

How to present vocabulary items and the different techniques to learn them were the focus of the questions in this section. The results are shown in Table 6.

TABLE 6
Mean, Correlation, and t-Test of Vocabulary

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig.	r	M
	M	SD	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference						
				Lower	Upper					
PC	-7.23539	9.17808	.60387	-8.42522	-6.04556	-11.982	230	.000	-.227	18.5682
NEC										25.8036

Present conditions of the new textbooks concerning the vocabulary had a mean of 18.56, whereas the necessities' mean was 25.80. The result showed ta negative correlation between them (-.227). As shown in the result of the t-test, the difference between two subparts of vocabulary is significant. Therefore, a significant difference between the present conditions of vocabulary and necessities exists.

Structure

The structure part of the questionnaire is made up of eight statements. As was previously mentioned, in the teachers' view, the most problematic part of the new textbooks was structure. The results of their survey ratings are presented in Table 7.

TABLE 7
Mean, Correlation, and t-Test of Structure

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig.	r	M
	M	SD	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference						
				Lower	Upper					
PC	-10.77410	5.12117	.32454	-11.41330	-10.13489	-33.198	248	.000	-.259	15.4880
NEC										26.2620

Based on the results shown in Table 7, there was a big difference between present condition and necessities in the grammar part of the questionnaire. Furthermore, the correlation between the two subparts (present condition and necessities) was negative. A t-test was subsequently run to reach a clear understanding in this part. According to Table 7, there was a significant difference between present condition and necessity regarding grammar in the textbooks.

Activities

The last part of the questionnaire refers to six statements about activities. The results are presented in Table 8.

TABLE 8
Mean, Correlation, and t-Test of Activities

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig.	r	M
	M	SD	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference						
				Lower	Upper					
PC	-5.95019	5.71004	.35344	-6.64617	-5.25422	-16.835	260	.000	.145	13.1628
NEC										19.1130

The Present condition's mean for activities was 13.16, while the necessities' mean was 19.11. As shown in the result of a t-test, a significant difference was found between the present condition and necessities for the activities in the textbooks.

Discussion and Conclusion

The questionnaire was made up of eight parts: general information, theoretical consideration, organizational features and practical considerations, content, skills, vocabulary, structure, and activities. Each part had two sections, necessities and present condition. Each part was analyzed separately, and means, correlations, and t-tests were presented.

In the first part of questionnaire, results showed that there was a gap between the present condition and necessities. This section contained questions about guidance, students' workbooks, and multimedia files. The results showed that the present condition of the new text books were not acceptable based on the teachers' perceptions.

The theoretical considerations items, which elicited teachers' opinions about goals and methods, were again found insufficient by the teachers. A negative correlation and a difference in means supported it.

The third part, organizational features and practical considerations, investigated the new textbooks features, such as its size, price, visual format, appendices, and references. The result of this part is in line with the earlier ones, showing that the difference between necessities and present condition means was

significant.

The content of the book was surveyed through 14 items on the questionnaire. It was found that this was the lowest-rated part of the book as per the teachers' perspectives. It asked about students' needs, authentic materials, subjects, diversity of abilities, culture, and language of the books. The result of this part of the study showed that teachers do not have positive views toward the new textbooks and that they believe that there is a big difference between the present condition and the necessities.

Regarding language skills, the fifth part of the survey, teachers found that that the new textbooks do not contain a balance of activities among language skills and learner strategies. This is troubling considering that the mismatch of language skills was one of the main reasons to change the prior textbooks.

Vocabulary and structure, the sixth and seventh parts, garnered the most negative views. The vocabulary section asked for the frequency of lexical items, their contextual presentation, and whether there was enough vocabulary practice included in the textbooks. The grammar section inquired about the load of grammar in each unit, the contextual presentation of these grammar items, whether or not the explanation was clear, and whether or not there were enough grammar exercises. However, both parts showed a big difference between necessities and present condition means.

The last part of the survey asked about the activities in the textbook, for example, if they supported meaningful and communicative language learning. It was in line with the other parts of the textbook analysis. In other words, a significant difference was found between the present condition and necessities means for textbook activities.

As the results of the questionnaire showed, there was a significant difference between present condition and perceived necessities. This study revealed that despite changes in the new textbooks, the new package is unsatisfactory to content teachers and that they believe that the new textbooks need revisions. The results of this study were similar to results from Gunal and Engin-Demir (2012), who questioned the new textbooks in Turkey.

Litz (2005) analyzed Korean textbooks and reached different results, such as the suitability of books for universities' aims and the raising of students' interest. At the end, he stated that textbooks can be effective "in the hands of a good teacher and instructor" (p. 34).

The new textbooks were written based on the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach and CEFR guidelines. CLT emphasizes the development and growth of students' communicative competence in the target language. Although CLT has been recognized as a successful approach for English teaching by both researchers and teachers (e.g., Lee & Van Pattern, 1995; Yalden, 1987), and has been widely accepted as a dominant language teaching approach (Kachru, 1992; Phillipson, 1992), difficulties with applying CLT have been identified because of standardized testing, time allocation, and other cultural factors (Anderson, 1993; Burnaby & Son, 1989; Gorsuch, 2000).

While the new textbook packages provided workbooks, audio files, and teachers' guides – items lacking with the prior textbooks – the teachers' responses indicated dissatisfaction despite these added new materials. Time, as in contact hours, is the most critical obstacle to the new curriculum, mentioned several times by participants. The problem will be more serious when the time allotment is reduced from two 90-minute classes a week down to one. Teachers objected to the educational department and declared that with the changes there will be no place for real communication and activities in class.

Moreover, materials that could be used for presenting skills were not proper and balanced. *Prospect 3,* a book which possesses a heavy load of grammar, is the book that most teachers objected the most heavily to. In *Prospect 3*, each lesson has two English grammar parts with different subjects.

Teachers believe that if the problems concerning time are solved, then they can manage to implement the new textbooks. Otherwise, the grammar sections will still cause problems and teachers will face difficulties in handling them. Most participants in this study had negative perspectives toward the new textbooks. In addition, they stated that according to the reduced time allotment, the lack of destination culture, and the materials load, no improvement can be gained by implementing these new textbooks.

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