



Primary School English Teachers' Perceptions of the Teacher Educator-Created English Textbook: The Case of Indonesia

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Introduction

In English language teaching (ELT) contexts, language textbooks play an important role in mediating students' language learning inside and outside of the classroom (Setyono & Widodo, 2019). A language textbook can also help language teachers organize and enact their teaching practices (Cunningsworth, 1995). While language teachers may find textbooks helpful in guiding their classroom practices (Underwood, 2010), they still need to know what students need to learn (Ghosn, 2017). For this reason, selecting, adapting, and designing textbooks can be a catalyst for implementing meaningful language instruction. It is no wonder that language textbooks become a guide for many language teachers around the globe. When no mandated language textbooks are available, teacher-created language textbooks become of great concern. This happens to teaching English to young learners (TEYL) in primary schooling where language teachers need to create their own textbooks or rely on available published textbooks that may not suit their teaching contexts (Copland, Garton, & Burns, 2013; Lestariyana & Widodo, 2018).

In the literature of language materials development (Tomlinson, 2017; Widodo & Savova, 2010), a myriad of studies into language materials evaluation and design has been undertaken. However, little empirical evidence reports language materials development designed for young learners of English (primary schools). For example, in English for young learners (EYL) textbook evaluation, prior research examined the representation of gender (Gebregeorgis, 2016), the presentation of content- and process-based reading skills (Jones, 2012), and the infusion of cultural values into EYL textbooks (Perfecto & Paterno, 2018). Another study by Lestariyana and Widodo (2018) investigated the use of digital stories in which both teachers and students co-created classroom materials (see also Widodo, 2016). Despite the existence of prior research on EYL materials development, primary school teachers' perceptions of

teacher educator-created textbooks remain under-explored. To fill this empirical gap, the present case study aims to explore in-service EYL teachers' perceptions of the teacher educator-created textbook used to teach young learners of English throughout Indonesia. The contribution of the present study is to provide empirical evidence detailing what textbook features should be taken into account when designing and adapting EYL textbooks. In this respect, teachers-as-textbook-users' perspectives can be the basis for further EYL textbook development. This suggests that language teachers are seen as individuals who are capable of assessing textbooks.

The Study

The present study investigated teachers' perceptions of the English language textbook used in primary schooling in Indonesia. It is important to note that since the enactment of the 2013 Curriculum, English is not part of the primary school curriculum because primary schools can offer English as an optional or co-curricular subject (see Hawanti, 2014; Sulistiyo, Haryanto, Widodo, & Elyas, 2019). For this reason, EYL teachers have to design their own textbooks or adapt/adopt available published textbooks. The current study was situated in a larger design-based study that examined EYL materials development in which one of the authors served as an EYL materials developer and consultant as well as mentor who conducted a series of workshops on EYL materials development intended for primary school teachers who taught English. Following the design of the teacher educator-created textbook, we conducted a textbook evaluation that involved 27 in-service EYL teachers (female = 24, male = 3, 30-50 years old, 5-25 years of teaching experience). With permission, the teacher participants were invited to assess the textbook entitled *English for an Elementary School Grade VI* published in late 2018. The textbook comprises 12 topics and has 144 pages, including the teacher's guide and bibliographies.

Prior to data collection, the participants were given a chance to closely read the textbook over a span of one month before they used it in class. This was called a pre-use textbook evaluation. They were then requested to complete the questionnaire used as a guide that helped the participants analyze the textbook. Using a Likert-scale evaluation (with responses ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree), the teacher participants analyzed six aspects of the textbook, including topics, activities, instructions, illustrations, content, and assessment. These aspects were drawn from a learner-centered curriculum perspective, which embraces three essential domains: the experiential domain, the learning process domain, and the language content domain (see Nunan, 2012). The data were presented in the form of a bar chart showing the percentage of the participants' responses. Following the submission of the questionnaire, the participating teachers were invited to attend a focus group interview in order to share their evaluation of the textbook in depth. They were also told to complete a consent form that confirmed their voluntary participation in the interview phase. Each of the interviews lasted 20-30 minutes. The data collected were thematically analyzed. Following Gibson and Brown (2009), the thematic analysis could be used as a tool to see "commonalities, relationships and differences across a data set" (p. 127). Thus, the vignettes or the data presented in this case study report were selected by considering how the data showed similar voices and the relationship between participants' responses (see Widodo, 2014).

Findings

Drawing on the questionnaire and interview data, the present study explores the perceptions of English teachers regarding the English textbook used in Indonesian primary schools. In particular, it looks into how the English teachers evaluated the textbook in terms of these parameters: topics, activities, instructions, illustrations, content, and assessment of the textbook. The findings are presented based on these six categories.

Topic as a Point of Departure: Relevancy and Contextuality

To begin with, the teachers were asked about the topic selection of the textbook. Figure 1 shows 27 teacher participants' responses to the topic selection of the textbook. 19 participants (70%) agreed that the topics of the textbook were carefully selected while 8 participants (30%) strongly agreed that the topics in the textbook were relevant to the context of teaching EYL and to the pupils' characteristics. In other words, the majority of the teacher participants reported that the selection of the topics in the English textbook used in primary schooling would meet their teaching needs and expectations.

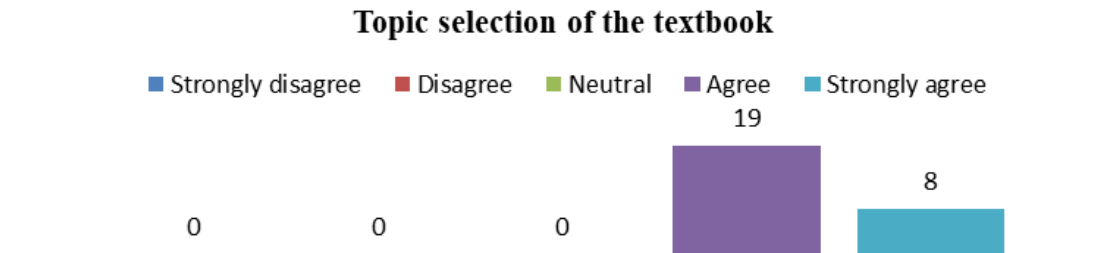


Figure 1. Topic selection of the textbook.

In addition to the data in Figure 1, the teacher participants were required to provide reasons for their responses to the questionnaire question. Here are the teacher participants' responses to the topic selection of the textbook regarding how the topics were relevant to their teaching context (EYL).

Interview Excerpts # 1

Participant 1

Basically, the topics were good, but they should include thematic materials, such as seasons from different parts of the world because this topic was only taught in science and social science subjects in Grade 6.

Participant 9

The topics in this textbook are relevant to the students' age because the materials introduce students to learner and one else's personality, understanding the surroundings, daily activities, well-beings, making a personal comparison, and understanding time.

Participant 10

The topics in the textbook are mainly relevant and integrated. Lesson 1 discusses learners' personality. Lesson 2 talks about things around pupils. Lesson 3 addresses the profession. Lesson 4 discusses things around pupils. Lesson 12 talks about time. All in all, the topics are mutually complementing.

Participant 16

The topics are relevant to students' age. However, they had better be integrated with the materials presented in other subjects as stipulated in the 2013 Curriculum.

The participants' responses suggest that the English teachers were aware that the topics of the EYL textbook should meet students' learning needs and be relevant to their pupils' age. To see how the topics are relevant, the teachers suggested taking a critical look at whether the topics are stipulated in the curriculum. The selection of topics in the design of language textbooks should consider two parameters: relevancy (what pupils need to learn) and contextuality (what pupils really experience in real-life situations). Thus, teachers should select contextually-relevant and culturally-sensitive topics to encourage students to engage more actively in language learning because topics can be the point of departure for building pupils' content knowledge and for making English lessons more meaningful and engaging.

Activity: Scaffolding Learner's Language Learning

In terms of activity design, most of the teacher participants shared opinions about the activities presented in the textbook. Figure 2 shows that while 18 participants (67%) out of 27 agreed that the activities presented might support the goal of the language learning, 9 participants (33%) strongly agreed that the activities could facilitate language learning.

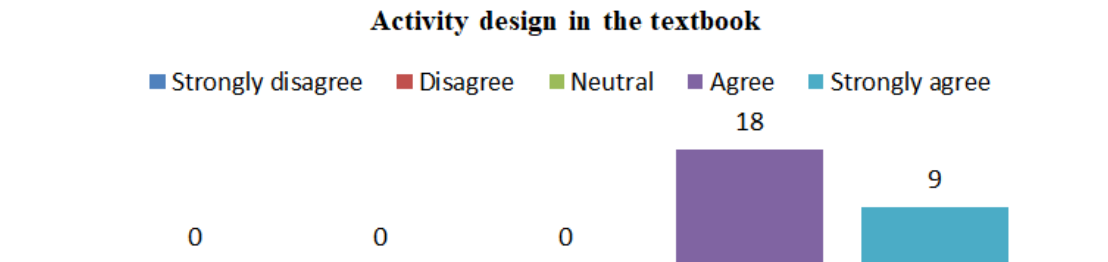


Figure 2. Activity design in the textbook.

To elaborate on this empirical evidence, the following interview excerpts paint a picture of teacher participants' voices regarding the activity design in the English textbook used in Indonesian primary schools.

Interview Excerpts # 2

Participant 1

The activities designed may support the language learning because they contain conversation-based activities that help students engage in meaning-making activities in English.

Participant 4

The activities in the textbook could help students to improve their English as the foundational skill in order to prepare them for English learning in secondary school.

Participant 9

The activities can engage pupils in a simple conversation about their neighborhood. The pupils may have the opportunity to talk about things around them.

Participant 25

Learning activities presented in the textbook may guide students to practice their English independently so that pupils could be autonomous learners.

From a teacher perspective, the activities in the textbook should be designed to encourage learner autonomy. Learner autonomy could be formed through teacher scaffolding and instructional scaffolding. In this respect, teachers can play a role as a facilitator who can guide pupils in doing particular learning activities. Learning activities can mediate pupils language learning in which pupils should be socialized into easier learning activities that prepare them for more difficult or complex learning tasks. This will help pupils build not only foundational skills but also other language skills useful for further language learning. More importantly, activities included in EYL textbooks should be authentic in terms of what pupils experience in real-life communicative contexts.

Learning Instructions: Bridging Pupils' Engagement with Learning Materials (Tasks)

The teacher participants were further asked about learning instructions or prompts. Figure 3 shows the teacher participants' responses to the learning instructions design of the textbook. While 17 participants (63%) agreed that learning instructions in the textbook were clearly formulated, 10 participants (27%) strongly agreed that they were well-designed to bridge pupils' engagement with learning materials (activities).

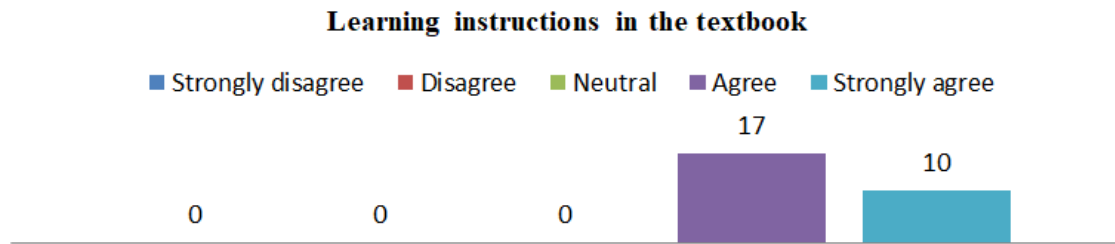


Figure 3. Learning instructions in the textbook.

These data were supported by the following interview data.

Interview Excerpts # 3

Participant 1

The instructions are easy to understand even without teacher's explanations. The language used as the medium of instruction may be familiar with students' level of language proficiency.

Participant 4

The instructions used in this textbook could help students follow learning activities easily. Additionally, the instructions possibly allow teachers to design or create interesting learning activities that could help attain learning goals.

Participant 10

The language instructions used in this textbook are very easy to understand because they contain simple vocabularies, such as: "Look at the picture;" "let's read, read and sing;" and "let's speak." All the instructions comprise simple sentences that emotionally help students engage more in learning than the use of commands.

Participant 14

The instructions may match students' level of language proficiency which guides pupils in doing learning activities and exercises.

As the data in Interview Excerpts #3 show, the teacher participants recounted that the learning instructions design could mediate student learning. These instructions were also pupil-friendly because of the use of simple language which could help pupils understand what to do. Thus, pupils can carry out activities with or without a teacher guide. In this respect, teachers may reinforce learning instructions to encourage pupils to do activities in an engaging way. The teacher participants also reported that learning prompts which use simple linguistic resources might help them design the learning tasks. As Weninger and Kiss (2013) argue, in designing textbooks, learning instructions are supposed to guide a meaning-making process and should be explicitly written to mediate students' language learning.

The Power of Illustrations in the Textbook

As regards the use of visual texts, Figure 4 shows the teacher participants' perceptions of to which extent the use of illustrations could support language learning. 21 teacher participants (78%) agreed that illustrations might help students learn English while 6 participants (22%) strongly agreed that illustrations could mediate students' engagement in the meaning-making process. In other words, the illustrations presented in the textbook could become a powerful meaning-making tool in language learning.

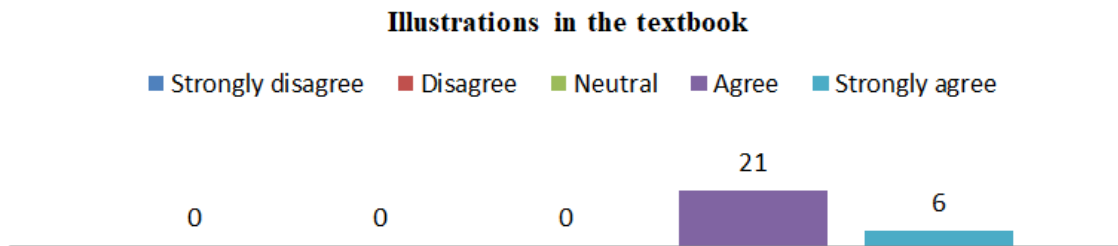


Figure 4. The use of illustrations in the textbook.

In order to explore more perceptions of the participants regarding the use of illustrations in the textbook, the following interview data complement the questionnaire data.

Interview Excerpts # 4

Participant 4

The illustrations or the images are interesting, complete, and clear that may help motivate students to learn English. Usually, learners are more enthusiastic if they see interesting and colorful pictures. Furthermore, the illustrations used in the textbook are very good that may assist students in understanding the language.

Participant 8

In my opinion, the illustrations in the textbook serve not only as decorative icons but also as a pedagogical tool that may help students make meaning of the instructions and language. The pictures can also reflect the theme that helps avoid ambiguity. Students could also learn from the pictures which reinforce what the textbook teaches.

Participant 10

The illustrations used in the textbook are so good that they can explain the topic as well as text. They may help attract students’ attention while they are learning the language. The use of the illustrations also portrays daily activities that most of the students do. This may stimulate the development of students’ motivation in learning.

Participant 17

In general, the illustrations used in the textbook are good but let me correct the image of the shoes used on Page 3. I would suggest that it had better use the picture of kid shoes. Furthermore, the placement setting of the picture should be adjusted on Page 30 where there was a picture of a stove which was on over the picture of kid’s head (see Figure 5).

The majority of the teachers found the images used in the textbook motivating, interesting, and contextual. In addition, they argued that the use of illustrations might help students make meaning of the language and experience language learning through visuals. As Stranger-Johannessen (2014) emphasize, images play an important role “[in yielding] connotation and associations” (p. 11). In spite of this, the teachers encouraged future textbook writers to consider the placement setting of the pictures to avoid students’ misinterpretation and ambiguity (e.g., see Figure 5). Grounded in a semiotic approach, Weninger and Kiss (2013) contend that potential meaning drawn from a task, text, and an image is used to reinforce a denotational meaning that influences students’ interpretation skills.

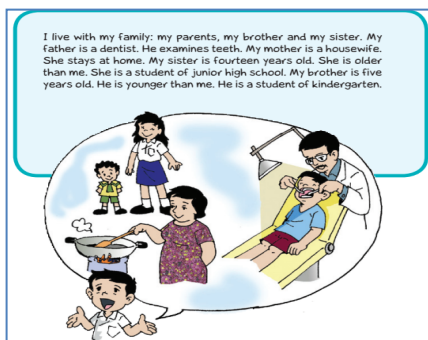


Figure 5. Example of picture setting misplacement.

Content: The Core of Material Designs

Drawing from the results of the questionnaire analysis, Figure 6 indicates that most of the teacher participants (96%) agreed that the content of the textbook might help improve students’ knowledge while 1 participant (4%) strongly agreed that the content of the textbook could support language learning. This means that the content materials designed in the textbook may facilitate both students’ knowledge improvement and language learning.

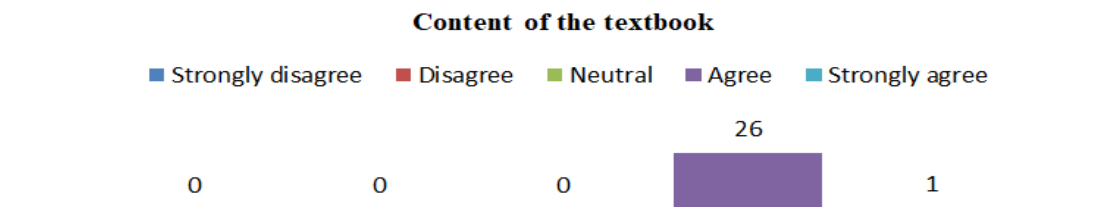


Figure 6. Content of the textbook.

The teacher participants’ response to this questionnaire question item is enriched by the following interview data:

Interview Excerpts # 5

Participant 10

The textbook covers good learning materials relevant to student’s language level. The students are guided to learn through activities that encourage them to listen, speak, write, and read as seen from learning instructions: On Page 100, let’s speak together with the image and dialog useful to improve students’ speaking repertoire.

Participant 12

The coverage of learning materials in the textbook is relevant to the theme or topic provided. The content of learning materials is also relevant to students’ learning needs and may help develop pupils’ language skills.

Participant 24

The textbook contains a great number of learning materials that are useful in developing pupils’ knowledge. The learning materials are also presented in a simple but meaningful way to enrich pupils’ lived experiences.

It can be seen that the majority of the teachers reported that the textbook being evaluated comprised of interesting and meaningful learning materials that could help students use their background knowledge to make meaning from different semiotic modes such as a text and an image (see Figure 7). The interplay of a text, images, and a context framed in pedagogical tasks will encourage students’ learning engagement in a meaningful way (Weninger & Kiss, 2013). Moreover, pupils can be extremely interested in visual texts inasmuch as this type of text can help them understand the materials presented in the textbook.

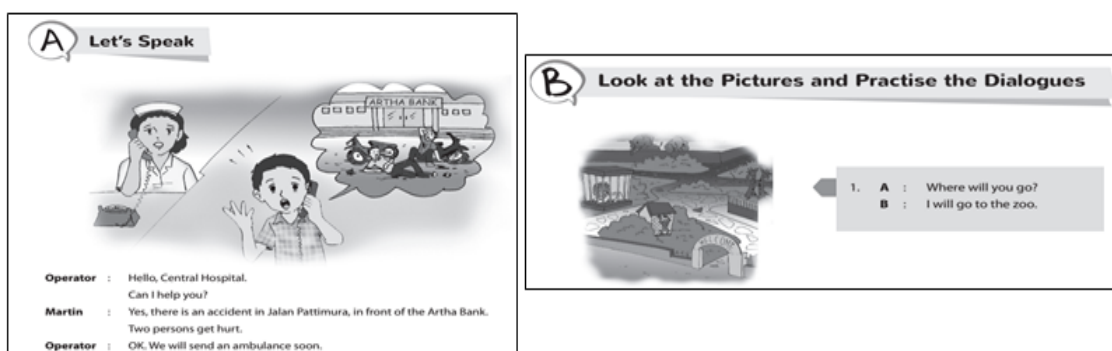


Figure 7. Content of the textbook.

Assessment: A Reflective Task

The final analysis of the textbook explores whether the textbook provided students with reflective tasks. Figure 8 shows more critical responses compared to the other five categories under analysis. In this survey, 15 teacher participants (56%) chose a neutral option to express their preference. While 10 participants (37%) agreed that the textbook provided students with reflective tasks, the other two participants (3%) chose the strongly agree option. It can be implied that more teacher participants expected the textbook writer to include more reflective activities in the textbook.

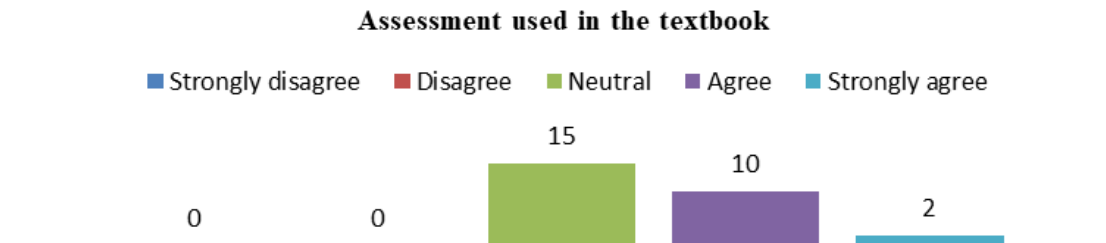


Figure 8. Assessment in the textbook.

To support the questionnaire result, the following interview data elaborate the teacher participants’ voices. The teacher participants’ neutral option also indicates a more extensive choice of testing formats (other than multiple choice questions). For this reason, the teachers suggested the design of reflective tasks.

Interview Excerpts # 6

Participant 1

I would suggest that the textbook is completed with a deeper reflective task. I think that the textbook only teaches students reading comprehension exercises with multiple choice options. This may be important, but I would hope students can reflect on what they have learned in the chapter so that they understand their strengths and weaknesses

Participant 2

I think the textbook writer may want to invite students to do reflection in Chapter 7. In the previous chapters, the textbook writer closes the lesson by providing students with a song related to the theme. It means that the textbook writer should engage students in reflective activities simultaneously not partly.

Participant 20

The reflection is given in the textbook which tries to contextualize pupil experience, for example On Page 98 (see Figure 9). However, I personally think that it does not really encourage students’ critical reflection because the questions only relate the language learning topics relevant to student’s life.

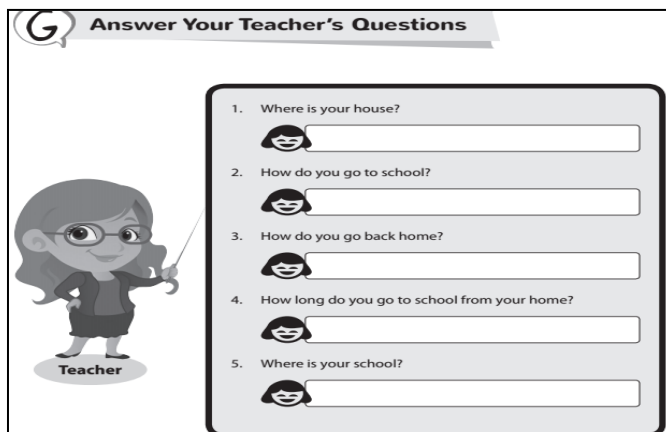


Figure 9. Assessment of what students have learned

As the interview data show, the teacher participants stressed on the importance of reflective tasks in the textbook as the tasks may help students become reflective beings. They felt that the textbook was actually well-written, but they expected that the textbook writer could provide students with more reflective activities so that students could see the end of a chapter/lesson unit as a means of understanding what they have learned instead of a way of judging what they can do. Breathnach, Danby, and O’Gorman (2017) recommend activities that promote critical and reflective thinking.

Conclusion

The present study has reported the primary school English teachers’ perceptions of the English textbook situated within the Indonesian context. We found that the participating teachers argued that a topic, activity, instructions, illustrations, content, and assessment play a pivotal role in the design of EYL textbooks. This empirical evidence has three main implications for future EYL textbook development. First, textbook writers need to consider contextual, familiar, and interesting learning topics that encourage students’ learning engagement. Second, pupil-friendly language use and learning instructions presented through linguistic resources such as texts and images should be deployed as a springboard for scaffolding the development of students’ content and language knowledge and skills. Third, the teacher participants suggest that reflective tasks can be included in the textbook so as to allow students to understand not only lesson content and knowledge but also their learning experience. This preliminary textbook evaluation study can be a catalyst for investigating whether any mismatch occurs between learners’ and teachers perspectives of EYL textbooks created by teacher educators/experts because both teachers and learners become “textbook assessors who see any English textbooks as both knowledge and value agents” (Widodo, 2018, p. 132).

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