



An Evaluation of the English Textbook “Four Corners, Level 2”: A Study at Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology

Tran Tan Phat^a, Bui Thu Hien^b

English Language Studies

^aNguyen Tat Thanh University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

^bHo Chi Minh University of Technology, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55248/genpi.4.923.92506>

ABSTRACT

The present study aims to explore the thoughts of teachers and non-English learners about the course book ‘Four Corners, Level 2’ used in non-English majored language classrooms at Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology (HUTECH) and investigate the learner needs. The evaluation is conducted based on data collected from 10 teachers and 250 students at the Center for Informatics – Foreign Languages – Skill in the form of questionnaires and interviews. The authors use questionnaires to collect participants' responses to five main categories including Overall Assessments, Aim and Approach, Language Skills and Language Contents, Design and Organization, and Learner Needs. Then, the authors use SPSS software to analyze and evaluate the results. The results show that most of the teachers thought that the textbook would meet the student’s needs and the curriculum aims and approaches, and could be suitable to the classroom and working environment.

Keywords: *Textbook, Textbook evaluation, Four Corners, HUTECH*

I. INTRODUCTION

English has experienced over the course of nearly 1,500 years in its development since the 5th century. Until the second half of the 20th century, English was examined as a foreign or second language in several countries, becoming the controlling language in different parts of the world. According to Richard (2001), the textbook is one of the main components in each language classroom. Recently, while researchers have shown an increased interest in studies related to the roles of English language teachers and learners as well as teaching and learning methodologies which are believed to support teachers and learners in fulfilling educational aims, a primary concern of a quality and suitable textbook is also considered as a more successful strategy to create effectiveness in language teaching and learning process.

Although textbook is written by people being professional in their fields and used internationally, it is not suitable for all conditions. There are two different types of learners who are studying at Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology (HUTECH) involving language majors and non-language majors. With non-language major learners, they are required to take English courses during their four years of study. Administratively, among many international English textbooks published and being available in the markets, the “Four Corners” series is suggested to be used as the main course book for those who study English as a school requirement during six semesters. The “Four Corners” series was initially written in 2013 by Richards and Bohlke and published by Cambridge University Press. It comprises four series for both English as a foreign and second language learners from basic to intermediate levels. Specifically, in school, the “Four Corners, Level 2” is used to teach classes for non-English majors.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

It is difficult to provide an exact definition of the textbook. Different researchers have offered different definitions based on the way and the context the textbook is used. For instance, according to Sheldon (1988, as cited in Khodadady & Karami, 2017), a textbook is a book used by learners to increase their ability in linguistic and communicative aspects, whereas it is one of the useful materials for teachers in teaching their learners (Tomlinson, 2011). In the meantime, Hutchinson and Torres (1994) suggest the definition of the textbook as a guide to help teachers in their teaching process as well as support to review of knowledge of learners. In another development, Cunningsworth (1995) seems to offer a more specific definition which involves several aspects. To illustrate, regarding the teachers, Cunningsworth (1995) defines the textbook as the effective source for pre-service teachers, building up the confidence when they make their lesson plans. In learners’ turn, the textbook is also defined as the map reference to provide learners with suggested topics and activities for their self-study learning. Specifically, for administrators, the textbook looks like a syllabus that represents course objectives. In general, though several definitions of the textbook are offered, they have the same feature that the textbook is a source material for both teachers and learners in their teaching and learning process and the role of the textbook may be flexible over the period of time and due to different instructional methodologies applying in the class (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

During the past and present eras, the textbook plays several roles in English language teaching curricula and in classrooms where teachers and learners are two main elements. Back in the 1980s, the textbook gained less attention though it was considered as the nature of English language courses (Sheldon, 1988, as cited in Khodadady & Karami, 2017). Moreover, the textbook was developed by a group of authorities so that they assessed legal validity, improving the capacities of learners in the aspects of linguistics and communication. According to O'Neill (1982, as cited in Gholami et al., 2017), it was believed that the textbook helped learners save time and expenses in their learning situation as well. With regard to the vast and fascinating subjects contented in the textbook, learners did not have to spend a large amount of time and at their expense for searching information, leading to a focus on acquiring systematically and logically the knowledge in the textbook related to language and skills.

In the next decades, the textbook and its roles have received more consideration in the English language teaching and learning process. It is the resource and guide for teachers and learners to follow (Harmer, 1991; Asher, 1994). First and foremost, the textbook has provided significant language inputs (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994) including worthwhile ideas and suggested activities to support teachers in planning lessons, which will be delivered in their language classrooms (Richards, 2001). As regards the learners, they have also obtained benefits from prepared texts represented in the textbook. Through the systematic and coherent design of the textbook, learners seem to have a general overview of what and how they are going to learn. Similarly, new methods are formally introduced in the textbook as useful guides so that teachers, in particular inexperienced teachers, can determine how they should give the lessons in efficient ways. In addition, rational approaches are recommended in order to encourage learners in their self-study learning condition. They rely on these approaches and the contents of the textbook to consider how the language and skills should be learnt, suiting their educational needs.

III. METHODOLOGY

In the study, for the purposes of investigating teachers' and learners' opinions and exploring the strengths and weaknesses of the textbook *Four Corners, Level 2*, the mixed methods research is adopted to obtain both numerical and non-numerical data. Moreover, as noted by Creswell (2014), the study purposes are fully addressed when these two types of research are parallelly conducted. Quantitative data are gathered through questionnaires delivered to teachers and learners, while interviews with the same participants are conducted to collect qualitative data. The connection of the two types of data can provide a clearer and more detailed understanding of teachers' and learners' views on the course book. Moreover, the results of the questionnaire as well as the responses of the interview which are compared allow for both inductive and deductive thinking (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) of teachers and learners in addressing the advantages and disadvantages of the textbook.

The research is conducted at HUTECH. The university was founded on April 26th, 1995 based on Decision No. 235 / TTg signed by the Prime Minister. Then, it was put into operation on June 24th, 1995 based on Decision No. 2128/GD-DT signed by the Minister of MoET. Regarding more than 25 years of establishment and development, it owns five campuses located in different areas of Ho Chi Minh city, which are well-equipped and modern to bring learners a globalized education environment and professional administrators and staffs and over 1000 regular lecturers who hold high academic titles and degrees. In addition, HUTECH offers diverse undergraduate and postgraduate training programs both in language and non-language fields, preparing learners for success to serve the socio-economic development and modernization – industrialization of Vietnam.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

IV.1. Results

Research Question 1: The learners and teachers at HUTECH think about the textbook '*Four Corners, Level 2*'.

The first research question aimed to explore what lecturers and students thought about *Four Corners, Level 2* with respect to five main categories such as (1) Overall Assessments, (2) Aims and Approaches, (3) Language Skills and Language Contents, (4) Design and Organization and (5) Learner Needs. For this research question, quantitative data were used for analysis. In order to answer this research question, item 1 to item 45 from the questionnaire was used for the analysis. The quantitative was processed by using the SPSS, version 22.0.

Research Question 2: The appropriateness of the textbook '*Four Corners, Level 2*' in relation to the school curriculum and teaching and learning objectives identified by the learners and teachers at HUTECH.

The results showed that most of the teachers thought that the textbook would meet the student's needs and the curriculum aims and approaches and could be suitable for the classroom and working environment. After finishing the course with this textbook, students can use vocabulary, basic grammar structures and language for communication targets with foreigners, reading English materials, taking English tests, developing their knowledge in the English learning process, and getting good jobs in international companies later. In addition, with regard to language skills, students are capable of enhancing necessary listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills.

IV.2. Discussion

According to Richards (2001), learner needs in learning a language, particularly English, are known as what learners will be able to do with that language at the end of the course. There are several kinds of the needs in learning English of learners.

Communication

First and foremost, communication, generally, is an important skill for people as it is the means by which they can share their ideas, information, opinions and feelings. More specifically, according to Nishanthi (2018), communication in English is one of the most necessary skills in today's world as it is not denied that, English has become the most common language worldwide. There is an increase in the number of learners who are trying to learn English in the world and one of the main reasons for them to learn English; therefore, is that they need to communicate at an international level (Srinivas, 2019). Furthermore, they want to become a global citizen. Indeed, when learning English, learners can develop four important skills including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Regarding speaking and writing skills, these two skills allow learners to communicate easily with other people from different countries around the world.

Education

Secondly, having been placed in the context of globalization, several educational leaders in different countries created the new curriculum design in which English is considered a compulsory subject (Lestari, 2003), especially at the tertiary level. Therefore, some learners who learn English need to get average scores for completing their studies at school. Otherwise, the need of the learners is not only to get high scores for their studying, but need to access a large amount of the learning and suggested learning materials, that are written in the English language to broaden their majored knowledge. Besides, several learners who want to learn English need to take different tests such as IELTS or TOEFL because they are going to study abroad. English or these certificates, in particular, are very important factors when it comes to studying abroad.

Occupation

Thirdly, in the globalization era, learners recognize the importance of English so their learning needs to make efforts to increase their English competence to enter a qualified global workforce in the future. Indeed, it is thought that having a good understanding and communication in English will provide learners with more chances to apply for good jobs (Nishanthi, 2018) after graduating from university because recent years, several international companies and organizations have been established and operated. Furthermore, it offers greater opportunities for them as these international companies and organizations not only tend to hire their professional employees, but also are willing to pay employers high salaries if they are good at comprehension and have the ability to use English in communication to express their thoughts at work, regardless of their well-educated major competence.

Travelling

Fourthly, it is said that English is the international language of communication for travellers, no matter where they come from. This leads to some learners who are trying to study English for the need of travelling worldwide. Firstly, as a traveler, it is believed that having known English can support them quickly and easily perform tasks while travelling individually instead of depending on tour guides including booking tickets and accommodation. Furthermore, as English is regarded as the basis for communication between people of different countries, it will make travellers more confident when they interact with local people to get to know and enjoy the lifestyle of the local people. More importantly, they can make friends with other travellers who share the same experiences in taking time to explore new places around the world.

Entertainment

Last but not least, nowadays, many learners need to learn English because they want to access a huge amount of entertainment. In fact, several well-known films and songs are produced and published in English. Though they are translated into various languages, their original meaning may be changed. If learners study English, they will enjoy and have cultural understanding as the authors intend without relying on translations or subtitles. Besides, they can easily read many newspapers and books written in English that are available on the Internet for relaxing.

V. CONCLUSIONS

When doing surveys, the selection of participants poses some limitations. The participants were beginners in the Four Corners 2 curriculum, however, some of them may have studied English before, and the selection of students and teachers participating in the survey and the interview was based on randomness: it was not selected according to their ability. Therefore, the results may not be completely accurate for all students and teachers. The participants in the survey and interview had different levels of English, so conflicting results were inevitable. When conducting the interviews, the participants gave good results about the curriculum and avoided saying the book's incompleteness. In addition, the interviewees did not have enough time to recall the entire content of the textbook, so the results were not very satisfactory.

Elementary-level textbooks are not easy to evaluate because of the lack of communication activities, short readings, limited vocabulary and language, small listening sessions, little information, and short writing. In this study, the findings and implications were drawn from the data collected from the participants in a setting at HUTECH, and in the complicated post-Covid-19 epidemic context, the results from this study have many limitations and need additional data to increase the reliability of this study.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to express my deepest gratitude to Ms Bui Thu Hien, my colleague, for her patience, insightful advice, and constant encouragement throughout the whole research process. Without her support, this study would never have been completed. Next, we are also really grateful to all lecturers for their helpful instruction as well as the staff of the Center for Informatics – Foreign Languages – Skill at Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology

for their kind assistance. We would like to thank the students who gave us a lot of sincere advice and shared with us a lot of knowledge, and learning experiences and helped us in the process of gathering data for analysis. Without their help, we think we could never have been completed this research.

References

- Creswell, J.W., & Plano Clark, V.L. (2011). *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications, Los Angeles.
- Creswell, J.W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks. London: Sage Publications.
- Cunningsworth, A. (1995). *Choosing your Coursebook*. Oxford: Heinemann.
- Harmer, J. (1991). *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (New Edition). New York: Longman.
- Hutchinson, T. & Torres, E. (1994). The textbook as an agent. *ELT Journal*, 48(4), 315–328.
- Khodadady, E., & Karami, M. (2017). An evaluation of textbooks designed for advanced English learners within a foreign context: A critical thinking perspective. *Porta Linguarum*, 28, 95–109.
- McGrath, I. (2002). *Materials Evaluation and Design for Language Teaching*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Mukundan, J. (2004). Making textbook evaluation meaningful. *ELT Matters*, 2, 105–113.
- Nazeer, M., Sha, S.K., & Sarwat, Z. (2015). Evaluation of Oxon English textbook used in Pakistan public schools for 6th and 7th grade. *Journal for the Study of English Linguistics*, 3(1), 51–79.
- Nishanthi, R. (2018). The Importance of Learning English in Today World. *International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development*, 3, 871-874.
- Papajani, J. (2015). The evaluation of the EFL textbooks used in the high schools of Elbasan, Albania. *European Journal of Language and Literature Studies*, 1(1), 7–15.
- Richards, J. C. (2001). *The Role of Textbooks in a Language Program*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, C. J. & Rodgers, T. S. (2001). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tok, H. (2010). TEFL textbook evaluation: From teachers' perspectives. *Educational Research and Review*, 5(9), 508–517.
- Tomlinson, B. (2011). *Materials development in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press