



COURSEBOOK EVALUATION FROM STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES: A CASE STUDY OF AN ENGLISH COURSEBOOK USED AT A VIETNAMESE COLLEGE

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Abstract:

Evaluating coursebooks has always been an important process affecting the selection and implementation of coursebooks. The coursebook evaluation can be conducted before, while and after a coursebook is employed for a specific course. While the benefits of coursebook evaluation are recognized, recently published coursebooks are not evaluated properly in some contexts. The present study was designed to gain college students' evaluation of a new coursebook recently used for their general English course and their recommendations for the editorial board. The findings led to the conclusion that the students shared positive perceptions of the book in general ($M=4.17$). Importantly, the students highly appreciated specific aspects of the book such as the design, the layout, the presented language and skills, the activities and cultural aspects as well. The study also provided students' recommendations which the editorial board could take into consideration to improve the coursebook.

Keywords: coursebook, general English course, evaluation, students' perceptions

1. Introduction

The effectiveness of learning and teaching English involves a variety of elements including teaching methodology, teaching materials, learner factors and the like. Each of the elements plays an essential role in the learning and teaching process and so does the coursebook. Selecting coursebooks has always been a great concern to academics and educators because of its importance. Choosing what coursebook to employ for a course depends on educational contexts. In some contexts, especially in public schools, the coursebook is often selected by administrative organizations. The selected coursebook can be produced by national publishers or chosen from well-known international publishers. In some other contexts such as private schools or universities, the main coursebook for a course is often designed by experienced teachers of the institutes or

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teachers who give the course. At Can Tho Vocational college, the main coursebook used for the general English course is entitled *English Teaching and Learning Material for College Students* written by General Directorate of Vocational Training, Ministry of Labors-Invalid and Social Affairs. The coursebook is officially commissioned for nationwide use at all colleges under the administration of General Directorate of Vocational Training. Since its introduction in 2020, there has been no investigation on the effectiveness and appropriateness of the coursebook, particularly from students' perspectives. The present study was conducted to investigate students' evaluation of several aspects of the coursebook. The researcher held a belief that to some extent the research results can contribute to the adaption and improvement of the coursebook in the future.

2. Literature Review

A coursebook, as defined by Thornbury (2006), is one of many materials used for learning and teaching in a classroom. Coursebooks provide students with “*texts, both spoken and written with accompanying tasks, grammar and vocabulary presentations, and exercises, speaking and writing tasks, and usually some form of grammar reference section at the back*”. (Thornbury, 2006, p127). The coursebook can also consist of authentic recordings, tests and a teacher-supported package (McGrath, 2013).

There have been arguments on the benefits and deficiencies of using coursebooks. The arguments in favour of the use of coursebooks focus on the merits that they can bring to teachers and students. It is argued that thanks to using coursebooks, teachers and students have easy access to rich language input and a variety of accompanied available activities. Those language resources and activities are useful for the language learning process because they can meet the students' needs to some extent (O'Neil, 1982) and as they are selected and designed by experts in the field, their quality is ensured (Rubdy, 2014). The teachers and students do not need to spend a large amount of time and effort on finding out language resources (Thornbury, 2006; McGrath, 2002). Moreover, coursebooks help teachers and students know exactly what to be covered and tested within the scope of the course (McGrath, 2013). As a result of this, it is easier for the students to review the old lessons and prepare for the new ones outside the classroom (O'Neil, 1982; McGrath, 2013). Especially, coursebooks can reduce teachers' pressure on designing teaching materials, especially for those who lack sufficient training and experience in material development and adaptation (Rubdy, 2014).

In regard to arguments against the use of coursebooks, they share a belief that using coursebooks can negatively influence the process of teaching and learning rather than facilitate it. A major cause of this objection comes from the view that no coursebook is perfect for a specific context. As explained by Rubdy (2014), many coursebooks are often designed for a general group of learners, thus there could be a shortage of consideration on specific learners' factors. Another worry about the use of coursebooks involves overreliance on the coursebooks. Many teachers just follow the structure of the textbook in terms of both the order and the content. This would lead to boredom for both

teachers and students because what is to be done is completely predictable. Moreover, it is more likely that the heavy reliance on the coursebook would hinder the teacher's creativity, which makes teaching and learning procedures become repetitious and demotivating (Cunningsworth, 1995).

The evaluation of coursebooks has to do with making judgements on their appropriateness and suitability for specific contexts (Sheldon, 1987). A great number of approaches and criteria for coursebook evaluation have been introduced by scholars and researchers. According to Cunningsworth (1995), materials evaluation, in general, comprises pre-use, in-use and post-use evaluation. In other words, it is necessary to evaluate a coursebook before it is used for a course, while it is being used and after the course has finished. As presented by Cunningsworth (1995), evaluating a coursebook involves considering specific aspects such as the extent to which it matches the learners' needs, the learners' future language use, and the program objectives. Rubdy (2014) proposed a framework for evaluating a coursebook which considers learners' factors, teachers', and material writers' ones. Using this framework, the coursebook is evaluated from three dimensions Psychological Validity, Pedagogical Validity, Process and Content Validity. Under the scope of Psychology Validity taking student-centeredness, a list of questions is given to get information about several aspects such as learner needs, independence and autonomy, self-development, creativity and cooperation. Pedagogical Validity taking teacher-centeredness deals with issues related to the way teachers will the textbook such as guidance, choice and reflection/ exploration/innovation. Questions under the scope of Process and Content Validity designed to get what the book writers think about it have to do with not only methodology, content, and design features of the book but also underlying learning and teaching theories.

3. Material and Methods

The present study was designed to answer two research questions as follows:

Question 1: What are the college students' perceptions of the coursebook for their general English course?

Question 2: What are the students' suggestions for the editorial board to improve the coursebook?

In order to find the answer to the research questions, a questionnaire was employed to collect data on the college student's perceptions of the English coursebook used for their general English course and their recommendations. The questionnaire was adapted from the checklist and criteria presented by former researchers in the field (Papajani, 2015; Tok, 2010; Laabidi and Nfissi, 2016; Nazim, 2021; Sheldon, 1988; Sahragard and Rahimi, 2018). The questionnaire includes a total of twenty items, nineteen multiple-choice items with five-point Likert scale responses and one open-ended question. For each multiple-choice item, the participants were required to choose an appropriate scale among Very good, Good, Average, Poor and Not Applicable. For the open-ended question, the students recommend changes they think the book needs for its

coursebook improvement to the editors. The questionnaire was sent to the research participants via Google form for its convenience. A total of 181 participants responded to the survey. Those participants have finished their study using the coursebook within a year. With regard to the participants' experiences in learning English, 65.2 percent of the participants reported that they had more than five years of learning English while the others had less than five years of learning experiences. The participants' responses to the survey were then coded and analyzed by SPSS. Descriptive statistics tests on the data showed high reliability of the research results ($\alpha=.97$).

4. Results and Discussion

The results of data analyses indicate the participants' positive attitudes toward the coursebook. Table 1 illustrates the mean score for the items which deal with the students' perceptions of various aspects of the coursebook.

Table 1: Students' overall perceptions of the coursebook

Mean	Min	Max
4.17	3.79	4.30

It can be seen from the table that the mean score for the whole question is rather high (M=4.17). This means that the students participating in the study believe that their English coursebook could meet the requirements well.

To obtain a closer look at what the participants thought about specific aspects of the coursebook, the mean scores for each item in the questionnaire were calculated and presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Students' perceptions of the extent to which the coursebook meets specific criteria

	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Q1: The table of content provides an overview about the organization of the book.	2	5	4.30	.74
Q2: The design and layout are clear and easy to access.	2	5	4.28	.78
Q3: The text format is appropriate and effective.	2	5	4.25	.78
Q4: Visual materials are suitable for the topics and bring students' interest.	2	5	4.26	.80
Q5: The topics are various and suitable to the students.	2	5	4.28	.77
Q6: The amount of vocabulary presented is reasonable and suitable to the students' level.	2	5	4.29	.77
Q7: A variety of vocabulary tasks are provided to help students use the words in real communication.	2	5	3.85	.75
Q8: Grammatical structures are presented sufficiently, appropriately and clearly.	2	5	4.13	.72

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Q9: A variety of grammar practices is provided to help students use the structures in real communication.	2	5	4.11	.77
Q10: Grammatical structures are presented in a logical order, from the easy ones to the difficult ones.	2	5	4.28	.78
Q11: All the 4 language skills are developed in each unit.	2	5	4.25	.82
Q12: The activities are various and suitable for different learning strategies.	2	5	3.91	.79
Q13: The situations provided for practising language skills are practical and real-life.	2	5	3.79	.81
Q14: For each language skill, various activities are provided to help students train-related subskills.	2	5	4.06	.79
Q15: The activities can help students gain accuracy and fluency.	2	5	4.19	.73
Q16: The activities give students opportunities for individual work and cooperation in pairs or groups.	2	5	4.28	.77
Q17: The activities encourage students to produce creative responses individually.	2	5	4.22	.80
Q18: In each unit, knowledge about grammar and vocabulary is integrated into skill practice.	2	5	4.25	.78
Q19: Local and global cultural aspects are presented through the language input.	2	5	4.24	.76

As conveyed by the results of descriptive statistic tests, the mean scores for the nineteen items in the questionnaire ranged from 3.79 to 4.30, around scale 4 indicating the participants' belief that the coursebook could meet the given criteria to a good extent although there was a clear difference between the highest and lowest mean score. The question that got the highest mean score was about the table of content (M=4.30). This means that to the students the best feature of the book lied in the table of content. The question that got the lowest mean score has to do with the degree to which the situations created for language practice are similar to real-life communication (M=3.79). The result revealed that the students expected more real-life situations, which is also evident in the students' responses to the open-ended question.

In detail, it can be said that the layout and design of the coursebook are clear and well-organized, so it is easy for the students to find a unit or a section in the coursebook. Moreover, the use of text format and pictures is appropriate, which can enhance the reading process as well as students' interest. It was also believed that the topics that the book covers are various and suitable to the students who the book is designed for. In terms of vocabulary, it can be concluded that the participants highly appreciated the amount of vocabulary presented to the students and the variety of vocabulary exercises. In terms of grammar, the data collected by Question 8, 9 and 10 showed the strong agreement that the book has sufficiently and logically provided grammatical structures to which the target learners of the book should be exposed. In addition, the given grammar exercises were thought to be various and useful for real communication. The

knowledge about grammar and vocabulary was believed to be integrated into language skill sections which provided students with practical situations for skill practice.

Regarding the activities in the coursebooks, it is obvious that the participants' attitudes towards these activities are positive. It is believed that the activities were not only sufficient, various in types, but also helped to develop the students' accuracy and fluency in all language skills. What's more, the activities could meet the learner's differences in learning styles and encourage the learner's creativeness and independence. Interestingly, it was reported that in the coursebook, students had chances to discover local and international cultural aspects.

Students' recommendations for improving the book are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Students' recommendations

Recommendations	Number of recommendations
Update knowledge	6
Present new words and vocabulary clearly	4
Provide more pictures	3
Provide more practice	2
Provide fun activities	2

The summary of suggestions as displayed in Table 3 indicates that most of the participants proposed no recommendations for the editorial board. Only 17 comments were made on the use of pictures, the number of exercises, the activities as well as the presentation of vocabulary and grammatical structures. Most suggestions were on the necessity of updating knowledge. The participants perceived that updated knowledge would help them study better. The second most concerning aspect was the presentation of vocabulary and grammatical structures. The participants expressed expectations that the new words and grammar points would be presented in a more detailed and understandable manner. Some participants believed that there should be more pictures given to each topic, which would bring them a clearer look at the issue mentioned. A few participants also shared a need for more practice and fun to make learning more interesting and effective.

5. Recommendations

Although the research study has reached the aim of investigating students' perceptions of the English coursebook, further research can be conducted to get more insights into the coursebook. In the present study, the questionnaire was employed as the main instrument for collecting data, which could prevent the researcher from getting a detailed evaluation of the coursebook. As a consequence, it is better to employ more research instruments such as interviews for data collection. This might help researchers get to know what the participants think about the book and which parts of the book lead to their beliefs. In addition, more aspects of the book could be examined to get a broader analysis and evaluation. Especially, more participants including both teachers and

experts should be invited to take part in the study. In this way, there would be more reliable evaluations and recommendations which are based on education theories rather than just feeling alone.

6. Conclusion

From the research results, it was found that the college students perceived their English coursebook as a good coursebook from different perspectives including the layout, the design, the knowledge and the activities as well. The extent to which the college students appreciated the suitability and usefulness of the coursebook was above the average. Most of the participants did believe that the coursebook meets the given criteria and there was no need for improvement. This can explain why the mean score for all items in the questionnaire was high, around 4.0. As far as the participants' recommendations are concerned, only a few were given on the use of visuals, the number of exercises, the activities as well as the presentation of vocabulary and grammatical structures. This implies that further examination could be conducted in order to better the coursebook and meet all learner's needs.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Cao Hoang Yen is an English teacher at Can Tho Vocational College, Vietnam. She has had more than 10 years of giving instructions to a variety of English learners. She is interested in conducting research on learners' sustainable learning, teachers' professional development and curriculum innovation.

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