**Solutions and American English Files: Can they meet the learners’ needs?**

**Abstract**

The current study aimed to explore the degree of congruity between English language learners’ real-life needs and the content presented in the upper-intermediate level of Solutions and American English File series. To this end, 20 EFL learners completed an adopted version of a questionnaire genuinely developed by Balint. Two researchers also evaluated the textbooks based on the same questionnaire. The results of the researchers’ evaluation of the activities in the two textbooks and descriptive statistics of the participants’ responses to the questionnaires revealed that American English File books could highly meet the top-graded needs of the students. The findings can carry pedagogical implications for the materials developers and teachers to make the required adaptation in order to gear these widely textbooks to the learners’ needs.

**Keywords:** Needs, Materials evaluation, American English File, Solutions.

**Background**

Textbooks are considered as important elements in ELT curriculum (Richards, 2001). They provide a framework for planning and implementing teaching and learning routines (Byrd, 2001). The advocates of using textbooks refer to some advantages, mainly giving a sense of security, presenting a purposeful image of the course, offering well-organized texts and activities while the opponents assert that using textbooks hinders the teachers' creativity and create barriers to addressing the students' needs (Ur, 1996).

However, the importance of textbooks has never faded away despite all these arguments. They have been regarded as a useful means to achieve the educational objectives (Ansari & Babaii, 2002). Accordingly, the teachers are called for evaluating the textbooks to uncover their strengths and shortcomings in order to gauge their values (Hutchinson & Waters, 1993). Analyzing textbooks reveals the degree of correspondence between the presented content and goals of a given English language course (Williams, 1983).

Textbooks evaluation promotes the teachers' understanding of the merits and demerits of the materials (McDonough & Shaw, 2003). It is indeed a prerequisite for fulfilling the learners' needs and expectations (Mirzaei & Tabatabaei, 2017). Evaluating the materials enables the teachers to make the optimum use of their strengths and make the required modifications and adaptations to remove the shortcomings (Cunningsworth, 1995). Conducting a context-dependent evaluation of the materials allow the teachers to have a good control over the context (Sheldon, 1998) and adapt them more realistically (McDonough & Shaw, 2003) and make informed decisions about the instructional procedures (Cunningsworth, 1995).

Numerous studies have been conducted to evaluate various textbooks used to teach English to a wide range of language learners. In this regard various ELT materials have been examined such as Headway (Ranalli, 2002) New Interchange (Dominguez, 2004; Iraji, 2007), Spot On (Tok, 2010), and Top Notch (Ahmadisafa, Moradi & Hamzavi, 2015). Reviewing the existing literature shows the prevalence of textbook evaluation studies of book series in the private sector. However, most of these studies have focused on eliciting the teachers' viewpoints. In this sense scant attention has been paid to the learners’ evaluation of the textbooks they study.

Drawing on the learners’ perspectives, as the main users of the textbooks would enable the researchers to investigate the degree of congruity between their perceptions of their needs and the presented texts and tasks in the textbooks. With this in mind, the current study aimed to evaluate the two widely used English textbooks in Iranian institutes, Solutions and American English File. In fact, these two textbooks were compared in terms of the degree to which they may be potentially effective in meeting the intended users' needs. Taking a seemingly different approach, the researchers asked the possible users of the two textbooks to provide their perceptions of their language needs. Then, the second and the third researchers evaluated the upper-intermediate level of the two textbooks to examine the extent to which these two textbooks would fulfill the learners’ self-perceived needs.

**Method**

**Materials**

Solutions series is a five-level English course book for teenagers with a supportive approach to teaching two macro skills of speaking and writing. American English File series is a six-level English course book for adults with grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation practice in every lesson and a special focus on equipping the students for successful speaking. Based on the target sample and objectives of the study the upper-intermediate level of solutions, containing 10 units and the American English File 2, containing 12 units, were chosen.

The present study was conducted through a questionnaire primarily developed and devised by Balint (n.d.). According to the aims and objectives of the study only 5 questions, which concerned the participants’ demographic information and 25 questions from the questionnaire, chiefly assessing the students’ current and future language learning wants and needs were considered.

**Procedures**

The data was gathered through a Likert-scale questionnaire which was submitted electronically as Google Form. The questionnaire was given to 20 respondents with heterogeneous demographic information. The students’ age ranged from 15-46. Apart from the first section of the questionnaire which dealt with the participants’ demographic information, the rest of the questions in section two, chiefly indicated their current and future wants, and needs. The researchers then, descriptively analyzed the data driven from the questionnaires. The raw frequencies, the percentage and the mean values of each chosen item was calculated and then construed by the researchers. Afterwards, the second and third researchers also filled the questionnaire in order to see whether the two aforementioned books were suitable according to the data of the students’ needs analysis.

**Findings and Discussion**

Table 1 represents the frequency, percentages and the mean values of the participant’s responses to the items included in the questionnaire. With regard to the first item, concerning reading English business documents/business e-mails (M=4.25), 25% of the respondents believed that it was of paramount importance for a course to include instructions and training leading to this goal. Considering the second item, addressing reading English articles on the Internet (M=5.15), 50% of the participants asserted the importance of implementing this factor in their courses. The third item dealing with reading English novels for pleasure (M=4.35), gained the attention of 20% of the respondents. Also, item four that questioned the significance of reading English newspapers (M=3.9), could get 20% of the votes signifying its importance.

The fifth item (M=4.95), addressing reading e-mails from foreign friends written in English, showed that 40% of the respondents asserted its significance in their perspectives. Regarding the sixth item (M=5.15), the results indicated that 55% of the respondents chose this item as very important in a general English course in accord with their needs. Items seven to eleven dealt with questions concerning listening. Considering item seven (M=5.1), which focused on listening in meetings or small-group discussions at work with English-speaking members, 55% of the participants agreed that practicing listening in their course would help them enhance their skills to understand a lot of the discussions going on at work with English-speaking members. The results for item eight (M=4.95), which for the most part devoted its attention on listening to take notes of a class lecture in English, indicated that 40% of the students asserted the importance of practicing this macro skill in order to make the most of a class lecture. Regarding item nine (M=4.8), only 35% of the participants considered listening to a speech in a conference given in English as an actual need in their life. Item ten addressing watching movies or TV programs in English (M=5.5), was selected as a significant need among the participants catching the attention of 70% of the participants. Item eleven (M=4.9), listening to English language music, elicited 45% of the participants’ agreement as an important need.

Questions twelve to eighteen focused on questions regarding speaking. As regards item twelve (M=4.6), regarding speaking informally in English with foreign tourists, only 35% of the participants expressed their agreement on the significance of this item as an actual need according to their objectives. Item thirteen (M=4.95), concerning giving formal speeches/presentations in English at international conferences, gained 50 % of the respondents’ agreement as an important need. Item fourteen (M=4.75), addressing the significance of giving small speeches/presentations at work, was considered very important by 20% of the participants whereas 50% of the respondents considered this item a somewhat important need.

Considering item fifteen (M=4.8), which concerned giving small speeches/presentations in English in university classes, 35% of the participants expressed their agreement on the last choice (very important) and 30% of them considered this item as being somewhat important. Considering item sixteen (M=4.7), which dealt with having discussions about general topics and current events in English with classmates, 35% of the students regarded this item as a significant need in their actual life, however, 40% of the respondents believed this item to be somewhat important according to their goals. Item seventeen (M=4.6), regarding having discussions about general topics and current events in English with foreign people, elicited 35% of the participants’ agreement on the significance of this item as a real need. Concerning item eighteen (M=5.1), which dealt with speaking to hotel and restaurant staff in English while traveling overseas, the results demonstrated the agreement of the 40% of the participants on this item as a very important; likewise, 40% of the participants expressed that this item is a somewhat significant need for them. Item nineteen (M=5.05) that focused on writing in English for university course papers, got 55% of the votes as a vital need regarding writing skill. Almost 35% of the respondents declared that item twenty (M=4.55), addressing writing business documents in English, was a very important need. Item twenty-one (M=4.7), which considered synthesizing information from more than one source was deemed significant by 40% of the participants.

Furthermore, scales “slightly important, somewhat important and very important” on item twenty-two (M=4.35), which focused on writing e-mail letters in English to foreign friends, each attained 25% of the votes of the participants. Item twenty-three (M=4.25), dealing with writing e-mail business letters in English to foreigners, was a very important need to only 20% of the participants. Considering item twenty-four (M=5.3), getting the ability to research information in English, 50% of the participants asserted that gaining this ability is an important need in their life. Finally, the last item (M=5), concerning doing group research with classmates or co-workers in English, was considered as very important by 35% of the participants and somewhat important by the other 35% of the respondents.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics for the respondents’ answers to the questionnaire items*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **No.** | **(1) Not at all important** | **(2) Somewhat not important** | **(3) Slightly not important** | **(4) Slightly important** | **(5) Somewhat important** | **(6) Very important** | **Mean value** | **Total** |
| **1** | 2 | 1 | 2 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 4.25 | **20** |
| 10% | 5% | 10% | 25% | 25% | 25% |  | **100%** |
| **2** | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 6 | 10 | 5.15 | **20** |
| 0% | 5% | 5% | 10% | 30% | 50% |  | **100%** |
| **3** | 1 | 0 | 5 | 3 | 7 | 4 | 4.35 | **20** |
| 5% | 0% | 25% | 15% | 35% | 20% |  | **100%** |
| **4** | 1 | 2 | 6 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3.9 | **20** |
| 5% | 10% | 30% | 20% | 15% | 20% |  | **100%** |
| **5** | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 6 | 8 | 4.95 | **20** |
| 0% | 0% | 15% | 15% | 30% | 40% |  | **100%** |
| **6** | 0 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 11 | 5.15 | **20** |
| 0% | 5% | 5% | 15% | 20% | 55% |  | **100%** |
| **7** | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 5 | 11 | 5.1 | **20** |
| 5% | 0% | 10% | 5% | 25% | 55% |  | **100%** |
| **8** | 0 | 0 | 2 | 5 | 5 | 8 | 4.95 | **20** |
| 0% | 0% | 10% | 25% | 25% | 40% |  | **100%** |
| **9** | 0 | 0 | 3 | 5 | 5 | 7 | 4.8 | **20** |
| 0% | 0% | 15% | 25% | 25% | 35% |  | **100%** |
| **10** | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 14 | 5.5 | **20** |
| 0% | 0% | 5% | 10% | 15% | 70% |  | **100%** |
| **11** | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 9 | 4.9 | **20** |
| 0% | 5% | 10% | 20% | 20% | 45% |  | **100%** |
| **12** | 0 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 5 | 7 | 4.6 | **20** |
| 0% | 10% | 15% | 15% | 25% | 35% |  | **100%** |
| **13** | 0 | 2 | 0 | 5 | 3 | 10 | 4.95 | **20** |
| 0% | 10% | 0% | 25% | 15% | 50% |  | **100%** |
| **14** | 1 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 10 | 4 | 4.75 | **20** |
| 5% | 0% | 0% | 25% | 50% | 20% |  | **100%** |
| **15** | 1 | 0 | 1 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 4.8 | **20** |
| 5% | 0% | 5% | 25% | 30% | 35% |  | **100%** |
| **16** | 2 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 8 | 7 | 4.7 | **20** |
| 10% | 5% | 0% | 10% | 40% | 35% |  | **100%** |
| **17** | 0 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 7 | 4.6 | **20** |
| 0% | 10% | 10% | 25% | 20% | 35% |  | **100%** |
| **18** | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 8 | 8 | 5.1 | **20** |
| 0% | 0% | 10% | 10% | 40% | 40% |  | **100%** |
| **19** | 1 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 11 | 5.05 | **20** |
| 5% | 0% | 5% | 20% | 15% | 55% |  | **100%** |
| **20** | 1 | 1 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 7 | 4.55 | **20** |
| 5% | 5% | 10% | 25% | 20% | 35% |  | **100%** |
| **21** | 1 | 0 | 2 | 6 | 3 | 8 | 4.7 | **20** |
| 5% | 0% | 10% | 30% | 15% | 40% |  | **100%** |
| **22** | 1 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 4.35 | **20** |
| 5% | 5% | 15% | 25% | 25% | 25% |  | **100%** |
| **23** | 1 | 3 | 1 | 4 | 7 | 4 | 4.25 | **20** |
| 5% | 15% | 5% | 20% | 35% | 20% |  | **100%** |
| **24** | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 7 | 10 | 5.3 | **20** |
| 0% | 0% | 5% | 10% | 35% | 50% |  | **100%** |
| **25** | 0 | 0 | 1 | 5 | 7 | 7 | 5 | **20** |
| 0% | 0% | 5% | 25% | 35% | 35% |  | **100%** |

In order to investigate the extent to which each textbook would meet the needs declared by the respondents, the second and third researchers also evaluated the suitability of the books by meticulously scrutinizing all the activities in the books.

Item one was considered somewhat not important in Solutions, while in American English File (AEF henceforth), it was conceived of as being slightly important. The second item, concerning reading English articles on the Internet, got exactly the reverse results. In Solutions, it was thought of as a slightly important skill while in AEF it was believed to be slightly not important. The third item gained two very close points in the two books, meaning the teachers considered reading English novels for pleasure as somewhat not important in Solutions and slightly not important in AEF. The forth item, dealing with reading English newspapers was assumed slightly not important in Solutions; however, AEF confirmed this need as a very significant one. Considering the fifth item, both of the books indicated that reading e-mails from foreign friends written in English is somewhat important.

As for the sixth item, Solutions did not prove this need to be important at all, while the other signified that it was slightly important. Item seven was marked as slightly significant in both of the books. Item eight was regarded somewhat not important in Solutions and slightly important in AEF. Regarding the ninth item the activities in both of the books confirmed that practicing listening to a speech in a conference given in English, is somewhat not important. Item ten, which dealt with watching movies or TV programs in English, proved to be as somewhat not important and slightly important in Solutions and AEF, respectively.

Item eleven, concerning listening to English language music, was regarded as somewhat not important in Solutions and highly significant in AEF. Item twelve was found to be slightly not important and slightly important in Solutions and AEF. Item thirteen was seen to be slightly important in Solutions and slightly not important in AEF. Solutions just like AEF, seemed to consider item fourteen as slightly important. Item fifteen was observed slightly important in Solutions and somewhat important in AEF. Item sixteen was somewhat important in Solutions, whereas the same item was very important in AEF. In both of the books, item seventeen which dealt with having discussions about general topics and current events in English with foreign people was somewhat significant.

Considering item eighteen, Solutions was marked as slightly not important; however, in AEF this item was found very significant. Item nineteen, concerning writing in English for university course papers, was somewhat not important in Solutions whereas in AEF, it was somewhat important. Item twenty which concerned writing business documents in English was marked somewhat not important in Solutions; similarly, in AEF, it was considered slightly not important. Item twenty-one was the slightly not important factor in Solutions while in AEF, it was slightly important. In Solutions, item twenty-two proved to be somewhat important but slightly important in AEF. Likewise, item twenty-three was somewhat significant in Solutions and slightly significant in AEF. Item twenty-four was found to be somewhat important in both books. Ultimately, the last item, dealing with doing group research with classmates or co-workers in English, was marked slightly important in Solutions and somewhat important in AEF.

**Conclusions**

The study attempted to see whether the upper-intermediate level of the two ELT textbooks, Solutions and American English File, could meet the real-life needs perceived by the EFL learners. According to the age range and education level of the participants and the fact that these participants were from different classes of the society, the items that got a mean of 5 and above could be considered common needs among people from different classes in the society. Moreover, since both of the books were published by Oxford university press and AEF series was rather new compared with Solutions, the items which got 5 and above in both books could be inferred as solid needs in the passage of time because these books were designed in accord with the results yielded from standardized tests like IELTS and TOFEL. Besides, the items that gained a higher value in older books and lower value in newer ones imply that these needs have been eliminated. Furthermore, the items which got lower values in older books and higher in newer ones, are for the most part newly spawned needs.

**References**

Ahmadisafa, M., Moradi, M., & Hamzavi, R. (2015). "Iranian EFL Teachers and Learners Perspective on Potentiality of Top Notch Series for Intercultural Competence Development". *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research, 3*(2), 47-66.

Ansari, H., & Babaii, E. (2002). Universal characteristics of EFL/ESL textbook: a step towards systematic textbook evaluation. *The Internet TESL Journal, 2*, 1-8.

Byrd, P. (2001). Textbooks: evaluation for selection and analysis for implementation. *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language, 3,* 415-427.

Cunningsworth, A. (1995). *Choosing your coursebook*. Heinmann Publishers Ltd.

Dominguez, L. M. (2004). Gender textbook evaluation [Unpublished Master’s Thesis]. University of Birmingham, United Kingdom.

Hutchinson, T, & Waters, A. (1993). *English for specific purposes: A leaningbased approach.* Cambridge University Press.

Iraji, A. (2007). Pragmatic features of the New Interchange: How communicative and task-based is it? [Unpublished Master’s Thesis]. Shiraz University, Iran.

McDonough, J., & Shaw, C. (2003). *Materials and methods in ELT: A teacher’s guide* (2nd ed.). Blackwell Publishing.

Mirzaei, N, & Tabatabaei, O. (2017). Textbook analysis: comparing the recent and the old first grade high school English textbooks, teachers and learners’ perspectives in focus. *Research in English Language Pedagogy*, 5(2), 167-180

Ranalli, J. C. (2002). An evaluation of New Headway upper-intermediate. Retrieved from http://www.cels.bham.ac.uk/resources/essays/Ranalli3.pdf., September, 2018.

Sheldon, L. E. (1988). Evaluating ELT textbooks and materials. *ELT Journal,* 42(4), 237-246.

Tok, H. (2010). TEFL textbook evaluation: from teachers’ perspectives. *Educational Research and Review,* 5(9), 508-517.

Ur, P. (1996). *A course in language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

Williams, D. (1983). Developing criteria for textbook evaluation*. English Language Teaching Journal,* 37(3), 251-255.