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A Textbook Evaluation of Socio-Cultural Contexts in Top Notch Series

Nima Farzaneh^{a, *}, Mohammadreza Kohandani^b, Dariush Nejadansari^c

^{a, b, c}University of Isfahan, Hezar-Jarib Ave., Isfahan, 81746-73441, Iran

Abstract

The study explored the appropriacy of socio-cultural contexts in Top-Notch Series. For this purpose, a survey questionnaire was used to elicit the teachers and supervisors' perceptions concerning the Series. The findings revealed that the intercultural content of the Series was understandable and positively evaluated by the participants. However, the textbooks had no clear objectives in the beginning and did not satisfy what was stated. Moreover, the textbooks did not satisfy teachers and supervisors' expectations regarding teachability. Finally, there was no clear consensus regarding the cultural awareness component. To conclude, some implications and suggestions for teachers and textbook designers are considered.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Top Notch in Iran

As the trend of globalization continues to grow, language learning assumes even greater significance. Students need to build the communication skills required to deal with educational, social, travel, and business situations foreign to their own language and culture.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +98-917-6651849
Email address: nimafarzanah@gmail.com

In today's world, English functions as the international lingua franca. English is the language for international trade, commerce and communication and its teaching and learning is a clear and growing need. As a result, it has been suggested that the previous EFL/ESL models be replaced by English as an International Language (EIL) which is the use of English for communication by people of various nations (Smith, 1976). The model claims that it is descriptive, reformative, functional, non-artificial, intervarietal, cross-cultural, universal, multicultural, and intercultural (Baxter, 1980; Kachru, 1982; Smith, 1983).

Iranian students feel the need to be proficient in English to be able to have communication with people outside Iran and to acquire knowledge in the fields of sciences, arts and new inventions, and of transferring knowledge and the sciences to other communities. It is most unfortunate that school instruction in the Iranian educational system has been unsuccessful in providing learners with communication skills they need. A major reason is that locally produced English language textbooks used in Iranian schools cannot meet the expectations of most learners and teachers (Yarmohammadi, 2002; Razmjoo, 2007). On the other hand, according to Razmjoo (2007), while school textbooks are not conducive to CLT implementation, private institute textbooks represent the CLT principles to a great extent.

Among the most widely instructed EFL course books in Iranian English institutes, Top Notch series have now become almost the most-frequently-used series in almost all of the institutes. The series claim to be unique in helping students to learn the communication skills and cultural fluency needed to deal with speakers of English with different languages and different cultures from around the world.

The strong association between the contents of textbooks and the learning of the students makes textbook evaluation a task of great importance to the future success of an educational program. To make sure that student needs and expectations as well as program expectations are being met appropriately, careful scrutiny of the text intended for use is absolutely essential. Learners of English as a foreign language often do not have much chance to speak or use the target language because learning is limited to the classroom environment and they have little contact with English or English (native) speakers. As a result, it is essential that texts and materials provide learners with knowledge of the target language and culture as accurately and objectively as possible. This often turns out to be problematic especially when the aim is presenting cultural content without stereotypes or essentialist perspectives, while keeping information relevant and interesting.

1.2. Objectives of the study

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the appropriacy of socio-cultural contexts in Top Notch series, a six-level communicative course for adults and young adults written by Joan Saslow and Allen Ascher, and published in the United States of America by Pearson Longman Incorporation in 2006. The reason behind the choice is that the book series are widely used in Iranian institutes and their evaluation will be an urgent need and of a great value.

The research project tries to find answers to the following research questions:

1. Are the social and cultural contexts in the series understandable?
2. Are cross-cultural perspectives in communication and developing real intercultural communication emphasized in the Series?
3. Regarding culture presentation, do the Series have a positive view of the cultures presented?
4. Does the cultural content of the textbooks promote flexibility and tolerance of otherness and cultural diversity?
5. Do the textbooks set clear aims and objectives in the beginning and satisfy what is stated?
6. Are the teachers comfortable teaching the cultural content of the textbooks?
- 7.

1.3. Significance of the study

Teaching materials exert a powerful influence over the process of learning and teaching. By evaluating the materials we can justify or improve them. Tomlinson (1998) asserts that materials can be (a) instructional: they can inform learners about the language; (b) experiential: they can offer experience of the use of language; (c) elicitive: they can provoke language learner into using language; and (d) exploratory: they provide opportunities

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