

RESEARCH ARTICLE**Evaluating English Textbook: A Sociolinguistic Perspective**

Nurcan Çakır

Sakarya University, Turkey / Contact: nrcnckr@gmail.com **Abstract**

This paper examines an English textbook used in Turkey within the context of sociolinguistic issues. Various studies on book evaluation can be found in the literature; however, there seems to be very limited research analysing the course books from a sociolinguistic perspective. By employing the qualitative research design, the 3rd grade English book *Just Fun English* (Tiras, 2019) published for public primary schools was analysed using the Sociolinguistic Textbook Evaluation Rubric (Atar & Erdem, 2020). Within the framework of the six criteria of the rubric, the results indicate that the textbook is hardly in conformity with the sociolinguistic matters. Though the textbook considers the linguistic ecology of learners and makes learning English accessible to the public, there are no examples of non-native and non-standard accents of English, non-native-non-native interaction, and successful bilinguals. This study contributes to a growing body of literature by evaluating a textbook concerning the sociolinguistic issues and it offers some insights into the improvement of the textbook.

Keywords

English textbooks, foreign language education, intercultural communicative competence, sociolinguistics in language teaching, textbook evaluation.

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Introduction

With the expansion of the British Empire, the English language has started to become a contact language across the globe, that is to say, not only colonized countries but also other different parts of the world speak English as a foreign and second language. This remarkable spread led to a term which is known as World Englishes and Kachru claimed that it firstly developed in the British-ruled regions as well as being affected by local languages and cultures (McKay, 2011, p. 124). The people constituted their ways of speaking that language and this also led to variations and accents. “These varieties of English have acquired stable characteristics in terms of pronunciation, grammar, lexis, discoursal, and stylistic strategies” (Kachru B., Kachru, Y., & Nelson, 2006, p. 526), inasmuch as the cultural, social, and historical backgrounds of the communities are dissimilar. The purpose of using English in these countries is to

communicate with other people whose native language is not English; thus, this is called English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) or English as Foreign Language. According to Alptekin (2002), speakers demand English for the instrumental reasons ranging from job opportunities and trade to better academic studies (p. 61). Following this, Kachru's model (1985) depicts that English is mostly used by the expanding circle including countries such as China, Turkey, Mexico, and Thailand (p. 356).

Turkey, taking place in the expanding circle, is one of the countries where English is available as a foreign language in the manner that it meets the purpose of instrumental functions, predominantly, in primary and secondary education (Dogancay-Aktuna, 1998, p. 37). To achieve these educational purposes and follow a route map, learners are greatly influenced by textbooks, since they can be easily found; in addition to that, there is an inextricable bond between how much the textbook imparts cultural understanding and how learners extend a familiarity with the target culture given in the book (Ahmad & Shah, 2014, p. 87). In fact, "literature on ELT coursebook evaluation reveals varying methods and criteria for coursebook evaluation" (Dulger, 2016, p. 2); yet, there appear to be inadequate research on book evaluation with reference to the sociolinguistic issues. Previous works have only focused on the compatibility of the high school English textbooks with the sociolinguistic matters. There has been no study examining the primary school English textbook used in Turkey which is *Just Fun English* (Tiras, 2019). In this manner, the motive behind this study is to analyse an English textbook of grade three students with the help of a rubric prepared by Atar and Erdem (2020) and seek answers to the question "From sociolinguistic perspective, to what extent third-graders' English textbook (Tiras, 2019) meets the criteria of the Sociolinguistic Textbook Evaluation Rubric?"

Literature review

Formerly, the process of language learning was mainly formed by its grammatical knowledge and translation of it into the mother tongue; within the time, the communicative needs of the learners were discerned by the teachers and researchers. It was not until the late 1960s that the theory of communicative competence (CC) was named and its importance, since then, has been identified and explicated. Not only

grammatical and linguistic rules of the language should be included in language learning-teaching, but also “broader features of discourse, sociolinguistic rules of appropriacy, and communication strategies themselves should be included” (Savignon, 2018, p. 5). Canale and Swain (1980) advanced the model of communicative competence that divided the skills into four categories: grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse competence. Berns (2013), a sociolinguist, affirmed that CC should be the primary focus when learning a language with regards to the comprehension of sociocultural contexts of language by learners.

Constraining the autonomy of both teachers and learners, CC got criticism for being a utopian theory and not close to the reality. In his article questioning the validity of the theory of CC, Alptekin (2002) concluded that an authentic use of language would be more reasonable when it is localized within a specific speech community (p. 61). Additionally, “communicative competence certainly requires more than knowledge of surface features of sentence-level grammar and educated native-speaker grammatical competence is not necessary for communication” (Savignon, 1985, p. 131). Based on the critiques of communicative competence, the concept of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) emerged. It has since been adopted by English teachers as ICC promotes cultural and social differences of the speakers. Being an intercultural speaker does not only mean that the speakers should acquire communicative skills. They must gain linguistic and cultural knowledge, critical awareness, curiosity, and skills of interaction and interpreting (Sercu, 2002, p. 63). Cetinavci (2012) suggests, “English language courses need to promote awareness of the cultural values underlying languages to encourage students to become cultural observers and analysts, discover the territory and draw the map themselves” (p. 3449).

While learning a language, learners should be provided with materials which develop intercultural awareness enabling them to see the world from the perspective of others (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003, as cited in Er, 2017, p. 202). Brown (2000) alleges that language is interlaced with culture and one cannot acquire or learn a language completely in case of cultural ignorance (p.171). Ergo, selecting a coursebook is quite essential and it is required to encompass not only linguistic elements of that language but also cultural factors so that the learners could develop their sociolinguistic competences as well as intercultural communicative ones.

Additionally, textbooks provide a sense of independence and reliance in the teaching-learning process (Richards, 2014, p. 20). Hence, they are required to present activities and materials in accordance with the notion of ICC.

To show how coursebooks are designed and prepared in relation to ICC from a sociolinguistic perspective, a few but concise studies were carried out. A key problem with much of the literature regarding the evaluation of English textbooks is that they do not examine the sociolinguistic aspects in the books. As for the Turkish context, this particular subject is a neglected area and there is very limited research on English textbook evaluation considering the sociolinguistic issues (Atar & Amir, 2020; Atar & Erdem, 2020; Meral & Genc, 2020). English textbooks used in Turkish primary schools have not been analysed in terms of the sociolinguistic concerns. Some of these limited studies will be reviewed in the following paragraphs.

In the study conducted by Meral and Genc (2020), an English book delivered by the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MoNE) for eleventh-graders was scrutinized by applying the Sociolinguistic Textbook Evaluation Rubric published by Atar and Erdem (2020). There were some criteria to be taken into account while examining the book such as non-native and non-standard accents of English and examples for successful bilinguals. The findings concluded that the textbook provided only American and British accents, presented local names like Zeynep. To this end, there was just one case in terms of non-native-non-native interaction (p. 174).

The next relevant and far-reaching inquiry in Turkey by Atar and Erdem (2020) explored a coursebook used at the Turkish public high schools. They introduced the checklist they developed for the analysis of textbooks from a sociolinguistic perspective. It was found that the book had non-native and non-standard accent instances but not a non-standard dialect, several examples for successful bilinguals, and also included intercultural themes (p. 408). Another valuable point to be mentioned is the demonstration of different cultures, that is to say, the results showed that the book mostly covered Turkish and English cultures and there were few topics that could reflect multicultural contexts. A ground-breaking research conducted by Atar and Amir (2020) used the same evaluation rubric but in a different country. Two English coursebooks used in Sweden for the ninth grade students were analysed keeping in mind the sociolinguistic aspects. One of the books

was found to have non-standard accents like Indian English and it presented several examples for the use of English by both poor and rich people. Non-native-non-native interaction was at a satisfying level including some Asian, African, and Middle Eastern names (p. 402).

When the abovementioned reviews are taken into consideration, English course books used in Turkey do not familiarize the high school students with the different accents and variations of the English language. The books partly deal with the sociolinguistic matters. In the literature, evaluation of primary English textbooks is lacking. With this in mind, this current paper aimed to analyse an English textbook used in Turkish primary schools from a sociolinguistic perspective by using the Sociolinguistic Textbook Evaluation Rubric (Atar & Erdem, 2020) of which six items are expounded and exemplified in the subsequent part.

Methodology

The main purpose of this study is to evaluate an English coursebook using the rubric developed by Atar and Erdem (2020). It is based on a qualitative document analysis of the book given by the Turkish MoNE in state primary education. In view of the fact that the assessment requires a careful interpretation of the textbook so as to obtain meaningful ramifications, an Interpretive Approach was adopted. “*Just Fun English*” (Tiras, 2019) seemed to be apropos for this aim so that it could be analysed if third-graders in public primary school study a book well-designed and prepared in regard to the sociolinguistic issues. Below, the rubric is presented in Table 1 and the six items are explained briefly:

Table 1. The Sociolinguistic Textbook Evaluation Rubric (Atar & Erdem, 2020)

The Criteria	Assessment		
	Yes	Partly	No
Does the course book ...			
1. provide non-native (e.g. Indian English) and non-standard (e.g. The Birmingham accent or Geordie) accents/varieties of English?			
2. provide native-non-native and non-native-non-native instances of interaction?			
3. include examples of successful bilinguals?			
4. promote intercultural communicative competence?			

5. consider the linguistic ecology of learners and their L1 (or other languages as well)?

6. alter the case of English learning among only the elites of the country?

1. Provide non-native (e.g. Indian English) and non-standard (e.g. The Birmingham accent or Geordie) accents/varieties of English: The first item refers to the different Englishes rather than knowing one single British or American accent. English is a global language. The speakers are generally non-native and the learners, thus, should be aware of these accents and variations from all over the world.

2. Provide native-non-native and non-native-non-native instances of interaction: People learn English for communicative purposes and therefore it is not a requirement to be native-like proficient; instead, the learners ought to know that they can carry their accents due to their first languages. This is acceptable.

3. Include examples of successful bilinguals: The third item suggests that learners should be exposed to successful bilinguals as it makes the learning process more fruitful and close to the reality (Atar & Erdem, 2020, p. 402).

4. Promote intercultural communicative competence: With the aforesaid definitions about ICC, this fourth item puts the idea that the learners should meet different cultures not only British and American culture but also Asian, African, or South American cultures. This cultural awareness would provide an effective interaction in the second language.

5. Consider the linguistic ecology of learners and their L1 (or other languages as well): It refers to the importance of the effect of native language. This highly influences language learning. In Turkey, the spoken language is Turkish; hence, giving a place to the first language in the textbooks may help students create a link between Turkish and English.

6. Alter the case of English learning among only the elites of the country: In some parts of the world, going to the school is a privilege. Sometimes economic realities do not accord the right to education for all children. To prevent this inequality, the course books must be delivered free of charge. All students across the country should be able to utilize them. Once the students are provided with the books, they have the opportunity to study English.

This study was carried out in Turkey and the target group of the book are Turkish students. The newly designed English language curriculum adopted the principles of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) emphasizing the importance of supporting learners in becoming efficient language users. Three descriptors of the CEFR are; learner autonomy, self-assessment, and appreciation for cultural differences (CoE, 2001) are embedded into the curriculum. All of four language skills are addressed. However, listening and speaking skills are intensely integrated into the syllabus of the second and third grades. *Just Fun English* (Tiras, 2019) features ten units including a variety of games, songs, and colourful activities to be practised two hours a week. Every unit focuses on improving students' language proficiency as well as introducing local and universal values. The books donated for free by the Ministry of Education are mostly written by the Turkish authors and published in Turkey. The analysed book was also prepared by a Turkish writer. If the teachers deem the books inappropriate for their students, they are at liberty recommending and purchasing new books.

Findings and discussion

The analysis of *Just Fun English* (Tiras, 2019) was achieved and culminated pertaining to the six items of the checklist and discussed in the following part:

Table 2. The summary of the examination of Just Fun English (Tiras, 2019)

The Criteria	Assessment		
	Yes	Partly	No
Does the course book ...			
1. provide non-native (e.g. Indian English) and non-standard (e.g. The Birmingham accent or Geordie) accents/varieties of English?			X
2. provide native-non-native and non-native-non-native instances of interaction?			X
3. include examples of successful bilinguals?			X
4. promote intercultural communicative competence?		X	
5. consider the linguistic ecology of learners and their L1 (or other languages as well)?	X		
6. alter the case of English learning among only the elites of the country?	X		

The first item suggests the use of non-native and non-standard accents of English. The book hardly meets this expectation. It introduces some Turkish names as well as foreign names (Figure 1 and 2); however, when all of the listening tracks were played, it was observed that there was no different accent or variety of English. The book presents only British English to the students and Turkish characters use standard British accent. The students are not exposed to the different accents and varieties; although most of the interactions in English happen among non-native speakers in the expanding circle. Similarly, the studies done by Genc and Meral (2020) and Atar and Erdem (2020) who utilized the same rubric revealed that English textbooks used in public schools do not familiarize the students with non-standard accents of English. These inadequacies in the books actively show that coursebooks should endeavour to introduce different accents and non-native speakers. This is in order to prepare the students for the real communication context and demonstrate that English is not only spoken by British and Americans. Non-native speakers are capable of communicating well in English. In the outer world, the learners would meet these non-native people; thus, they need to know but also understand how they speak English.



Figure 1. Turkish names presented in unit 1

Regarding the second item in the checklist, it was found no example for native-non-native and non-native-non-native interaction in the book. In unit 5 which is Toys and Games, there is a dialogue between Mary and John, and they speak standard British English (Figure 2). So, they are natives and they talk to each other. Although there are also Turkish characters in the book; however, they speak to another Turkish boy or girl. As a result, when the whole book was examined, there was no non-native-non-native interaction. Turkish characters communicate with Turkish ones and British ones interact with the British. As mentioned above, the characters speak standard British English and the students only hear this kind of listening audios. In order to prevent this restriction and monotonousness, non-native-non-native interactions should be demonstrated and “including examples of non-native interactions will create an awareness that one important value of English is that it allows individuals to communicate across a variety of geographical and cultural boundaries and not merely with speakers from Inner Circle countries” (McKay, 2011, p. 137). To recommend, Turkey hosts nearly three million Syrians and the book can reflect some Arabic names and accents so that the authenticity would be provided. The book can also reflect other nations and accents such as Indian, Asian, and African English.



Figure 2. Foreign names introduced in the book and native-native interaction

As for the matter of including successful bilinguals in the next criterion, the book is very restricted in terms of depicting different accents, cultural elements, and nations; as a consequence, no instance of successful bilinguals was encountered. It could be better if the books present some examples of successful bilinguals since the students might be more enthusiastic about learning when they see a good model from their own countries like Dr. Mehmet Oz. If there is not an instance of successful bilinguals in the book, then, teachers could be the best examples. In Turkey, the majority of English teachers are Turks and they could be representatives of successful bilinguals, too. Non-native English teachers embody the possibility of being a successful non-native speaker which may motivate the learners in the process of learning a foreign language (Thomas, 1999, p. 6).

In consideration of improving students' ICC, the book partly gives attention to it. Unit 9 is the only part of the book which includes other cities such as New York, Cairo, Sydney, and Rio de Janeiro. The theme of this particular unit is weather. It illustrates the weather conditions in these cities. Turkish cities are also introduced in this unit so it can be said that local and foreign cities are integrated successfully as seen in Figure 3 and 4. Even though young learners study this textbook, it is crucial for them to know different countries and cities shown on the map. This increases their cultural awareness. When a foreign language is taught with its culture, learners build a holistic view about how and when to use the language appropriately (Byram & Fleming, 1998). In addition to that, listening to the dialogues among the citizens of these cities might be the best way to demonstrate divergent cultures and accents. On the theory of ICC, *Just Fun English* (Tiras, 2019) mainly encompasses Turkish culture and more attention should be given equally to the other cultures, too.



Figure 3. World Map in unit 9

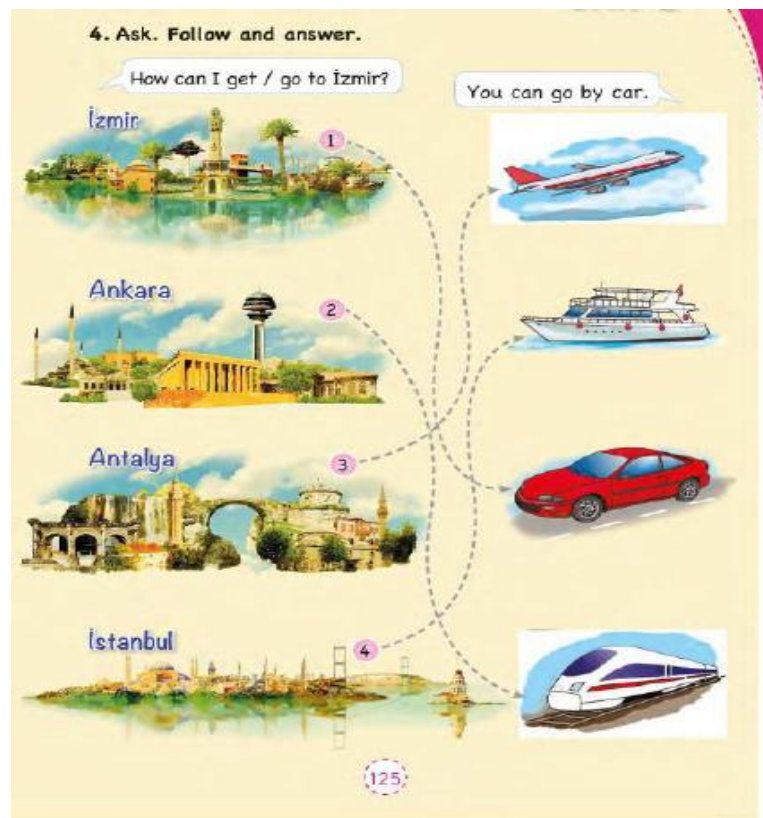


Figure 4. Turkish cities

During the analysis, it was seen that students' L1 is highly considered in the book. Most of the cities, famous people, and places are Turkish. As aforesaid in the fourth item, the ninth unit covers Turkish cities and places (Figure 4). Furthermore,

unit 2, My Family, gives the family concept analogous to Turkish culture. For example, grandparents generally live with their children and this unit shows the family pictures included grandparents (Figure 5). As Alptekin (2002) recognised, “The more the language is localized for the learners, the more they can engage with it as discourse” (p. 61). Also, Turkish students do not use English outside the classroom and the activities in this book are largely art-crafts; therefore, it could be more effective if the students are given a speaking assignment.



Figure 5. Family concept similar to Turkish culture

Taking into account the situation of English learning solely being among the elite communities of Turkey, the MoNE does not expect financial payment from the students. All the third grade students in state schools can access this book freely. This is a good step so as to keep the balance between poor and rich. Not only that, but financially stable parents can afford to buy better and more equipped English books for their children. An average parent might not be able to afford and this again may lead to imbalance. On the web site of the MoNE, it is stated that, “the acquisition and learning of a foreign language will enable the students to read academic and literary texts in a foreign language, follow closely the technological advances in the world

and communicate with people from different cultures” (Bayyurt, 2006, p. 236). Though the content of the units and tasks for listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills seem to be pertinent to the aim of language learning as shared on that web site, the book is hopelessly incompetent in terms of the sociolinguistic matters.

Conclusion

For the present study, the aim was to analyse an English textbook from a sociolinguistic perspective in line with the specifics of the checklist developed by Atar and Erdem (2020). Even though there is a considerable amount of book evaluation researches in literature, only a few of them deal with the sociolinguistic issues; to wit, it is an under-researched area. Given that the context of the study was Turkey, *Just Fun English* (Tiras, 2019) was selected to determine if the English textbook used in the Turkish primary schools is in conformity with the criteria of the Sociolinguistic Textbook Evaluation Rubric. Upon examining *Just Fun English* from multiple sociolinguistic perspectives, the results highlighted that the book does not meet the requirements of the theory of ICC. It is inadequate deeming the sociolinguistic matters. Perhaps the paramount issues rising from this study are the lack of non-native accents and the paucity of non-native-non-native interaction which are decisive factors affecting learners’ international awareness (McKay, 2011, p. 135). All of the speakers in the recordings speak standard British English. Equally important is that no example of successful bilinguals was pinpointed. For this matter, Atar and Erdem observed instances of successful bilinguals in the high school English course book and emphasized that introducing successful bilinguals would make learning much more authentic (Matsumoto, 2011, as cited in Atar & Erdem, 2020, p. 408). As anticipated from the similar studies done in Turkey that are presented in the previous sections, the textbook thoroughly integrates linguistic ecology of the learners including many Turkish names, cities, and cultural elements. Finally, it is provided free by the Turkish government and this makes the book accessible for every student of the country.

In the light of these results, this particular English textbook needs to be improved in order to introduce different cultural elements, accents and variations of

English. Integrating ICC into the English language teaching process, especially into the course books, is very significant, inasmuch as it ensures that the students can discern the target culture (Eken, 2019, p. 596). Therefore, textbooks should be designed in accordance with ICC so that the learners can have an opportunity to increase their awareness about other cultures, people, and accents. On a final note, the most important limitation of this study lies in the selection of only one book that makes the findings less generalizable about English textbooks in Turkey. A comparative research which would look into two or more textbooks used in both public and private schools could reflect comprehensive ideas about the sociolinguistic context of English course books in Turkey so that the authors of future books can add the missing parts and arrange them accordingly.

Notes on the contributor

Nurcan Çakır is an English teacher who presently teaches English to adult learners. She has a BA in Foreign Languages Education from Sakarya University, Turkey. She is interested in language teaching, second language acquisition, and linguistics.

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