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## AN EVALUATIVE LOOK AT AFGHAN LOWER SECONDARY EFL TEXTBOOKS

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### Abstract

*This article reports the evaluation of three EFL textbooks which are used in Afghan lower secondary schools by employing a document analysis approach. Two evaluators took part in the study, where they independently evaluated the textbooks of grades 7-9. This study employed a 33-item checklist designed by the researchers, adopting or modifying items from three checklists in the existing literature. All the items were organized under six headings, namely, content, grammar, vocabulary, skills, exercises and activities, and attractiveness of the text and physical make-up. The evaluation of the textbooks highlighted a number of serious problems that deserve close attention. The study closes with a series of recommendations to guide EFL research in the Afghan context.*

**Keywords:** *Afghan Curriculum, EFL Textbooks, Curriculum Development, Lower Secondary Education*

## AFGAN ORTAÖĞRETİM İNGİLİZCE DERS KİTAPLARININ DEĞERLENDİRİLMESİ

### Öz

*Bu çalışmada, Afganistan ortaokullarında okutulan İngilizce ders kitaplarının döküman analiz yaklaşımıyla değerlendirilmesi amaçlanmıştır. Araştırmada 7-9 sınıf ders kitapları iki değerlendirici tarafından ayrı ayrı değerlendirilmiştir. Bu çalışmada, literatürde yer alan üç kontrol listesinden yararlanılarak araştırmacılar tarafından oluşturulan 33 maddelik bir kontrol listesi kullanılmıştır. Kontrol listesinde yer alan maddeler içerik, dilbilgisi, kelime hazinesi, beceriler, alıştırmalar ve etkinlikler ile metnin fiziksel yapısı ve çekiciliği olmak üzere altı başlık altında düzenlenmiştir. Araştırma sonucu, ders kitaplarında önemli sorunlar olduğunu ortaya koymuştur. Çalışmada, Afganistan bağlamında İngilizce öğretimi araştırmalarına rehberlik etmek için öneriler sunulmuştur.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Afganistan Eğitim Programı, İngilizce Ders Kitapları, Program Geliştirme, Ortaöğretim

### Introduction

After years of war and deprivation, Afghanistan became the focal point of the international community for the first time after the incident of 9/11 in the US (Spink, 2005). At this time, the US intervened, in collaboration with international coalition forces, by putting an end to a two-decade-long war in the country. Consequently, a new government was established to restore peace and stability as the primary measure to allow reconstruction of the societal, educational, political and economic infrastructure in the country. After security, priority was given to the treatment of the laming education system by allocating a hefty budget (Guimbert, Miwa, & Nguyen, 2008). There were many problems that needed attention in the education sector. Two of them were the most important, that is, the lack of a standard curriculum and limited access to textbooks as a basic need of students and teachers requiring immediate, countrywide, attention. Georgescu (2007:444) maintains that "the curriculum plays the role of an engine of the education system". However, its absence or paucity can put the students and teachers in a difficult situation. Afghanistan's education system has suffered such and many other kinds of dilemma for several years during the periods of war. It will take a longer time to recover to the optimum level required to keep pace with the world or at least with the neighbouring countries (Samady, 2001; Jones, 2007; Karlsson & Mansory, 2007; Spink, 2007).

Over the course of history, Afghan curriculum underwent a number of changes and modifications in terms of the content that served the political ideologies of different regimes as they came to power (Samady, 2001; Jones, 2007). The school curriculum was used for cultivating provocative political and religious mindsets in students against the opposition forces. The content modification was mostly supported financially by different countries and intelligence agencies

backing specific militant groups, both during the Soviet occupation and Taliban regime (Spink, 2005). However, with the end of Taliban sovereignty, the new government stakeholders and the populace realized “that societal reconstruction in Afghanistan will not be possible without” a sustainable development in education (Georgescu, 2007:444). This ambition was seen as unlikely to be fulfilled without creating a national curriculum system that Afghanistan had been deprived of for three decades. Therefore, the Ministry of Education (MoE) worked hard with United Nations organizations and international education experts to draft the first curriculum framework in 2002, in a fundamental decision to reconstruct the Afghan education system by planning the primary (grade 1-6) and secondary (grade 7-12) educational programs (Georgescu, 2007). The curriculum framework, introduced in 2003, defined the preliminary objectives for each educational cycle from primary to upper secondary education and determined the subject areas, including secular and religious, so that the ministry could begin to work on designing the new textbooks (MoE, 2003). The framework also emphasized that the education system should be based on constructivist and child-centred learning approaches by providing a safe, supportive, and motivating learning atmosphere that adheres to improving higher-order thinking skills as well as “spiritual, emotional and social development” (MoE, 2003:32).

Despite the existing problems, the education system has witnessed considerable achievements since 2001 with the financial assistance of international partners, resulting in increased enrolment rates of both boys and girls, construction of new school buildings, and publication of new textbooks to the students to name a few (MoE, 2016). Moreover, the ministry considered the improvement of the school curriculum system as the main gateway to meet the vision declared. The curriculum tops other objectives of the MoE, of intermediate outcomes to be met, as declared in the national education strategic plan (NESP) of the years 2017-2021, that is, “Reformed curriculum for education at all levels” by providing “Quality textbooks and materials in schools and learning centres” in different subject areas (MoE, 2016:4).

The new education system in Afghanistan follows a Western structure as evidenced in different subject areas like mathematics and the social and natural sciences. Amongst them, English as a foreign language (EFL) also gained significance as a compulsory subject starting from grade four (Karlsson & Mansory, 2007; Alamyar, 2017). Previously, it normally started from grade seven as the main foreign language in the Afghan educational system (Samady, 2001:13). The new textbooks were designed with quality colourful paper and with the removal of political content. However, they are of lower content quality with many errors and written in a complicated language compared to the student grade level (Karlsson & Mansory, 2007), which critically affects the overall quality of the education. Apparently, similar problems exist in EFL textbooks, too. The low teacher

qualifications and ineffective textbooks may have a combined negative impact on the students by undermining their ability to learn English in school.

Today, the English language has become a requirement for nations to participate in the global economy and develop their “human capital” to be part of the globalization trends in this modern era (Hamid, 2010:289). For sure, this also applies to the post-conflict situation of Afghanistan to find its position in the region and the world. As mentioned elsewhere, the English language is given a special place in Afghan curriculum. Nonetheless, the available textbooks seem to contain various problems. The apparent problems in the English language textbooks and low teacher qualifications have motivated various international organizations, such as the British Council, to become involved in training English teachers throughout the country on student-centred teaching approaches and effective utilization of the current textbooks (Hamid, 2010:301).

Though such training programs contribute to some constructive changes in EFL teaching, they might be insufficient in nature to make a bigger impact by providing quality instruction in low resource classrooms with low content quality of the textbooks throughout the country. The textbooks, as the primary in-class and home-take concrete materials, are essentially designed to provide consistent progress in terms of the content to meet student needs (Wen-Cheng, Chien-Hung & Chung-Chieh, 2011). They “not only influence what and how students learn, but also what and how teachers teach” (Mahmood, 2011:71). Therefore, they should follow a logical order and ideal balance in terms of language skills, grammar, and vocabulary. The new vocabulary and grammatical features require reinforcement in subsequent lessons to help students learn their different meanings and usages. Even the textbook format, layout and imagery characteristics are considered to have a motivating effect (Wen-Cheng et al., 2011).

The curriculum evaluation and textbook writing seem to be problematic issues for Afghanistan to conform to international standards. Afghanistan might have serious challenges to deal with curriculum evaluation and revision, but the neighbouring countries and other non-English speaking countries seem to share similar challenges at varying rates, too. For instance, Ghorbani (2011) questions the teacher qualifications and textbook quality as the main problem for the Iranian students who are unable to use the language for communication after graduation. He adds that, although the textbooks have been revised several times they still remain inadequate in terms of content quality to meet the communicative needs of the students. Besides, there are teachers who continue using conventional ways of EFL teaching such as grammar-translation and others. Similarly, Mahmood (2011) argues that textbooks provided by the ministry of education in Pakistan are also of inadequate content and physical qualities. Another study in Saudi Arabia reports that the secondary school EFL textbooks are incompatible with the current theories and there are no effective evaluative activities to assess student learning (Al Harbi, 2017). Unfortunately, little empirical evidence exists as regards the educational

status of Afghanistan in terms of the curricular system, textbooks, teacher qualifications, and the teaching and learning process from the primary to upper secondary levels. Only a few studies exist in the form of postgraduate theses as well as some academic articles written by non-Afghan researchers. As it appears, the evaluative research as regards the content quality of the textbooks does not exist in any subject area.

#### ***The Aim of the Study***

The purpose of this study is to take a general evaluative look at the Afghan lower secondary English textbooks (grade 7-9) in terms of the overall content quality, the balance of language skills taught, grammar, vocabulary, exercises, and activities plus the physical characteristics from an insider and outsider/foreign expert perspective. Although all Afghan school EFL textbooks need deeper evaluation to shed light on their potential weaknesses and strengths for the future reference while being revised, the lower secondary was chosen in particular because of having all-in-English content. The primary EFL textbooks (grade 4-6) contain instructions either in Dari or Pashtu languages making it difficult for a foreign expert to do a thorough evaluation. Moreover, the evaluation of upper secondary textbooks needs a separate evaluative study, which is beyond the scope of the current study.

#### ***Methodology***

##### ***Participants***

The first researcher, or textbook evaluator, is an Afghan Ph.D. student in curriculum and instruction; the third, a Turkish expert holding a Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction with direct experience of teaching English at primary, secondary and university level in Turkey, evaluated the EFL textbooks (grade 7-9). The evaluators were selected based on their expertise in English language teaching, educational research, curriculum development, and evaluation.

##### ***Research Design***

A document review was employed, through a descriptive research design within a qualitative study, to evaluate the Afghan lower secondary EFL textbooks. According to Bell (2005:125) "most common kinds of documents in educational research are written as printed or manuscript sources". Even books and journals, which are publicly available, can be considered as documents in academic research (Denscombe, 2007). Thus, the textbooks also carry such characteristics as official documents to serve evaluative academic research purposes. Creswell (2012) recommends the selection of documents which offer valuable information for responding to research questions asked in a study.

The EFL textbooks, evaluated in this study, were published in 2011. Each of them accompanies a teacher's guide but none includes supplementary resources like workbooks, CDs, or DVDs. Students get the textbooks free of charge and return

them to the school library by the end of school year. All of them are printed in colour with similar physical features. There are 160 pages in grade seven textbook, 167 in grade eight, and 176 in grade nine.

#### **Data Collection**

The data were collected through a 33-item checklist designed by the researchers, adopting items from three checklists in the existing literature. However, the items were modified into a concise and clear format. All the items were organized under six headings, namely, content, grammar, vocabulary, skills, exercises and activities, and attractiveness of the text and physical make-up. The majority of the items and section names were adopted from Miekley's (2005) textbook evaluation checklist. However, the *skills* section with all its items, one item in *exercise and activities* section, and two items in the physical make-up section were adopted from the checklist presented by Soori, Kafipour & Soury (2011). Lastly, only two items in the grammar section were taken from Rahimpour and Hashemi (2011).

The items in the *content* section included six questions regarding the logical organization of the subject matter, the reflection of the target language culture in the content, the authenticity of the reading materials, challenging content that encourages critical thinking, presence of literary genres, and the facilitating traits of the content in student interactions. Further, the grammar section included four questions about the logical presentation of grammar, its increased order of difficulty, contextual presentation, and suitability of the number of grammatical points within the textbooks. Following that, three questions were on variations in presentation, occurrence and repetition of the new vocabulary. The *skills* section, however, had five questions inquiring about the enforcement of cognitive skills, adequacy of the guidance given to the students, the balance between the language skills, and integration of those skills as well as the development of fluency skills in the textbooks. Moreover, the *exercise and activities* section asked nine questions inquiring about the sufficiency, spread and balance of the exercises concerning different aspects of EFL textbooks including the comprehensibility and feasibility of the activities in promoting critical thinking. The last section, *text attractiveness and physical make-up* included six questions regarding the physical features of the textbooks in terms of aesthetic quality, layout, attractiveness, the proximity of the illustrations to the text to avoid detachment of meaning among them, and the interestingness of the texts to help students enjoy reading the textbook.

Each item was in a yes/no question format with three pre-determined responses (2=to a large extent, 1=to some extent, and 0=not at all) as well as a separate space provided in front of each question for the evaluators to explain why a particular response was selected. To ensure the content validity and clarity of the checklist items, three experts in the field of curriculum development were consulted. Their comments and recommendations were considered in improving the comprehensibility and suitability of the question items to the predefined

textbook evaluation criteria under the abovementioned sections. The experts also offered some items to be added to the checklist.

#### **Data Analysis**

The textbook evaluation results were analysed and interpreted through a descriptive analysis procedure to give a summarized description of the EFL textbook quality in Afghan lower secondary education. A qualitative research method which describes “a phenomenon and its characteristics” and “involves naturalistic data” as the nature of this study requires (Nassaji, 2015:129). Hence, the section names (i.e. content, grammar, vocabulary, skills, exercises and activities, and attractiveness of the text and physical make-up) in the checklist were used as the main pre-defined guiding themes or categories in the analyses process. Meanwhile, the checklist questions were converted into concise statements and organized under the relevant categories in the tables as the criteria used during the textbook evaluation. Then, the quality scores (2, 1, 0) on the extent to which each textbook met these criteria, were interpreted and reported accordingly. In addition, descriptive explanations were made by presenting quoted examples of the comments the evaluators made when rating the quality of the textbooks based on these criteria. Besides, the grade levels within the text were shown as G7, G8, and G9, in short, and, the criteria, as C1, C2, C3, and so forth.

#### **Findings**

##### **Overall Content Quality**

A thorough reciprocal evaluation was carried out independently by the two researchers on different aspects of the Afghan lower secondary English textbooks. Each of the books was read and consecutively rated for quality following the defined criteria in the checklist used in the study. The ratings provided by the evaluators are comparatively portrayed in the tables according to the grade levels. Responses of Evaluator 1 (E1) and Evaluator 2 (E2) and subsequent quotes are shown in the tables and the summary. As a result of textbook reviews, the researchers came up with a number of important findings. First, the findings related to general content suitability of the textbooks scored by the evaluators are discussed in detail.

As seen in Table 1, the findings show that there are many problems in all three textbooks in terms of the content from a general perspective, though some merits were also evidenced during the evaluation. With respect to the first and sixth criteria, the logical organization of topics and facilitation of interactive language practice were found satisfactory in all three textbooks, at least to some extent.

**Table 1:** General content suitability of the textbooks

Criteria	Grade 7		Grade 8		Grade 9	
	E1	E2	E1	E2	E1	E2
1) Topics are organized in a logical order	1	1	1	1	2	2
2) Content teaches about the target language culture	0	0	0	0	1	0
3) Reading selections are authentic pieces of language	0	0	0	0	1	0
4) Content provides real-life issues, challenging readers to think critically	1	1	1	0	1	0
5) Text selections represent a variety of literary genres	0	0	0	0	1	0
6) The content facilitates interactive language practice	1	1	1	1	1	1

0: not at all                      1: to some extent                      2: to a large extent

Only grade nine (G9) was highly satisfactory considering the first criterion (C1). However, G7 and G8 did not meet the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> criteria at all according to both evaluators. Simply put, the language used does not represent real-life English, the content does not teach students about target language culture, nor includes any literary genres except one or two in G9 detected by E1. Furthermore, provision of real-life challenging issues to improve critical thinking skills of the students and facilitation of interactive language practices in the fourth and sixth criteria were found somewhat satisfactory, but inadequate in many cases requiring fundamental changes and reconsideration. This finding, however, does not apply to G8 and G9 according to E2. Some examples of such and many other problems in the EFL textbooks were evidenced in the following comments made by the evaluators.

Listening activities in G9 textbook were not given in a logical way as the nature of listening activities apply. They appear more like reading activities because the listening texts are given along with the activity to be completed. E1 contemplated that: *“reading texts are given as listening activities in the book which may distract students’ attention to fill in the relevant tables and blanks according to what is being read or to follow the text given”* (See page 13, 33, 39 in the book, C1). Similarly, there are activities; in G7, where *“students are required to fulfil tasks which are topically unrelated even within a single activity”* and *“many exercises stand alone without connection in between”* (E1, G7, C1). *“The language exercises are mostly designed based on the behaviourist approaches of teaching and learning requiring students to fulfil the tasks individually and do not provide interactive language practice* (E1, G7, C6). *“The content mostly reflects Afghan and Islamic cultural and historical values. Even the English person names are rarely used in the texts”* (E1, G8, C2). *“The textbooks do not put special emphasis on critical thinking about different worldviews”* (E2, G8 and G9, C4).

### **Grammatical Contents**

After checking the overall content quality, grammatical content was evaluated taking four criteria into account. As seen in Table 2, the evaluators have provided similar scores on the first two and the last criteria. The findings show that the grammatical rules in the textbooks are presented logically, with an increased order of difficulty, and with appropriate introduction frequency satisfactorily to a large extent in most cases except criterion 2 in G9. Only small discrepancies can be seen in between the evaluators in terms of their ratings of G7 and G8 according to C1 and C4 respectively. Considering C3, E2 had similar comments about each book, that is, “*grammar subjects are presented directly without preparing students for a better understanding*” (All textbooks).

**Table 2:** *Textbook suitability according to the grammatical contents*

Criteria	Grade 7		Grade 8		Grade 9	
	E1	E2	E1	E2	E1	E2
1) Rules are presented in a logical manner	1	2	2	2	2	2
2) Rules are presented in increasing order of difficulty	2	2	2	2	1	1
3) Grammatical points are given in a meaningful context	1	0	2	0	1	0
4) Number of grammatical points introduced is appropriate	2	2	1	2	2	2

However, E1 believed that a meaningful context was created for a new grammar rule at least to some extent in G7 and G9, but to a great extent in G8. For example, in G9 and other textbooks, “*the grammatical rules are mostly used implicitly within conversational texts and then explicitly introduced under separate headings with some meaningful interactive grammar exercises*” (E1, G9, C3).

### **Vocabulary Content**

Furthermore, a quality check was done regarding the vocabulary content of the EFL textbooks. The findings in Table 3 show that the new vocabulary was presented in all the textbooks satisfactorily, at least to some extent, in terms of variety of ways (C1) and the number of times they are presented in the textbooks (C2). The only difference that E1 found between the textbooks is that the vocabulary activities presented in G9 are highly satisfactory according to the first two criteria. Besides, the repetition of the new vocabulary in the subsequent lessons to enforce their meaning or usages was limited, only according to the last criterion.

Some of the major problems that evaluators have noticed related to the findings reported in Table 3 are quoted here. Considering the ways the vocabulary words are introduced, “*there is a variety, but it is not a large variety. We can see*

two or rarely three different types of exercises covering the target words” (E2, applies to all; C1). However, E1 found that a great variety of ways is used in the G9 textbook. He concluded that “most of the vocabulary exercises are designed thoughtfully within graphic organizers, crosswords, matching with pictures or definitions, puzzles, tables, and filling in the blanks” while this variety was more limited in the previous two textbooks.

**Table 3: Textbook suitability according to the vocabulary content**

Criteria	Grade 7		Grade 8		Grade 9	
	E1	E2	E1	E2	E1	E2
1) New vocabulary is presented in a variety of ways	1	1	1	1	2	1
2) New vocabulary is presented at an appropriate rate	1	1	1	1	2	1
3) New vocabulary is reinforced in subsequent lessons	1	1	1	1	1	1

Moreover, the number of vocabulary exercises presented was partly sufficient in G7 and G8 according to both evaluators, but contrary to E2, E1 found that “there is a sufficient number of vocabulary activities in grade 9” (C2). According to the findings related to C1, the new vocabularies were not sufficiently repeated in the subsequent lessons to reinforce their meaning or usage in all three the textbooks.

### **Skills**

The spread of skills was checked as another aspect of the EFL textbooks considering criteria 1-5 as in Table 4, that is, the presence of challenging cognitive skills, adequacy of guidance provided for language skills acquisition, the balance between the language skills, integration of language skills, and development of fluency skills. As seen in Table 4, it was found that most of these features are either missing or considered only to a limited extent

**Table 4: Textbook suitability according to the spread of skills**

Criteria	Grade 7		Grade 8		Grade 9	
	E1	E2	E1	E2	E1	E2
1) Include a wide range of challenging cognitive skills	0	0	1	0	1	0
2) Adequate guidance given for language skills acquisition	0	0	0	0	1	0
3) There is a balance between the four language skills	1	1	1	1	1	1
4) Enough attention to the language skills integration	1	0	1	0	1	1

5) Enough attention to the development of fluency skills 1 0 1 0 2 0

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The challenging cognitive skills (C1) and adequate guidance for acquiring the skills (C2) were missing features in all grades according to E2, while E1 believed that they are present in G9 at least to some degree of acceptability, as is the first criterion in G8. However, both of the evaluators saw the language skills well-balanced in all three textbooks, but only to some extent (C3). Language skills integration in G9 was a bit satisfactory to both of the evaluators, but in contrast to E1, E2 thought that this feature is missing in G7 and G8 (C4). E2 also believed that the development of fluency skills is a missing feature in all three books, but according to E1, such skills were given adequate attention in G9 (C5). E1 believed that limited attention is paid to the fluency skills in G7 and G8. Relevant comments to the findings above are compared as in the following:

Although E2 has rated the cognitive skills as 0 in all grade levels, he has commented that *“few activities contain a large variety of cognitive skills”* (C1). This is supported in a comment by E1: *“some of the writing tasks and open-ended questions in some activities sound cognitively challenging”* (G8; C1). *“However, some activities are not well-designed and may not challenge students”* (E1, G9, C1). Similarly, E2 found that *“the instructions lack necessary guidance in reading and listening activities”* in G7 and G9 *“except for some grammar exercises”* in G8 (C2). According to E1, most of the instructions are unclear and confusing in G8 and G9 except some, but he found G7 completely *“not-user-friendly. Students may not be able to complete most of the activities by themselves without direct instruction by the teacher”* (E1, C2). Considering criterion 3, both E1 and E2 had similar considerations about the evaluated textbooks. E1 argues that *“the content is not well-balanced in terms of language skills in many parts of the. In some units, the grammatical issues and reading activities are presented frequently than others”* (E1, G8, C3). E2 contends that *“the balance between the major skills seems to be substantially proportional”* (all books, C3). E1 found that some language skills were partially well-integrated with each other such as listening and speaking, reading and speaking, as well as reading and writing in the textbooks but with many of them standing alone.

**Exercises and Activities**

The findings related to the quality of the exercises and activities according to nine criteria are given in Table 5. The results show that the exercises and activities are not fully satisfactory in the textbooks and need serious attention.

**Table 5:** Textbook suitability according to the given exercises and activities

Criteria	Grade 7		Grade 8		Grade 9	
	E1	E2	E1	E2	E1	E2
1) Activities require students to use new vocabulary in communication	1	1	1	1	1	1
2) Instructions tell the students to read for comprehension	0	0	0	0	2	0
3) There is sufficient work on recognition of sounds	1	1	1	1	1	1
4) There is sufficient work on the production of sounds	1	1	1	1	1	1
5) There is a reasonable balance between the exercises	1	1	1	1	1	1
6) Activities facilitate the use of grammar rules in a meaningful context	1	1	1	1	1	1
7) Text makes comprehension easier addressing one concept at a time	1	1	1	1	2	1
8) Exercises promote critical thinking of the text	0	0	1	0	1	1
9) Clear instructions are given to the activities	1	1	1	1	1	1

As shown in Table 5, the evaluators agreed that the textbooks meet seven of the criteria to a limited extent except in the second and eighth criteria, where some discrepancies can be seen. None of the textbooks instructed students to read for comprehension in G7 and G8 according to both evaluators. In contrast to E2, E1 found that the majority of the reading texts in G9 asked students to read for comprehension. Similarly, according to E2, the exercises in G7 and G8 do not promote critical thinking skills in students, while E1 had the same observation only in G7 and believed that G8 and G9 textbooks contain at least some activities that may help them think critically. Nonetheless, it was found that some activities are of good quality with a somewhat reasonable balance between them. For instance, some of them more or less require students to use the new words in communication, work on the recognition and production of sounds, use grammar rules in a meaningful context, make comprehension easier by addressing one concept at a time, and give clear instructions. All these features were also seen in severe need of improvement and fundamental changes. The comments the evaluators provided are compared as in the following.

Generally, the evaluators had similar comments regarding the criteria in Table 5. Concerning the first criterion, E2 had almost the same impression of all the textbooks. He found that *“some speaking activities require students to use new vocabulary to communicate”* (E2, all textbooks, C1). *“For instance, students are expected to use and even extend the words they have learned in the listening and*

*speaking activities on page 158*" (G8, C1). *"However, some activities are too general and do not require the students to use their new vocabulary for interaction"* (G7). Supporting E2's observations, E1 claimed that *"only some units allow students to use the new vocabulary they learn in communication"* (G9, C1).

Moreover, the instructions tell students to read for comprehension, but *"only in a limited number of the activities"* (E2, C2, all textbooks). According to E1 *"no instruction explicitly asks students to read for comprehension or getting the main idea. However, there are questions followed by some reading texts that can check students' comprehension of the text they read"* (G8 & G7, C2). Unlikely, in G9 *"most of the reading activities necessitate students to tell or write the main idea of the texts and answer the given comprehensive questions"* (E1, C2). In addition, *"exercises on individual sounds for"* the recognition and production of sounds in each of the textbooks provide somewhat sufficient work on them (E2, C3 and C4). E1 found these exercises somewhat monotonous and commented that *"the pronunciation sections are given mostly using the same method and layout throughout the book, but most of their content is interesting"* (G9, applies to all grades, C3). Likewise, the balance between the activities in all the textbooks was reasonable to some extent.

Further, the evaluators concluded that the grammatical points were presented in meaningful contexts to some extent. According to E2, *"generally, students are presented some grammar rules. Later, they are given an activity, where they should use the grammar rules they have already been shown"* (all grades, C6). E1 had similar observations. He noticed, *"The grammar rules are mostly used in conversational or reading texts first without a direct focus on grammar. Then they are given within relevant activities"* (E1, applies to all grades, C6). Besides, the evaluators thought the concepts were addressed one by one making the comprehension somewhat easier. Regarding the criterion 8, E1 believed that *"only some of the open questions in discussion sections and reading texts, plus some of the writing activities, may promote students' critical thinking"* (G8, applies to G9, C8). E2 observed that only in G9 *"there are a few exercises which can partly promote critical thinking"*. Lastly, E1 commented, *"the complicated phrasing or lack of instruction to some activities can make it difficult for students to understand by themselves"* without any teacher explanation (E1, G8, C9, applies to all grades).

#### ***Attractiveness and Physical Quality***

Lastly, the evaluators checked the attractiveness and physical quality of the textbooks based on six criteria given in Table 6 with relevant findings. The findings indicate that none of the books had appealing covers or physical appearance. Similarly, their aesthetic visual imagery quality was of the lowest quality except in G9 which was found more appealing than those of other grades, according to E1. The layout organization of textbooks, however, was found good to some extent. E2 believed that the illustrations in all books were placed in close proximity of the

relevant text to add to its meaning satisfactorily to a large extent, while E1 thought this feature is only partially met in G7 and G8 but fully in G9. The evaluators found G9 textbook more interesting than the other two. Some of their written comments are highlighted below to cast some light on the apparent problems detected in the textbooks according to the criteria in Table 6 except for the first criterion, where no comments were provided.

**Table 6:** Text attractiveness & physical make-up

Criteria	Grade 7		Grade 8		Grade 9	
	E1	E2	E1	E2	E1	E2
1) Appealing book cover	0	0	0	0	0	0
2) Attractive physical appearance	0	0	0	0	0	0
3) High aesthetic quality of visual imagery	0	0	0	0	1	0
4) Well-organized layout	1	1	1	1	1	1
5) Illustrations are close to the text, adding to its meaning	1	2	1	2	2	2
6) Interesting text that students will enjoy reading	1	1	1	1	2	2

In relation to criterion 2, E2 commented that *“in comparison to new textbooks of good quality, the visuals need improving”* (all textbooks). E1 also had similar considerations. He added that *“the images used in the book are not of good quality and some of them are unrelated to the activities or difficult to figure out what is shown (G7; C2). “Most of the illustrations are placed unprofessionally in inappropriate locations with small size and low quality”* (E1, G8, C2). In G9, however, E1 found that *“most of the images are of good quality and relevant to the given activities although some of them are of very low quality”*. E1 also had similar conclusions applicable to all textbooks. Regarding the overall physical appearance of the books, E2 reported that *“the design of the textbook is neither distinctive nor attractive”* (C4). With reference to C5, E1 found that the illustrations are close to the texts, but *“some of them are unnecessarily given in the activities. Besides, low quality and the illegibility of the text in some illustrations or figures makes it unlikely to fulfil the required task given”* (G7 & G8) and *“some of them also stand out of place without a meaningful context”* (G8). However, the problems related to the proximity of the images to text or their qualities were minimal in G9 according to both evaluators. In addition, the content of G9 was more interesting and motivating than the others.

#### Discussion and Conclusion

The evaluation of Afghan lower secondary EFL textbooks highlighted a number of serious problems which require close attention. The general content quality evaluation indicated that all three EFL textbooks need major revision in terms of both textual and illustrative components. The majority of the textbook

features were of a minimal level of acceptability, especially in G7 and G8. All findings regarding the textbooks are elaborated comparatively by starting with the topical organization of the textual contents, as in the following. However, there is a lack of earlier research findings from the Afghan context to compare with the results of the current study.

The initial findings revealed that the topic organization of the textbooks was somewhat logical. Yet certain activities required specific knowledge to be completed and many of them were designed based on behaviourist teaching approaches that required lecture. Besides, the content provided inadequate interactive language practice and fewer challenging issues to promote students' critical thinking skills. As Wen-Cheng et al. (2011) suggested, a well-constructed textbook is expected to present both communicable language content and a sort of framework from which adequate teacher improvisation can develop, and this is one of the areas all the textbooks examined should be consolidated. The finding also revealed that cultural elements related to the target language including the literary genres were missing features in these textbooks except in rare occurrences in G9. Mostly, indigenous social, cultural, and historical values were reflected in the contents of EFL textbooks. In addition, the English used in the textbooks sounded very unnatural and inauthentic, particularly in G7 and G8 which contained many spelling, punctuation, collocation, and grammatical errors. A textbook with authentic content is supposed to expose students to communicative and interactive language learning opportunities in the class and to include cultural topics to increase student interest and motivation (Wen-Cheng et al., 2011). Pulverness (2014:428) maintains that "*language and culture are inextricably intertwined*". Therefore, incorporating cultural aspects in the teaching material makes language education more meaningful. English is considered as a lingua franca today. Therefore, raising students' intercultural awareness is essential besides improving their language skills to enable them to function within multicultural contexts. One way to boost this awareness is by introducing literary genres in the teaching material (Pulverness, 2014).

Nevertheless, particular attention was paid to the grammatical contents of the textbooks. The grammar rules were logically presented in an increased order of difficulty and the number of rules introduced was at an adequate level. Some of this content, however, did not display the qualities noted. Besides, the grammar rules were, in most cases, presented in somewhat a meaningful context, where they were used implicitly in the conversational texts and then introduced explicitly.

Furthermore, the presentation of new vocabulary in the textbooks was partly satisfactory. The vocabulary was presented in a variety of ways such as graphic organizers, crossword puzzles, matching the words with pictures or definitions, and filling in the blanks, but still insufficient especially in G7 and G8 textbooks. Their meanings and usages were rarely reinforced in subsequent

lessons. It is accepted that example sentences play a vital role in slowing down the rate of memory fade in learning new vocabulary (Baicheng, 2009), yet the textbooks in question fail to provide them regularly.

Similarly, scarcity of challenging activities conducive to cognitive skill development was another problem encountered in the EFL textbooks. Only a handful of writing tasks and discussion questions were somehow cognitively challenging in G8 and G9. Besides, the guidance for language skills acquisition was mostly unclear, which could make the textbooks difficult for the students to use on their own. However, the balance between the language skills and their integration were partly adequate but still needed fundamental changes and reconsideration. Alamyar (2017) also echoed the underrepresentation of communicative activities and he stated the courses were, mostly taught theoretically. Even so, many of these activities stood alone without integrating other language skills. Activities that contribute to the fluency skills were either limited or entirely missing as revealed from the evaluation.

Furthermore, the evaluation results of the exercises and activities indicated a partial level of suitability. Both evaluators found almost none of the instructions for reading exercises in G7 and G8 textbooks ask students to read for comprehension. Another feature that was of a partial acceptable level was the inadequate number of exercises that contributed to the development of critical thinking of the students except some of the discussion sections, reading, and writing activities. As critical thinking and autonomy are strongly correlated based on the findings of Afshar, Rahimi, and Rahimi (2014), the way the exercises are built and the teacher's attitude should focus on encouraging these two factors. Although these exercises were featured only to some extent in G8 and G9, G7 included none. However, the findings show that some aspects of the textbooks were more or less of better quality with a reasonable balance between the activities. Sufficiency of activities related to the recognition and production of sounds as well as the facilitation of using grammatical points in meaningful contexts were some other aspects that met partial acceptability level. Besides, comprehension of the text was somewhat easier as concepts were addressed one by one, especially in G9. One of the negative features of the textbooks was the complicated phrasing and/or lack of clear instruction in the textbooks, and this can indirectly force students to be more dependent on the teacher. Some activities even did not include any instruction on how to complete them. Tok (2010) reported similar findings in his evaluative study on a grade eight EFL textbook in Turkey. He found that the communicative and meaningful language practices were not sufficient plus the grammar and vocabulary exercises were not given in a motivating, real context. Similarly, a review study by Ahmadi and Derakhshan (2016) revealed that such problems exist in Iranian high school EFL textbooks that need fundamental changes and revisions. They found that the balance between language skills is ignored. Instead, the

priority is given to the reading comprehension and grammar and the activities do not encourage communicative language practice to an adequate level.

Last but not least, the EFL textbooks were evaluated in terms of text attractiveness and physical make-up. In general, none of the textbooks had an attractive cover or physical appearance. Even the visual imagery of two textbooks (G7 and G8) was of the lowest quality, which can make it difficult for the reader to make meaning out of them. Some of them were not even related to the context given. Nonetheless, the overall content layout organization of the textbooks was fairly good. The illustrations were mostly placed close by the texts to add to their meaning. However, the low quality of some images and the illegibility of text in some figures could make some of the tasks difficult to fulfil. In addition, the textual content in G9 was interesting to a great extent, but this finding was partially true about G7 and G8. Laabidi and Nafissi (2016) argue that physical appearance of a textbook is of vital importance as students have the tendency to judge the textbook by its cover and images, so it may increase the likelihood of students being attracted to study the book. Besides, using lively colours and pictures of good quality are expected to well-suit the needs of adolescents (Alemi & Sadehvandi, 2012).

Taken together, the lower secondary EFL textbooks, G7 and G8 in particular, need fundamental revisions in terms of both textual and illustrative content to make them more user-friendly for the readers. The writing errors, the complexity and unnaturalness of the English used in some parts, low quality of images, and unprofessional organization of the overall content were some of the many problems frequently encountered in G7 and G8. However, these problems were relatively fewer in G9. Its imagery quality was better and its textual content was interesting to a larger extent compared to the other two textbooks. In general, textbooks serve as the principal source of input for language classes (Khodadady & Shayesteh, 2016) and this applies to Afghan students, too. This study also found that most of the grammatical content in the textbooks seem to have been well-planned with fewer errors, but the relevant exercises needed improvement to enable students to learn the rules through a variety of meaningful ways. One of the major problems in G9 was with the listening exercises which appeared more like reading activities since the listening transcriptions were given alongside the listening activities. Overall, the listening activities in all these textbooks were inauthentic, as the students have to listen to their teacher to practice listening because of the unavailability of recorded materials. Alemi and Sadehvandi (2012) maintain that the presence of auditory and visual activities helps students to use their sensory channels in the course of learning. Undoubtedly, using materials with authentic language in EFL classes is of primary importance in effective learning (Dewi, 2018). Herewith, the instructions or guidance to the activities need to be revised as well to make them more authentic and comprehensible to the student.

This study, in nature, has many limitations since only two evaluators examined the textbooks. It covers only a small part of the curriculum, that is, the lower secondary EFL textbooks. Besides, only one data collection tool (i.e. a checklist) was used to collect the data. Thus, this may raise the subjectivity threat towards the resultant findings. However, diversifying the data collection tools and the sample heterogeneity could be a solution for inhibiting potentially biased interpretation.

### **Suggestions**

Although all these textbooks need major revisions in the wake of the problems discussed above, the following recommendations are made, in general, to the textbook writers and curriculum developers:

- Include a variety of literary genres and information as regards the cultural aspects of the target language in all the EFL textbooks.
- Use authentic pieces of language to make the content sound more natural from a linguistic perspective.
- Include a variety of real-world challenging topics to improve the critical thinking skills of the students.
- Incorporate activities that facilitate interactive language learning practices.
- Provide the grammar rules in a variety of meaningful ways.
- Integrate at least two language skills in a single activity.
- Consider professional redesign, resize and reorganization of all text and pictorial content.
- Use quality illustrations relevant to the kind of text they are sided with.
- Provide clear instructions for every exercise to allow students to engage in self-study out of the class.

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