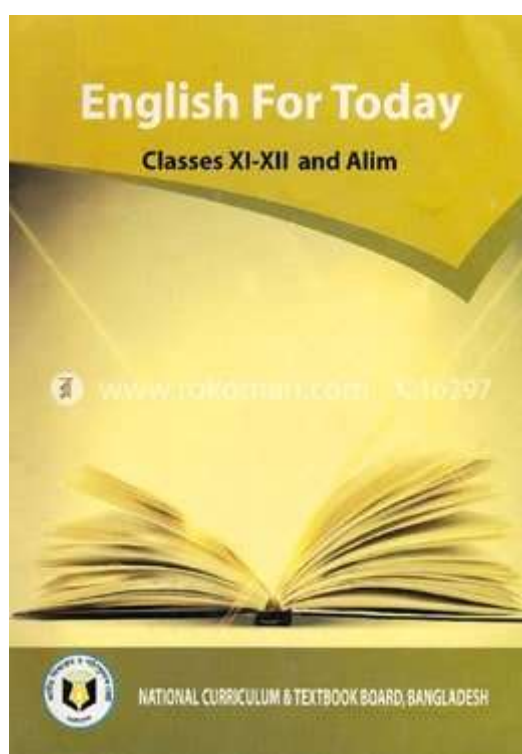


Revisiting the EFL Coursebook for the Higher Secondary Level of Education in Bangladesh: An Appraisal

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Abstract

The place of a coursebook in an EFL classroom is of ample academic significance and worth. *English for Today* is the common title of the English coursebook prescribed for primary, secondary and higher secondary levels of education in Bangladesh. This coursebook is the harbinger of Communicative Language Teaching. The present study analytically sheds light on the practicality and unattainability of this coursebook prescribed for the higher secondary level based on the only the criteria like- language skills, learners' activities, inclusion of literary and stimulating contents and cultural representation. This paper shows, how the criteria are dealt with in the textbook and to what extent they maintain close proximity with the academic reality of our

context. At the closing line of the paper, some deviations of *English for Today* as a context-oriented EFL textbook have been disclosed.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Coursebook, learners, teachers, culture, skills, activities, EFL & CLT.

1. Introduction

In the EFL arena, the implication of a textbook that comprises every aspect of auspicious teaching/learning requirements is enormously fingered. Second language teaching and learning is an intricate as well as multifarious process where a textbook plays very vibrant role. According to Wen-Cheng, Chien-Hung, & Chung-Chieh (2011), “Textbooks remain a staple within school curricula worldwide, presenting teachers and students with the official knowledge of school subjects as well as the preferred values, attitudes, skills, and behaviors of experts in those fields”(p. 92). The EFL textbook in Bangladesh, commonly titled as *English for Today*, is also playing very hands-on role to our EFL teachers and learners for many years. The present study actually deals with the practicality and the unattainability of the textbook *English for Today* for the higher secondary level. This paper is a review study based on the practical experiences of the researcher as an EFL teacher as well as some theoretical and research articles in the relevant ground.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Role of Textbooks in EFL Classroom

In the EFL classroom the role of a textbook is enormous. According to Tomlinson (2011), “A textbook provides the core materials for a language-learning course. It aims to provide as much as possible in one book and is designed so that it could serve as the only book which the learners necessarily use during a course. Such a book usually includes work on grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, functions and the skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking” (p.11). Harmer (2011) opines in a different way by saying that textbooks “are merely proposals for action, not instructions for use” (p. 8). Sheldon (1988, p. 237) expresses that textbooks acts as “the visible heart of any ELT program”.

Cunningsworth (1995, p. 7) assesses the EFL textbook as: a) an effective syllabus b) support for less experienced teachers to gain confidence and demonstrate new methodologies c) source of ideas and activities for practice and communicative interaction d) effective resource for learning and self-study, and e) valuable resource for materials. O’Neill (1982) argues that textbooks are advantageous for both teachers and language learners. Both teachers and learners get valuable learning resources from a textbook (Richards, 1993, p. 104). Cortazzi and Jin (1999) refer to the textbook as a teacher, a map, a resource, a trainer and an authority (p. 198).

2.2. Criteria for Selecting a Textbook

There are some basic criteria which must be fulfilled while selecting an EFL textbook. Iakovos (2011) looks into some issues to select a textbook. They are: a) appropriateness of the tasks and activities in relation to the aims and objectives of the syllabus b) task and activities being interesting and relevant to the learners c) relevance of the language of the task d) tasks having variety e) tasks being authentic, simulating real-life situations f) cultural suitability of the task, and g) clear manifestation of the learning objective (p. 761).

There are more criteria like a) materials of the textbook should be well-organized, attractive and pleasant b) learners' linguistic ability should be matched with the contents, and c) consistent artwork. Wen-Cheng, Chien-Hung, & Chung-Chieh (2011), propose some more aspects regarding selecting an EFL textbook. They are: a) up to date materials b) linguistic and cultural diversity of the learners c) appropriate layout and formatting d) clear and appropriate visual and graphics e) materials addressing variety of learning styles, and f) materials being conducive to variety of grouping strategies (p.94).

3. Significance of the Study

English for Today, the EFL textbook for the class XI-XII prescribed by the NCTB is a much talked about coursebook due to its uniqueness as well as academic constraints. There have been many debates and discussions over the issues related to this textbook whether it deserves full acceptance by the EFL teachers and learners, or needs modification, though, there are some renowned professors and experts behind the implementation of this textbook. The present study is significant because it deals with an all-inclusive analysis regarding the practicality and the inaccessibility of this textbook.

4. Objectives

The main objective of the study is to explore the practical applicability of various aspects of *English for Today* prescribed for class XI-XII in relation to the basic criteria of an EFL textbook.

5. Evaluating *English for Today* (XI-XII) as a Textbook

6.1. Language Skills

Achieving language skills is the prime concern of an EFL textbook since to achieve the target level of the English language is the foremost point of EFL learning objective. Actually, the main objective of the present English curriculum is to achieve communicative skill. That's why Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been introduced amidst much debate. To achieve the perfection in the four language skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing, the learners try heart and soul. In this circumstance, the textbook must contain the contents that ensure learners' maximum benefits for obtaining the skills. Language skills should be integrated accordingly with contents of the textbook since "teaching the skills in isolation is ridiculous"

(Harmer, 1983, p. 47). Sadika (2015) opines that “the integration of listening and speaking with reading and writing will make learners good listeners, speakers, readers and writers so as to be able to communicate effectively” (p. 29). The EFL textbook creates the opportunity for the inert-integration of the language skills.

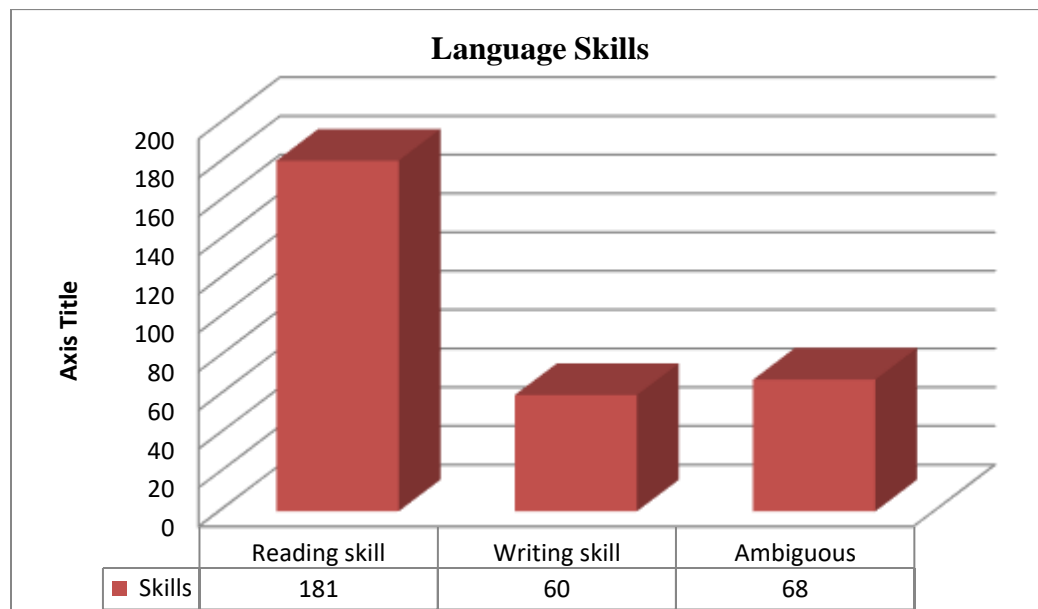


Diagram-1: Language skills

English for Today contains numerous and sufficient contents and activities related to learners’ language skills. The diagram describes the presentation of various language skills in the textbook *English for Today*. Only reading and writing skills are shown in the diagram. Speaking and listening skills are not valued because they occur automatically through learners’ group/pair/individual works, though some special listening skill activities could have been incorporated. The numbers below the categories indicate the frequency of the category.

There is a category shown in the diagram named ‘Ambiguous’ which means that in the textbook *English for Today* there are a good number places in the instructions for learners where it is not clear whether they are for reading skill or writing skill. It may be that the teacher will let it go according to her own choice and contextual needs. We can see that in terms of frequency reading skill dominates other skills. But it may work positively for the teacher as she can modify the instruction to make reading skill change to writing skill according to the context. Regarding the writing skill, the textbook instructs the learners, most of the cases, to write paragraphs on a given topic. Sometimes, it is essay-type or dialogue writing. This is contextual and practical as our learners are very much oriented and familiar with these types of writing. This is also commendable in the sense that paragraph, essay or dialogue writing activities in the textbook act

as the bridge between the two parts of the syllabus of English- Paper-I (*English for Today*) and Paper-II (grammar and other applied aspects).

6.2. Learners' Activities

EFL learners' physical involvement in the learning process is very much expected and glorified in Communicative Language Learning. Learners are expected to participate in various linguistic practices through group/pair works or other types of involvement. By group works or pair works, learners can learn from each other. This is a kinesthetic type of activity where learners are expected to involve themselves physically. They also need to be extrovert learners. Actually, CLT approach requires the extrovert learners where there is no scope for feeling shy and uneasy in the whole learning processes and activities.

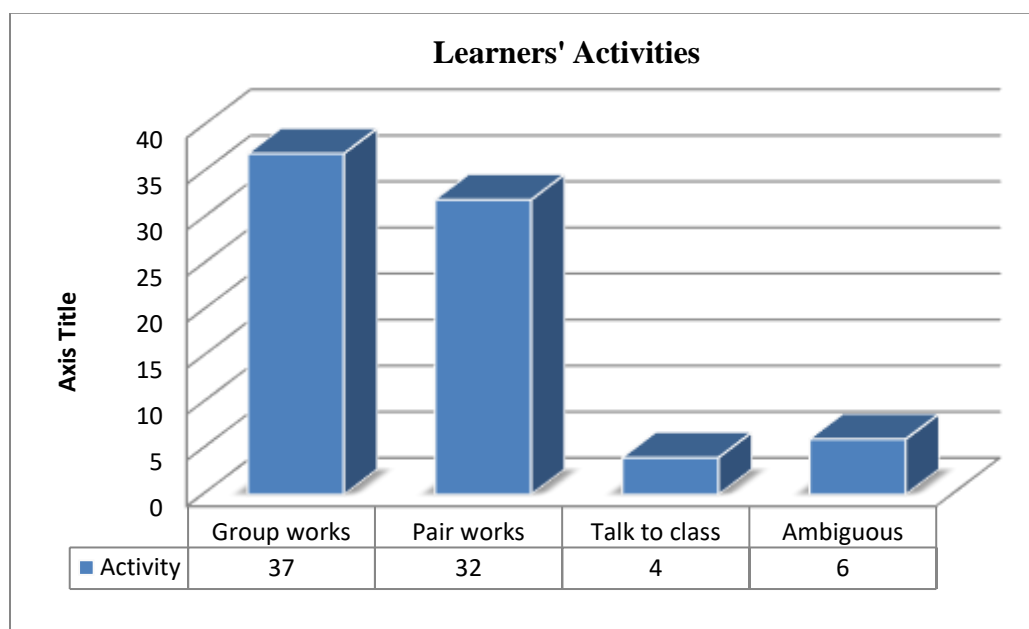


Diagram-2: Learners' activities

Diagram-2 indicates that the textbook *English for Today* contains a good number of instructions for learners' group/pair works. Compared to these activities, the number of learners' individual speaking in front of the class is very trivial. This issue is important because there have been many debates over the issue of the practicality of group works and pair works in our context. The requirements of group/pair works are not exclusively available here. Besides, our learners' psychological (dis)orientation towards participating in group/pair works needs to be explored. Most of our EFL learners feel shy and remain introverted when they are asked to do any linguistic performance. Even if we ignore this point, we cannot deny the physical constraints like insufficient classroom size to implement the activities of group/pair works. As an EFL teacher, the researcher of the article experiences enormously that the activities of group/pair

works are seldom done in the classroom. Causes may be found out from variety of sources, like pressure for completing syllabus, time constraint etc. So, the EFL teacher feels real challenge to implement the group/pair works prescribed in *English for Today*.

6.3. Literary Contents

Literature is a very convenient tool for learning language. Experts argue for incorporating literary contents in the EFL textbook. There are many reasons behind their arguments. Collie & Slater (1990) show four main reasons for using literature in the language classroom. They opine that, literary pieces should be used for language learning because they are a) valuable authentic materials, b) sources of cultural enrichment, c) sources of language enrichment, and d) ensure personal involvement (p.75).

According to Keshavarzi (2012, p. 557), “Literature develops learners’ strategies. They listen and read for general meaning, predict and guess the meaning of unfamiliar words. Since, when discussing about the contents of the subject matter, they have to verbalize their own thoughts, they develop higher levels of thinking skills. Also, their frequent engagement with words reinforces students’ tendency to induce meaning from the contexts in which they appear....Literary texts provide us with a lot of opportunity to learn effectively to use words in different contexts. Literature helps students to go beyond the surface meaning and dive into underlying meanings.”

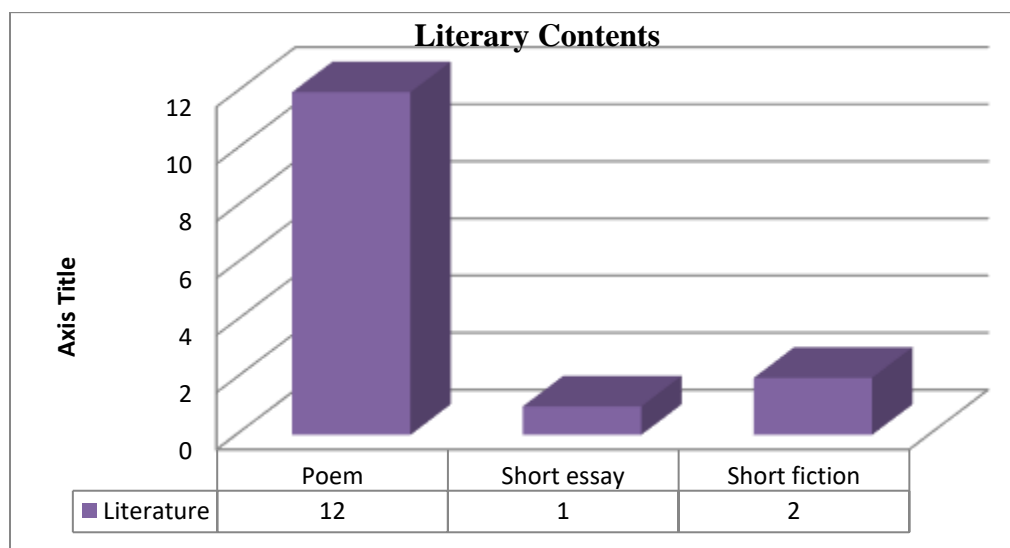


Diagram-3: Use of literary contents

English for Today for the class XI-XII contains twelve poems, one literary essay and two short fictions. Though, the number is not so high, considering the real context, the number is enough because dealing with literary pieces as a tool for EFL class is really a challenging

phenomenon and requires more favorable settings as well as skilled EFL teacher. This requirement is not possible to implement most of the time. That's why the EFL teacher deals with the literary pieces merely as a part of adding aesthetic flavor to the class. Here we have huge gap between the expectations and the realities. Hence, in this respect, the less number of the inclusion of literary pieces in the textbook is a practical choice.

6.4. Cultural Issue

Representation of learners' native culture in the EFL textbook is positively considered and heavily expected by a group of linguists. They argue that language learning through the contents of the learners' own culture is much more favorable than that of the foreign culture. According to Huda (2013), "Because of the close relationship between culture and learning, many educationists, researchers and experts now argue that an instructional process of learning cannot be successful if we do not base it on the cultural traits of the learners" (p. 69). But this issue has generated many debates whether EFL learners should go through their native culture or target language culture while learning the language.

Culture has multiple aspects and branches. To discuss its places in EFL textbook evaluation, this paper will take educational culture into account. The educational culture of Bangladesh (and of the Subcontinent) is still guru-based where the learner depends fully on the lectures of the class teacher. We are still dependent on a teacher-centered classroom. "In a traditional teacher-centered classroom the teacher behaves as possessing autonomous power and intellectual authority, and students submit themselves to the teacher. The learners take the teacher's authority for granted" (Alam, 2013, p. 29).

The textbook *English for Today* follows the instructional mechanisms prescribed by Communicative Language Teaching which suggests a learner-centered EFL classroom where the teacher is a mere facilitator and classroom manager. It does not go with our educational culture. Though the textbook is written and prepared by a group of experienced EFL teachers and experts, this is a hindrance of the textbook to the way to implementation. Though we cannot deny the world-wide influence of CLT, still we are not ready to accept a learner-centered EFL classroom which is also whole-heartedly recommended by *English for Today*. In the textbook, there is not a single place where there is any indication of the classroom teacher's direct involvement with the learners and their learning activities. The teacher seems to be a mere shadow, nothing else. This is quite contradictory to the educational culture of our context.

As an EFL teacher, the researcher of this paper has practical experiences regarding the learner-centered class. From the experience it is practical to opine that the concept of teacher as a facilitator or classroom manager is unproductive (and fake) in our Bangladeshi context. We, the EFL teachers, have to exercise direct control over our learners and they (learners) also expect so, though the scenario is slowly changing with the thrust of modern science and technology with its global invasion.

7. Are the Contents in the Coursebook Interesting?

This is proposed by the ELT experts that the textbook must contain a sufficient number of contents where learners find fun and aesthetic interest. Too many serious topics and contents are detrimental to sustaining the EFL learners' interest and motivation to carry on the learning process smoothly. The textbook *English for Today* (XI-XII) contains the issues like diaspora, climate problems, food adulteration, human rights, scientific achievements and other concerns related to the modern civilization. Most of the Units are burdened with the issues that have made the textbook more a multi-disciplinary guide than a handy EFL learning instrument. Of course, this text is prepared for the higher secondary level; but aesthetic flavor delivered through fun and interest is a compulsory presence in the learning materials used by the learners of all stages. Besides, some may argue that as contents and topics of the EFL textbook are suggested to be extracted from the real life happenings and stores to ensure learners' achieving life-like communication skill, the textbook possesses acceptability and practicality. But, problem is that, by containing too many serious contents of real life, the textbook has made itself alienated from both the teacher and the learners.

8. Conclusion

The EFL scenario prevalent in Bangladesh is changing, though very leisurely, with the effect of globalization. Our EFL teachers and learners are trying to keep pace with the stream of global change in language pedagogy. That's why, though there is less practicality in the textbook *English for Today*, we are still assertive to take it as our best tool for learning the English language academically. Our EFL teachers are undergoing operative training to handle Communicative Language Teaching, as well as the textbook. Our EFL learners are going through psychological adaptation to be more active and demonstrative in their class to learn language interactively. Therefore, we dream of a day when *English for Today* will really be our best EFL material.

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Appendix

Samples of Learners' Activities Taken from *English for Today* (XI-XII)

Work in pairs.

- Who are the people in the pictures? Why are they famous?
- Make a list of some famous people that you have heard about and write about their contribution in their fields.

1. Warm up activity:

- Discuss in a small group what traffic management means. Then write down how you think traffic management can be improved in our cities .

2. Now read the poem given below and answer the questions that follow:

9. Now write a paragraph in 150 words about Tereshkova and Chawla based on the information provided in the text.

3. Write 'T' if the statement is true, 'F' if the statement is false.

Now rank these activities and share your rankings with your partner. Put the best at the top. Change partners and share your rankings again.

7. "Paradoxically, the poor infrastructure is one of the reasons why the city is growing so fast." Do you agree? Form two groups to debate this proposition.

8. Write a short essay on "Solving Traffic Jams" (500 words)

3. Guess the meanings of the following words from the context:

2. Now read the story (slightly abridged) and answer the questions that follow.

The story, "The Luncheon," is by William Somerset Maugham (1874-1965).

6. Find 5 adjectives in the text and make sentences with them.

12. Write a brief summary of each of the poems.

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