

On Evaluation of the New Edition College English Textbooks Based on Multi-dimensional Perspectives

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Abstract

Relative findings about the evaluation of English textbooks in China are really rare. In this paper, the new edition college English textbooks are analyzed and evaluated through drawing on the evaluation experience of English textbooks of other countries. The conclusion was drawn through questionnaires that the multi-dimensional mode, as a mode of learning based on the multi-sensory experience of students, could provide students with broader space for free development and exploration. It could guide the compilation and improvement of textbooks.

Keywords: New edition; College English textbooks; Multi-dimensional perspectives; Evaluation; Tom Linsen

INTRODUCTION

Textbook evaluation is mainly to study and discuss whether the content of textbooks meets the requirements of the curriculum objectives stipulated by the curriculum syllabus. And the evaluation of college English textbooks is primarily to investigate whether they could meet the requirements put forward by various language skills. Systematic evaluation of English textbooks includes many aspects that work together into the comprehensive evaluation system; and the evaluation is carried out based on research findings, evaluation principles and the theory of second language acquisition. Textbook construction experts in other countries evaluate textbooks from multi-dimensional perspectives. Taking every aspect of the compilation of textbooks into consideration, they studied and analyzed, in combination with the development of students' cognitive ability, the overall value of textbooks. Conclusions about the diversified trend of textbook development in other countries were successfully summed up. To the evaluation of English textbooks in China, although there are still certain gaps between researches on compilation and actual compilation work at present, the focus is still concentrated on language practice. Findings about the evaluation of textbooks in China are really rare. However, the evaluation criteria and experience of other countries could be learnt from to evaluate and analyze the college English textbooks of the new edition^[1]. In this paper, the new edition college English textbooks are analyzed and evaluated from multi-dimensional perspectives.

Evaluation Principles of Textbooks

Tom Linsen, the textbook construction expert, is a famous pioneer in the field of textbook evaluation. Starting from the multi-dimensional perspective of second language acquisition, he undertook extensive research on evaluation principles, evaluation methods, and internal and external evaluation of textbooks, and summed up the development trend of textbooks in foreign countries. Foreign theories believe that scientific and comprehensive evaluation should pay attention to students' learning experiences in textbooks, and focus on developing and forging students' ultimate English competency through studying; Therefore, in addition to a comprehensive investigation into the demands of the users of textbooks, scientific and rational evaluation should also be conducted with regard to the design of the textbook itself. The evaluation principles of textbooks are not only an

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important guarantee of objective evaluation of the new edition college textbooks, but also a vital key to verify whether the compilation of textbooks is in accordance with the second language acquisition theory. It is of great help to adjust the textbooks in order to cater for the demands of students constantly in the process of application and update of textbooks. The textbook evaluation principles put forward by Tom Linsen mainly include four aspects: firstly, to stimulate emotions. It allows students to combine their personal feelings and knowledge experiences with the content of textbooks actively, to express their personal opinions and perception constantly, and to build up their own mental representation of language in the process of listening and reading; secondly, to encourage students to create psychological schema during study. It could improve students' progress in language study; thirdly, to encourage students to actively apply their inner language to assisting their study; and fourthly, to establish their own version of English texts in the process of studying, practicing and trying ^[2]. In view of the content of our new edition college English textbooks, the evaluation principles should start from both the internal and the external evaluation. Based on the evaluation principles of textbooks proposed by Tom Linsen, the evaluated content is specifically listed below in table 1.

Table 1. Evaluation Principles of New Edition College English Textbooks.

| Internal Evaluation | External Evaluation |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Whether it could attract students from multidimensional perspectives | Whether the design and organization of textbooks focus on communication and usability of language. |
| Whether it could provide students with opportunities to improve their language awareness | Whether the language in the textbooks is in accordance with the language level of students. |
| Whether it could help students to build up confidence in learning English through classroom activities. | Whether the content of the textbooks focuses on cultivating students' language skills. |
| Whether it could provide students with sufficient space for self-expression. | Whether students are interested in the topics included in the textbooks. |
| Whether it could enhance the cross-cultural awareness of students. | Whether the textbooks are compiled based on communicative approaches. |
| Whether it could encourage students' individualized learning. | Whether the textbooks could provide guidance or suggestions for the teaching process. |
| Whether it could inspire students emotionally. | |
| Whether it could inspire students from the cognitive perspective | |

Evaluation Methods of Textbooks

Evaluation of textbooks mainly includes two phases, namely, internal evaluation and external evaluation. Internal evaluation is to check whether it is in accordance with the requirements of the compilation target, the teaching statement and the teaching project through exploring the content of textbooks thoroughly. External evaluation is, however, mainly to review textbooks and to provide macro-evaluation about the overall structure of the textbooks. The evaluation of relative textbooks in other countries is divided into pre-use evaluation, in-use evaluation and post-use evaluation according to the usage phases; pre-use evaluation is further divided into potential evaluation and applicability evaluation by some scholars. Such kind of classification is in consideration of the specific environmental conditions. From Tom Linsen's point of view, pre-use evaluation is a kind of presentational evaluation, which mainly evaluates and analyzes the value or potential value of the textbook itself. The main methods of pre-use evaluation are quick-browse evaluation and estimation of the value of textbooks. Therefore, it is often closely related to the subjectivity of the evaluators, so it is less objective ^[3]. Compared with pre-use evaluation, In-use evaluation is much more objective. As its evaluation process is built on a large number of observable service conditions of textbooks, it is a huge project to measure the value of textbooks in combination with the application situations.

Many contents need to be measured, such as the understandability of texts, the flexibility of textbooks, the rationality of the layout of the textbook content, the potential stimulated by the texts, the clarity of the instructions, etc. After analyzing the measured contents, Tom Linsen pointed out that such kind of evaluation was also somewhat limited. This is because the evaluators involved may be misled by the presentation of the applications ^[4].

Post-use evaluation is considered to be the most valuable and reliable evaluation method, because it could not only explicitly measure the influence of textbooks on the textbook-users, but also evaluate both the short-term and the long-term application effect. Post-use evaluation is more complicated, which involves investigations from various aspects. The participants to be investigated need to answer many questions, such as “what’s the influence on the learners’ confidence in language study after using the textbooks?”, “what are the changes in the learners’ language skills before and after using the textbooks?”, “what are the changes in the knowledge acquired and not acquired before and after the use of the textbooks?”, “to what extent can the textbooks help students to prepare for the exams?”, “what’s the influence of textbooks on the enthusiasm of students for study?”, “what’s the influence of the textbooks on the learners in terms of becoming an independent learner?”, “what are the repercussions and feedback with regard to the application effect, the convenience and the helpfulness for teaching”, etc. Both the internal and the external evaluation of textbooks could be realized through a variety of methods, such as questionnaire forms, proficiency tests, questionnaire interview, teachers’ summary reports, interviews with teachers and students, tests in the content of textbooks, students’ command level of language, etc. In this paper, post-use evaluation is adopted to analyze the new edition college English textbooks.

External Evaluation of Textbooks

In this paper, the English textbooks selected for external evaluation are mainly the *New Horizon College English (The Second Edition)* textbooks for non-English major students published in 2008 by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. Specifically, volumes 1-4 *Listening Course* and *Reading and Writing Course* were selected as the objects for external evaluation through questionnaires among teachers and students. 300 non-English major sophomores in our university who had completed the study of volumes 1-4 *Listening Course* and *Reading and Writing Courses*, as well as several specialized teachers from the foreign language teaching and research department were studied. Questionnaires and interviews were combined in this study; all of these 300 students were mainly surveyed through questionnaires and all of the teachers involved were investigated primarily through interviews and questionnaires. All teachers and students surveyed must answer or fill out all the questions asked or listed in the questionnaires.

The Design of Multi-dimensional Questionnaires: The questionnaires were specially designed to explore the applicability of college English textbooks of the new edition to teachers and students, to discover the positive and negative influencing factors in the process of application and on this basis, to summarize, analyze and figure out the measures for improvement. Four different copies of questionnaires were prepared for teachers and students separately, two of which were designed for *Listening Course*, and the other two for *Reading and Writing Course*. In the first part of the questionnaires, there are totally forty questions. All the questions are raised from five aspects, including design and organization, language content, skills, topics and methods. They are mainly the multiple-choice questions to study the microscopic design and the evaluation criteria of textbooks. The second part is designed into essay questions. The options are divided into five levels according to the questions from such as useless to very useful, low degree to high degree, etc. The essay questions require the participants investigated to make overall evaluation of the textbooks, such as advantages, disadvantages, etc.

Analysis of Survey Data: The data obtained through questionnaires were firstly sorted out comprehensively to make sure that the questionnaires were successfully collected and the

questionnaires were valid. Then the investigation results were analyzed and discussed. The analysis of the data was carried out in the statistical software of SPSS16.0.

Findings of the Investigation: The results of the questionnaires show that, as to the design and organization of the reading and writing textbooks, more than 70% students believe that the textbooks can provide sufficient teaching content and exercises for them to study, consolidate and review, the texts are designed and arranged neatly and tidily, and the proportion of tasks designed on the use and the forms of language in the textbooks is proper and reasonable; and around 50% students think that the CDs attached to the textbooks can't be used properly or effectively. It could be seen from the survey that the application of the attached CDs to the textbooks is a big problem that, to some extent, influences students during self-directed learning, independent learning and using the learning resources. As to the language content, over 65% students think that the teaching content is abundant and colorful, the curriculum design does attach great importance to the practicability and interest of the information, and it could basically keep pace with the times. However, approximately half of the students think there are too many new vocabularies to learn and read. As to the development and training of language skills, more than 70% students believe that the textbooks themselves cover almost all the skill training including listening, speaking, reading and writing that college English study needs to develop. Teaching activities and skill development activities are believed to be well designed, which are conducive to enhancing students' study and application level. As to the topics, more than 60% students think that the textbook content can help them to broaden their scope of knowledge and expand their horizon. And about 40% students feel that the content of the textbooks is closely related to their lives. The investigation results of the essay questions indicate that more than 80% students like discussing the English topics related to their lives after class. And only 40% students study grammar and vocabulary and practice listening actively after school. Therefore, to improve the interactivity between students' personal experiences and the content of textbooks is popular with students, and helpful to promote and develop students' interest in participation. However, influenced by the compilation of the traditional English textbooks and classroom teaching, some students still study simply to get a high score in the examinations. They are not clear with the learning focus and are limited to the study of vocabulary and grammar.

As to the *Listening Course*, the majority of the students believe that the content of listening exercises is organized reasonably and properly, the degree of difficulty is acceptable, and the content is authentic and reliable. And more than half of the students are satisfied with the interest, the practicability and the amount of information included in the textbooks. It could be seen from the suggestions put forward by the students that most of them hope that interesting audiovisual materials, such as movies and TV programs, news interviews, animation movies, etc., could be added into the textbooks to stimulate students' interest in participating.

The results of the questionnaires among teachers indicate that most of the teachers think the textbooks are properly designed and the difficulty degree is well controlled. As to the content of the textbooks, theoretical knowledge and language skills are believed to be well matched and distributed. For example, the textual structure after each text is helpful to develop and train students' structure consciousness of reading and writing. Moreover, the abundant and colorful reading materials are conducive to stimulating their interest. As to the language skills, more than 70% teachers feel that the exercises after each text could train many skills of students, including listening, speaking, reading and writing, etc. They are believed to be helpful to deepen students' understanding and better train and develop students' language skills. As to the topics, around 60% teachers hold the idea that the textbooks cover a wide range of topics which are of great help to expand students' horizons. However, the topics for discussion are less interactive with the personal life experiences of students. Therefore, it is difficult to arouse students' interest. It also indicates that the degree of correlation with students' personal experiences is in direct proportion to the degree of students' interest. The interviews with the teachers show that an increase in the topics, tasks or activities related to students' personal life experiences in the limited text genres contributes to teaching activities, and the

development and training of students' skills. Moreover, the teachers also hope that the audiovisual textbooks should be more interesting in order to stimulate students' interest in participating.

Internal Evaluation of Textbooks

Internal evaluation and external evaluation of textbooks are mutually complementary to each other to form a complete textbook evaluation process. Internal evaluation of textbooks involves many aspects, such as “whether it could attract students from multidimensional perspectives”, “whether it could provide students with opportunities to improve their language awareness”, “whether it could help students to build up confidence in learning English through classroom activities”, “whether it could provide students with sufficient space for self-expression”, “whether it could enhance the cross-cultural awareness of students”, “whether it could encourage students' individualized learning”, “whether it could inspire students emotionally” and “whether it could inspire students from the cognitive perspective”. The evaluation of textbooks based on multi-dimensional perspectives needs to observe the ways the students use various kinds of learning resources in the textbooks and the significance of the learning process ^[5]. The multi-dimensional mode of textbook construction is to observe students' learning experience from a variety of angles including senses, emotions, knowledge, ability, etc. It could combine students' language learning demands with the functionality of textbooks, and accumulate feedback and supplementary content revealed in the process of application to ensure the continuity and integrity of language learning and personal cognition for students. Hence, in addition to receiving and understanding knowledge, the students, as the main part involved in experiencing the textbooks, the most important thing is to combine their personal life experience with the content of textbooks to accumulate perceptions and experiences. It could better motivate students' enthusiasm for language, intelligence and emotions to complete the task objective of the textbook syllabus. Thus, as the learning mode built on students' multi-sensory experiences, the multi-dimensional mode could provide students with a broader space for free development and exploration ^[6]. According to the viewpoint of Tom Linsen, textbooks should help and encourage students to discover independently the laws of language, and reflect true data in language applications; frequent interaction activities could create richer language learning conditions for students, provide students with diversified options, realize the close combination of the content of textbooks and the frequently used language in real life, and stimulate students' emotional investment. However, Tom Linsen also points out that the existing textbooks are generally lack of controversial topics to stimulate students' creative and divergent thinking. They are poor in providing students with space for free expression, and they underestimate students' development of language, intelligence and emotions.

From the investigation results of both the internal and the external evaluation of *New Horizon College English (The Second Edition)* for non-English major students published in 2008 by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, it could be seen that the future compilation of college English textbooks in China must base on multi-dimensional perspectives and fully take students' emotional needs into consideration. It should get rid of the traditional limitation and cultivate students' awareness of cross-cultural communication to deepen their cognition, constantly broaden the free space for self-expression, gradually enhance their self-confidence in study, and continuously improve their language awareness. The English textbook evaluation theory of attracting students from multi-dimensional perspectives is an important progress of the compilation of college English textbooks at present, which is helpful for constant and in-depth development of the compilation and evaluation of English textbooks in the future.

CONCLUSIONS

Evaluation of textbooks plays a vital role in the compilation of college English textbooks and English teaching, which could scientifically evaluate the existing textbooks and make proper proposals for improvement. It is conducive to better playing their role in language teaching, and

developing students' language awareness and language proficiency, so it should be constantly and deeply explored and practiced.

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