INDONESIAN TESOL JOURNAL

A Situational Analysis of EFL Textbook Selection in Thai Public Schools

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Abstract: *It is undeniable that a textbook is a useful resource for teaching and learning. In English language education, especially in EFL countries, EFL teachers use a suitable EFL textbook to facilitate student learning. The present study, therefore, presents the current situation of how EFL textbooks are chosen as a core material in Thai public schools. An online questionnaire was distributed to 30 participants, who were English language teachers working at Thai public schools under the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC). Interviews were also conducted to elicit more data from some of the participants. The findings of the study reveal that an EFL textbook is chosen based on whether it follows the Basic Education Core Curriculum, the textbook content, the textbook quality approval from the Ministry of Education, and price. However, the analysis shows that a systematic evaluation of an EFL textbook is not undertaken before the textbook is used, which can affect the teaching and learning outcomes in an EFL classroom. This paper proposes some recommendations regarding textbook evaluation criteria for those who are in charge of selecting a proper EFL textbook so that they can systematically evaluate and choose a practical textbook for their EFL classroom. It is also hoped to raise Thai EFL teachers' awareness of the need for a proper textbook evaluation to be undertaken before a textbook is used in an EFL classroom.*

Keywords: *EFL textbook, situational analysis, textbook evaluation, Thai public schools*

INTRODUCTION

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning, teachers are considered the most important resource that can facilitate student learning. Equally important, following the teachers, an EFL textbook plays a tremendous role in EFL teaching and learning settings (Riazi, 2003). A suitable EFL textbook assists EFL students in reaching learning goals more effectively, as well as helping EFL teachers use lessons and activities more productively (Hamidi et al., 2016). In principle, a textbook contains harmonious organization and outlines a practical teaching and learning structure for the entire textbook (Byrd & Schuemann, 2014; Tomlinson, 2012). Practically, it is known that a syllabus for a language course can be based on a set of information provided in a good textbook since such a textbook spells out the details of textbook lessons and learning exercises for its users (Ur, 2012).

With regard to English language education in Thailand, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has been aware of the importance of English as a lingua franca (ELF) and has been promoting the development of the entire nation's English

language as a pressing need. Thus, MOE officially issued the 'Notification on English Language Education Reform Policy' as of 14 January 2014. The Notification pinpoints the six sub-policies of English language development implementation at the Basic Education level (Ministry of Education, 2014) as follows:

1. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is adopted as a core conceptual framework for the English language teaching in all its aspects, e.g. learning objectives, curriculum development, testing and evaluation;
2. The communicative approach or Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is emphasized;
3. Each educational institute can adopt various teaching approaches or methods of instruction following the core framework, depending on their context and student interests;
4. English language proficiency development is undertaken in the forms of English language teaching/learning projects (project-based activities), special English language programs with emphasis on English language skill development for social, academic, and professional communication, together with a number of learning activities and learning environments of English offered in both intensive and free elective English courses;
5. EFL teachers' English proficiency is assessed for further systematic English language proficiency enhancement; and
6. The use of ICT-oriented materials is increasingly promoted for teachers and students' English proficiency development.

In addition, to achieve the goals of the sub-policies described above, the Office of Basic Education Commission (OBEC) issued the 'Notification on Practice for English Language Education Reform' as of 22 April 2014 (Office of Basic Education Commission, 2015). The Notification outlines the implementation practices based on the CEFR, grouping language learners into three broad levels, i.e. Basic User (A level), Independent User (B level), and Proficient User (C level). With reference to the six CEFR levels (i.e., A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2), MOE has set the prospective CEFR-based English language learning outcomes for Thai school students of the three basic education stages, i.e. elementary school (grades 1-6), lower secondary school (grades 7-9), and upper secondary school (grades 10-12) as briefly detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. *MOE's prospective CEFR-based learning outcomes for Thai school students*

School Level	Proficiency level	CEFR Level
Elementary school graduates (grade 6)	Basic User	A1
Lower secondary school graduates (grade 9)	Basic User	A2
Upper secondary school graduates (grade 12)	Independent User	B1

It is crystal clear that the current practices in English language education in Thailand embrace CEFR and CLT, not only at the basic education level but also at tertiary level. Selecting an appropriate EFL textbook as a teaching and learning instrument to follow the prospective directions of MOE and OBEC is an indispensable task (Lawrence, 2011) since a practical EFL textbook not only presents a great number of lessons and activities, but also needs to draw student attention, develop students' critical thinking ability, and promote interactions among the learners (Opoku-Amankwa, et al., 2011). One cannot agree more with Riazi (2003) who stated that English language textbooks are the most important resource, followed by English language teachers, in EFL teaching. This is particularly true in Thailand, where both the teachers and learners are native Thais whose mother tongue, Thai, is used at all levels of education as the medium of instruction and the official language for communication (not to mention different Thai dialects used outside classrooms and at home). It is, therefore, undeniable that the English language input provided by the selected textbooks is an invaluable asset for both teachers and learners.

Since the adoption of CLT, a language teaching approach emphasizing the ability to communicate in the target language, and the CEFR in 2014 by the Ministry of Education of Thailand as mentioned earlier, a good number of EFL textbooks published by leading international publishers, or by local Thai publishing houses who have been authorized for the copyrights by some international publishers, as well as those written by independent authors, are mapped with a proficiency level of CEFR on the cover page (Wuttisrisiriporn & Usaha, 2019). Every EFL, also referred to as ELT, textbook must be approved by the Bureau of Academic Affairs of the Office of Basic Education Commission (OBEC), Ministry of Education, and listed on the OBEC textbook database website (http://academic.obec.go.th/textbook/web/) before use in schools. It is obvious that a variety of such textbooks are available in the market. Selecting the most appropriate ones for each class, from K-12, is by no means easy for the responsible teachers aiming to help the learners successfully achieve the demanding learning objectives. Choosing from the official list sounds convincing and convenient, but whether they base their selection decision on any other reasons still remains to be investigated.

Our review of previous research studies surprisingly revealed that, among a rather small number, none of them addressed how Thai school teachers choose the EFL textbooks for their classes; instead, each only looked into particular aspects of the textbooks chosen from the OBEC list. For instance, Pornsakkul (2015) studied the teachers' opinions on the effectiveness of the textbook *Smile 1* for grade 1 students, which he claimed to be the most popular in one of the southern provinces in Thailand, while Pinjinda (2015) conducted an intercultural analysis of three coursebook series (Books 1-6) used by grades 7-12, or Mattayomsuksa 1-6 Thai secondary school students. Thumvichit (2018) analyzed cultural content presented in visuals and reading texts from seven EFL textbooks for grade 7, or Mattayomsuksa 1, namely *Bride 1*, *English in Mind 1*, *Messages 1*, *Motivate! 1*, *New World 1*, *Time Zone 1*, and *Your Space 1*, and then investigated teachers' attitudes towards cultural presentation in these coursebooks. Most recently, Juntanee (2015) investigated the global English orientation of EFL

textbooks in four series for grades 10-12, or Mattayomsuksa 4-6. Thus, the purpose of the present study is to investigate the current situation of how EFL textbooks are selected in Thai public schools. The findings of the study reflect the current practices of textbook selection that have great effects on English language teaching and learning outcomes in the country. Finally, the present study aims at addressing the following research question;

1. *How do teachers select the EFL textbooks used in Thai public schools?*

RESEARCH METHOD

To investigate how Thai EFL teachers selected textbooks used in Thai public schools, a mixed-method was implemented. An online open-ended questionnaire asking for all reasons considered in this process was used, and interviews were also conducted through telephone calls in some cases for further information or clarification of the answers if needed.

The participants were 30 outstanding EFL teachers from small, medium, and large Thai public schools from all seven provinces of the Eastern Region of the country, four or five from each province. Respondents were chosen by purposive sampling technique by the Eastern Region's Office of Basic Education Commission to participate in a 30-hour in-service teacher training in ELT organized by the Language Institute, Burapha University, the largest state university in the Eastern Region, as part of a 35-million baht national research project on English Education in Thailand funded by the Office of Basic Education Commission, Ministry of Education. The Eastern Region is one of the six regions of the country. After the one-month period of data collection, 25 participants returned the completed questionnaires. All of the answers to the question about what reasons the participants used to select the EFL textbooks in their schools were then grouped into five main criteria based on similar meanings though described in different wordings. Frequency of occurrence/use of each reason was then counted by percentage.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the current EFL textbook selection practices undertaken in Thai public schools at different levels indicates the five common EFL textbook selection criteria as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. *The five common EFL textbook selection criteria used in Thai public schools*

No.	Textbook selection criteria	Percentage
1.	A selected EFL textbook follows the Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (A.D. 2008).	77.78
2.	The content of a selected textbook suits target students' English proficiency level.	66.67
3.	A selected EFL textbook must be approved by OBEC.	66.67
4.	A selected textbook follows the EFL teaching and learning programs of Distance Learning Television (DLTV).	11.11

5.	The publishers of a selected EFL textbook offer reasonable costs and provide additional teaching and learning activities for students.	11.11

The most common EFL textbook selection criterion is that a selected EFL textbook must follow the Basic Education Core Curriculum 2008 (77.78%). The Basic Education Core Curriculum 2008 has set out the five key learning competencies for Thai school learners, namely communication capacity, thinking capacity, problem-solving capacity, capacity for applying life skills, and capacity of technological application (Ministry of Education, 2008). It is clearly seen here that a selected EFL text should promote not only practical language learning ability, but also comprehensive personal, professional and life skills needed for the 21st century era.

Following the first criterion mentioned above, another two common criteria are based on the suitability of a selected EFL textbook's content (66.67%) as well as the approval for use from MOE (66.67%). Most approved EFL textbooks provide a table of detailed content on which persons in charge of selecting a textbook can fundamentally focus, whether or not the textbook is outlined parallel to the core curriculum. The textbook information provided in a textbook can be then applied as the syllabus of a language course since it pinpoints the details of lessons and additional exercises for students (Ur, 2012). Further, interesting presentations of content and activities provided by a textbook should be able to draw students' attention for learning engagement. Selecting a practical EFL textbook should rely on both the suitability of a textbook and students' needs and interests (Laabidi & Nfissi, 2016).

The findings further show that an EFL textbook following the EFL teaching and learning programs offered by the Distance Learning Television or DLTV is also chosen (11.11%). These satellite teaching programs, founded on 5 December 1995 on the 50th anniversary celebrations of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej's accession to the throne, are aimed at solving the current problems of teacher shortage in rural areas. This means some schools believe that their students can have a good learning of English through the DLTV, a standard audio-visual teaching resource, apart from teacher input at their schools.

In addition to the criteria mentioned above, the selling price of a textbook and additional teaching and learning support from publishing houses are taken into textbook selection consideration (11.11%). If a publishing house can provide a reasonable price for a textbook, together with additional teaching and learning activities (e.g., English camp, English tutoring), this encourages interested schools to choose an EFL textbook from such publishing houses. It is because the schools are well aware of the importance of additional teaching activities that can serve the students' needs and interests for better English language learning in more interactive and practical ways. However, if emphasis is more on only these benefits in terms of prices and additional activities, the schools may fail to be aware of the suitability of a textbook, which certainly has a greater effect on students' English language enhancement (Tomlinson, 2003, 2008, 2010). It can be seen in the current EFL textbook market that the EFL textbook publication industry is highly competitive. Each international or local publishing house needs

to survive in the market, so they provide their customers (i.e., educational institutes) with great offers and services, apart from high quality EFL textbooks (Litz, 2005; McGrath, 2002; Sheldon, 1998; Tomlinson, 2003). Thus, selecting a good textbook among many other choices that can serve the course objectives is a difficult task if benefits offered by publishing houses are taken into account in the textbook selection process (Cunningsworth, 1995).

It can be concluded from the analysis of the current textbook selection practices and criteria that the suitability of a textbook is the primary focus, followed by consideration of additional offers from publishing houses. However, it can be seen that such current practices fail to include a systematic textbook selection that involves applying an appropriate evaluation tool. Using a practical EFL textbook evaluation instrument will allow those persons in charge of selecting a textbook to be more aware of advantages and disadvantages of a selected EFL textbook. Also, it will be very useful to use a textbook evaluation framework or checklist that is suitable for English language education in a particular teaching and learning context.

At this juncture, it is recommended that an insightful textbook evaluation be performed before a textbook is selected for use in a real EFL classroom. In the literature of EFL textbook evaluation research, textbook evaluation was first introduced during 1970-1979 but it was not conducted systematically as an evaluating tool and it was not sufficiently detailed (Harbi, 2017). Then during 2011-2013, research and practices regarding EFL textbook evaluation were more systematically explored and conducted in different contexts, although the purposes of EFL textbook evaluation during the period of time focused on particular evaluation categories: learning activities and textbook exercises (Dweikat, 2011); content, grammar, vocabulary and the four language skills (Alsheri, 2012); content-based instruction method (CBI) (Phonhan et al., 2012) etc. Therefore, using an EFL textbook evaluation instrument that covers a comprehensive evaluation, focuses on a wide range of evaluation categories, and suits a local teaching and learning context will very certainly be helpful for program or curriculum planners endeavoring to select a suitable EFL textbook that successfully serves their program or curriculum objectives.

Recent English language textbook evaluation research has shown the availability of textbook evaluation checklists developed by a number of applied linguistics practitioners and researchers from different EFL/ESL contexts, e.g. Iran (Khodabakhshi, 2014), Malaysia (Khoo & Knight, 2015), and Morocco (Laabidi & Nfissi, 2016). Each checklist promotes a systematic textbook evaluation before use in an EFL program or curriculum for effective teaching and learning. For English language education in the Thai context, a newly localized EFL textbook evaluation has been developed and validated by Wuttisrisiriporn and Usaha (2019), based on the CEFR and CLT. This 70-item Thai context-oriented evaluation checklist can provide textbook evaluators with both comprehensive and insightful textbook evaluation since the EFL textbook evaluation checklist includes eight different evaluation categories: (1) layout, design, and physical makeup; (2) unit organization; (3) content, topics, and language; (4) language teaching methods and activities; (5) the four language skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing); (6) vocabulary; (7) grammar;

and (8) accompanied/supplementary materials. It will be very useful for Thai EFL teachers or persons in charge of text selection to use this checklist in the three evaluation stages, including pre-use evaluation, in-use evaluation, and post-use evaluation (Cunningsworth, 1995; Ellis, 1997). However, it is suggested that textbook evaluators using the checklist should have a good understanding of the CEFR and CLT. Thus, textbook evaluation training might be needed and should be run by those who fully understand the two concepts, which are the main focuses of English language education in the Thai context.

As described above, it is necessary to promote a systematic EFL textbook evaluation among EFL teachers. To succeed in doing so, a model for the process of EFL textbook evaluation is proposed and suggested for implementation (see Figure 1 below). First, the overall analysis of an English course should be conducted to identify particular needs and learning goals. Then, the three stages of textbook evaluation (pre-use, in-use, and post-use evaluations) are performed while the course is being administered to particularly look at advantages and disadvantages of the textbook in terms of the specific course. Lastly, a re-analysis of the entire course is done in order not only to evaluate the suitability of the textbook but also to find out particular materials or activities to compensate for any weaknesses of the textbook. This process can be a guideline for EFL teachers to systematically select the most suitable EFL textbook among many others and then to prepare additional materials and activities to fill the gaps after critically evaluating a textbook. This will contribute to the increasing effectiveness of an EFL course administration facilitated by the teachers and the target learning objectives can be achieved more successfully by target students.
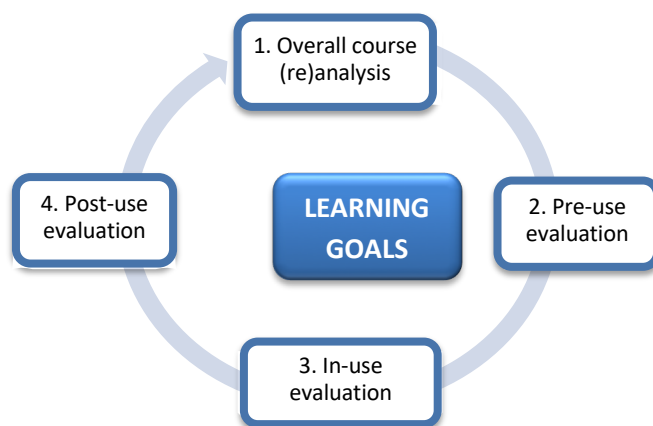

Figure 1. *The proposed model for EFL textbook evaluation process*

CONCLUSION

This paper reports on the current situation of how Thai public schools select an EFL textbook for use in their EFL program or curriculum. It was found that most schools have used various criteria, e.g. the suitability of a textbook for the national curriculum, the approval for use by the Ministry of Education, as well as considering reasonable prices and any other offers given by publishers. However, the current practices of the textbook selection process lack a systematic

and insightful textbook evaluation using an EFL textbook evaluation instrument suitable for the Thai context.

Thus, it is recommended that each EFL textbook be assessed using the newly developed EFL textbook evaluation checklist, based on the CEFR and CLT (Wuttisrisiriporn & Usaha, 2019). It is further suggested that all textbook evaluators should have a good understanding of the CEFR and CLT so that they can choose the right material that best serves the learning objectives and the national English language curriculum.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study chose the teacher participants only from Thai public schools in the Eastern Region as representative of the country, so researchers are encouraged here to conduct a similar study with a larger sample size and to turn their interest to other contexts, e.g. Thai private schools, international schools, vocational schools, and other regions. In addition, a situational analysis of how EFL textbooks are selected for higher CEFR-level learners (e.g., college or university students) can also be a new focus of future research.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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