

Evaluation of an ESL English Course Book: A Step towards Systematic Vocabulary Evaluation

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ABSTRACT This study was an attempt to evaluate English Pre-University text book of Karnataka state in India with respect to general criterion as well as vocabulary teaching. To this end two types of evaluation were performed. First a questionnaire was made with reference to some critical features extracted from different material evaluation checklists in addition to, a part related to different strategies of vocabulary teaching. The prepared questionnaire was completed by 26 Pre-University teachers from 12 randomly selected governmental and non governmental schools. Then merits and demerits of course book were discussed in detail. In the second phase, to analyze vocabulary of the book systematically some texts of the book were randomly selected, submitted to vocabulary profile to see if they are sequenced from the most frequently used words to the less used ones which according to Nation (1990) is an important factor in vocabulary teaching.

1. INTRODUCTION

To do book evaluation in a correct way, first defining characteristics and giving a good definition about course book is necessary. Although the definition which Ur (1996: 183) has given is a simple one, it is very useful and easy to understand. It reads as follows:

The term 'course book' means, a text book of which the teacher and each student has a copy and which is in principle to be followed systematically as the basis for a language course.

Therefore, from the above definition one can get that a course book must have at least being available in the hand of students and teachers, and used systematically in a course of study, and a course of study in this article refers to an English course of study.

As Ur (1996) puts forth, in some places course books are taken for granted while in others they may not be used at all. In that case the teacher works according to a syllabus or according to his or her own program, and uses text book or supplementary materials as the need arises. A third, 'compromise', situation is where a course book is used selectively, not necessarily in sequence, extensively supplemented by other materials.

The problem arises when we speak about selecting the course book, a book which must be used in a homogeneous class or in the worst situation for a heterogeneous class in a course of study. So, which quality must that book have to

meet the needs of every single individual member of the class? If it is so, is it necessary to use a course book?

Of course answering the last mentioned question depends on some other factors such as, style of teaching and accepted way of teaching in the related institution. Because of the problems that exist in using just one textbook for different students some are against using a course book for one of the possible following reasons (Ur 1996):

Inadequacy: Every class or better to say every learner has their own learning needs and no one course book can supply these satisfactorily.

Irrelevance: The topics dealt within the course book may not necessarily be interesting for the class.

Limitation: A course book is confining and it may lead to boredom and lack of motivation on the part of the learners.

Homogeneity: Course books have their own rational and they do not cater for variety of levels of ability and knowledge that exist in most classes.

Over-easiness: It may be too easy to follow, and teachers may find themselves as mediator of its content.

On the other hand, mostly teachers prefer to use a course book, because by using a text teachers can regulate and program the time. Furthermore, learners also prefer to have a textbook since they consider learning seriously, and they have a purpose. It seems that the possession of a course book may carry a certain

prestige (Ur 1996). The following advantages of using a course book in the class, also add to its importance: having a framework and syllabus, ready made texts and tasks, economy, convenience, guidance and, autonomy

It is said that a learner without a course book is more teacher-dependent. While developing materials for a class is a thorny job, now with a variety of textbook available on the market each with a different methodology and syllabus, it can be much more difficult to choose the best suitable book for a particular teaching situation.

Hence, in this situation the importance of book evaluation is clear. A thorough evaluation pave the way for teaching staff of each organization and policy makers to have this ability to discriminate amongst all the available books in the market and considering weak, as well as strong points of each book educators can choose the most appropriate book. Thus, through identifying strengths and weaknesses in textbooks, optimum use can be made of strong points, and weaker points can be adapted or substituted from other books (Cunningsworth 1995: 14).

Therefore, as a key area in English Language Teaching (ELT), the significance of material design and evaluation has grown steadily since materials, especially authentic materials are not simply the everyday tools of the language teachers; they are an embodiment of the aims and methods of a particular teaching/learning situation (Zhang 2007). Evaluation is basically a matching process, which concerns matching learners' needs to available solutions (Hutchinson and Waters 1987: 97). Low (1987: 21) reminds us that "teachers generally need to screen materials, in order to predict their suitability for particular classes".

It is beneficial to consider some guidelines for evaluation and considering criteria of book evaluation. Various writers suggested some criteria more or less containing similar criteria that can be applied by teachers and even learners for optimum use of the existing materials. Cunningsworth (1995: 7-15), points out that course book should: correspond to learners' needs, help to equip learners to use language effectively for their own purposes, facilitate students' learning process, have a clear role in mediating the target language and the learner.

Ur (1996) provides a checklist consisting of 19 items in assessing a course book in general. In comparison to Cunningsworth's criteria Ur's checklist is more general and lacks different sub

skills. As a complimentary criterion for evaluation, Nunan's (1989) list of successful listening, speaking, reading, and writing can also be applied.

In terms of when to evaluate a course book, Cunningsworth (1995) illustrates that evaluation can engender three types, viz. 'pre-use', 'in-use' and 'post-use' evaluation. According to him, pre-use evaluation tends to be the most difficult kind since there is no actual experience of using the course book. From another perspective, in-use evaluation is a kind of evaluation for suitability, involving, matching the course book against a specific requirement including the learner's objective, the learner's background, the resources available, etc. on the other hand, post-use evaluation refers to an assessment of a text book's fitness over a period of continual use which help teachers to decide whether to use the same text book in future or not.

In addition, Cunningsworth (1995: 1) differentiates two approaches between impressionistic overview and in-depth evaluation. He suggested that an in-depth evaluation is necessitated. So based on the above definition, the present study is a kind of post-use or reflective evaluation with more emphasis on vocabulary teaching and learning, an aspect of language which is usually taken for granted. Surely, the results will be of great help for policy makers, staff and those who have a hand in writing materials according to school syllabus.

2. THE PRESENT STUDY

Having a course book in the trend of teaching and learning is a vital element and is looked upon as an indispensable vehicle, selecting a proper book or providing a course book is of great importance too. Furthermore, teaching vocabulary as a building block of language is tricky and not as simple as it may be considered.

With this idea in mind and considering vocabulary as an important and may be as the first element involved in learning, the aim of this study is two-fold. First, evaluation of an English text book against the available and common criterion, second evaluation of vocabularies of the book systematically. The second part is what makes this study different from others.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this section the subjects, the book under

study and different materials which were used for the preparation of the main questionnaire will be explained in detail.

3.1 Participants

A total number of 26 Pre-University teachers from 12 different governmental and non governmental schools of Mysore, India participated in the study. They were asked to fill in the questionnaire prepared by the researcher carefully and honestly and issue their opinions about the book followed by conducting a short interview with the teachers.

3.2 Materials/instruments

A) Questionnaire: Three major steps are proposed for evaluations which are, selecting a unit from a volume of the text book, deciding and defining the criteria for evaluation, and analyzing and evaluating the effectiveness of the textbooks in matching their claims with learners' needs (Rea-Dickens and Germaine 1992).

As it is mentioned above and for the purpose of selecting criterion for evaluation, which is the ultimate goal of this study, the researcher browsed different checklists provided by different authors (Chastain 1971; Williams 1983; Rivers 1987; Cunningsworth 1995; Ur 1996, Banfield and Quirke 2008 to name but a few).

Finally it was decided to select those features which are common, at the same time necessary for evaluation. Then, a questionnaire was prepared by the researcher considering vocabulary teaching as well.

The outline of the questionnaire which consists of 5 main parts and different subparts in the form of yes/no questions are as follows:

- i. Logistical factors, two questions about the availability and price of the book
- ii. Pedagogical factors, or methodology, with two subparts of 'skills' and 'contents'
- iii. Human factors, including 'teacher friendly' and 'learner friendly' factors
- iv. Vocabulary factors, entail questions regarding vocabulary learning strategies which were added by the researcher and finally two open ended question regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the book along with the extras that the book needs.

Totally, there were 38 questions within

different parts. To get the validity of the test the researcher consulted some experts in the field and made some modifications, also the reliability of the test was estimated which was 0.76.

B) Vocabulary Profile: To evaluate the book under study, having in mind its vocabulary as well, vocabulary profile was utilized. Vocabulary profile is a part of complete lexical tutorial which was developed by Tom Cobb. This site was designed with the intention of improving English and even French systematically. It gives the number of type, token, word families, type token ratio, function and content words ... and even divides the vocabularies into 1000, 2000, Academic and off-list words and in a nut shell all the information regarding vocabularies frequency of a text.

3.3 The Books under Study

The books which served as a corpus of the present study and were content analyzed for the evaluation were second Pre-University English books under the title of 'enable' prepared by the Subject Committee for English and appointed by the Directorate of the PU (Pre-University) in government of Karnataka, India reprinted in 2007. In India each state has its own book which is different from the other states. There are two educational systems such as Central Board and State Board consist of governmental and non governmental school.

Including 14 units, the book consists of prose and poetries. It also accompanied by a work book being learner-centered, as stated in the book, to overcome some of the problems posed by a large heterogeneous class where the teacher function as a facilitator than as an explicator of grammatical rules.

In the introduction of the text book it was mentioned that a similar workshop was held in January 2005, where teachers from all over the states help put the text together. Two months later teachers from four zones of the state met separately to take a critical look at the experimental edition of the text. So in keeping with this demographic approach, the book is designed within the framework of the revised syllabus so it is a result of collaborative work.

3.4 Procedures and Data Collection

To achieve the goal, second Pre-University

English book was evaluated from two different aspects and in two different steps. First, a number of Pre-University teachers were asked to scrutinize the book with the mentioned criteria in the questionnaire followed by having an interview with them.

In the second phase, to reveal if the used text was appropriate considering the difficulty and frequency of vocabularies and its sequence from easy to difficult texts, after excluding short poems of the book 5 texts were chosen randomly (units 1, 4, 6, 10, 13) . The selected texts were pre-processed; proper names were omitted, typed and submitted to the vocabulary profile the results of which will be shown in the ensuing parts.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

For ease of understanding this part will show the results in two consequent parts of A and B. First, the results of data gathered from the questionnaires will be analyzed then vocabulary difficulty and sequence of the texts will be discussed.

Part A: This part deals with the general criteria of the above mentioned English text book. Although writing a book in a multilingual country with cardinal rule of ‘ different strokes for different folks’ is a tough job generally speaking from the analyzed data it was revealed that the book is acceptable from the view point of the majority of English teachers who are familiar with the book. Figure 1, shows teachers’ views about the book. As it is clear from the figure nearly 70 % of the teachers believe that course book has those criteria that is fundamental and necessary for each

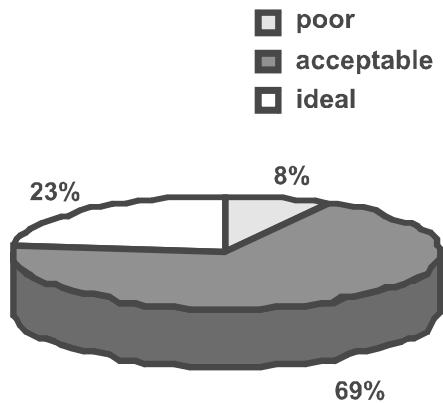


Fig. 1. Teachers’ view regarding the acceptability of the book.

course book according to different researchers which was mentioned earlier. This is a good point regarding a course book, which is considered an inseparable part of classroom.

Considering the sub parts of the book namely logistical, pedagogical, and human factors along with its sub parts as content, skills and vocabulary teaching and strategies the results are illustrated in Figure 2 (except for the logistical factor). Because it was revealed that nearly all the teachers (95%) believe that the cost of the book is within the students’ budget and the book is available, so the book is an ideal one for the logistical factor. For a country like India, with such a diverse economical background it is a great achievement that their course book is both available for everybody and its price is reasonable especially for people of the lower economic social class. The government of India supports its people by providing them with different facilities to continue their education. Although, the price of pre-University book is reasonable, even for lower standards (educational level) in governmental school their course books are gratis!

Regarding the content, 92.3% of teachers believe that the book is culturally acceptable. One good point about the book is that it includes some

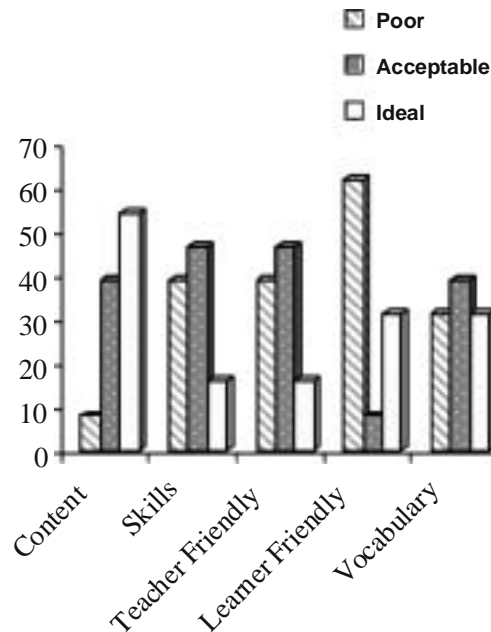


Fig. 2. Teachers’ opinions regarding each subpart

units which make students familiar with different aspects of their culture such as their history, culture and customs. Furthermore, at the end of each unit there is a part called "Note on the author" which gives a brief biography of the author which is a good idea. Not only does the book familiarized students with their culture, but also there are some units which familiar students with customs and culture of English countries as well as other countries by introducing their poems, writers... by including even some lines of them (a case in point is a given note about Brovka, a Russian poet, page 14 of the book, Shakespeare, page 37).

Likewise, 62% of teachers mentioned that the book is clearly organized and graded from easy to difficult. The book recycles previous taught materials to some extent. Since, according to Grant (1987) it is very important that language function and grammatical form appear several times after being introduced for revision practice and extension. In other words students' language is formed by recycling in different parts of the book and with different items so would be better to add some more recycling parts in the book. It also includes a test section at the end of the book showing model question paper and allocated time and it's scored so that students can be familiar with the final exam in this way (92%). Just 46% of teachers believe that the book intends to increase students' motivation from one unit to another, and it encourages learners to become independent and nearly 30% of them believe that the topics are not interesting for the students so it is important for decision makers to strive and improve this part.

In response to the question of gender discrimination, 92% of teachers think that the topics are more male dominated and women appeared less visible. Although to be honest, government discount the university fees for girls, which is the sign of considering both genders equal. Since the story of gender discrimination is debatable without any conclusion, the researcher prefers no to delve into this question and leaves it to further study.

A good course book should aim to teach major skills in a balanced way especially in a context where English is a medium of instruction an important criterion would be that text books should provide balanced and systematic training in all language skills William (1983). Although the book does not contain any extra- textual items such as tape, CD or video, fortunately at the beginning of

the book it was mentioned that the director of PU Education has initiated the process of setting up Language Laboratories all over Karnataka to provide them with the sample of acceptable language use. It is worth mentioning that there is a listening section in the students' work book which should be read by their teacher.

Nearly 69% of teachers had this idea that the book teaches principles of paragraph writing. Different kinds of writing have different conventions for their organization and expression. A course book should cover as many of these as is appropriate for the level and aims of the learners (Cunningwoths 1995). In the workbook it is mentioned that a total of 45 hours should be dedicated to writing and teaching cohesive Devices, note taking, summarizing, letter writing, report writing, and so on. It should be noted that work book need not be taught and learners should do the exercises on their own in pair or group.

Speaking is also embedded in pre-reading parts which force student to speak too and according to Hill and Thomas (1988) will best assist the reader to understand global meaning of the text as well. Almost, 84% of teachers point that, the book includes dialogue and role play or communicative activities.

Interest and authenticity are two important factors in reading. Authenticity which can be opposed to artificial according to Widdowson (1990) would be materials designed for native speakers of English used in the classroom in a way similar to the one it was designed for. For example, a radio news report brought into the class so students discuss the report on pollution in the city where learners live. In today's globalized world, examples abound, but the most commonly used perhaps are: newspapers, TV programs, menus, magazines, the internet, movies, songs, brochures, comics, literature (novels, poems and short stories), and so forth. Authentic materials keep students informed about what is happening in the world, so they have an intrinsic educational value. As teachers, we are educators working within the school system, so education and general development are part of our responsibilities (Sanderson 1999) despite its importance 56% of teachers mentioned that topics are not so authentic. Teachers' ideas reveal the positive points about comprehension questions have been framed in three levels which deal with details of the texts, reader's awareness and overall understanding of the texts.

As it is clear from Figure 2, although the book is the best from logistical point of view, regarding human factors especially learners, it needs to be improved. And 64% of teachers believe that the lay out of the book does not appeal to the students and lacks appropriate visual materials and it is not learner friendly at all. Hill and Thomas (1988) mentioned 3 reasons for including illustrations in the books as follows: to help sell the book, to break up the texts and to support the text which are used differently in the lower and upper level. The last reason which is of course the important one in educational course book is of great help to teach materials in a more effective and long lasting way. With more pictures subjects became more concrete especially for vocabulary learning pictures have a crucial role.

Although the book includes a guideline to the teacher just 50% of teachers are satisfied with the book and consider it teacher's friendly or suitable for the teachers to use it. They believe that still they need to do a lot of adapting in the classroom.

Hence, the aim of this study was to take a close look at the status of vocabulary and methods of vocabulary teaching the most and the best important strategies classified by Oxford (1990) was asked in the vocabulary part to see whether the book make use of those strategies in teaching or not. As Figure 2 shows nearly 40% of the teachers are satisfied with the vocabulary section. And 69% of the teachers stated that the book introduces general strategies of the vocabulary learning.

To achieve the purpose of evaluation with considering the status of its vocabulary the book was scrutinized by the researcher as well. It was revealed that although it entails some vocabulary strategies that introduce to students some of those strategies such as analyzing a word to its parts such as prefixes or suffixes, or introducing and giving examples, collocations, idioms and phrases or word pairs still it needs some major modifications.

First and foremost, the book does not work on simple pronunciation of the words putting aside stress, rhythm and so on. Cunningsworth (1995) mentioned that emphasis should be at least as much on the global aspect of phonology- weak forms, stress, rhythm- because the production of natural sounding connected speech depends on the speaker's ability to handle the sentence stress and intonation of English with the degree of

Table 1: Results of vocabulary analysis of the selected texts.

	F, Ty, To, P, text 1		F, Ty, To, P, text 2		F, Ty, To, P, text 3		F, Ty, To, P, text 4		F, Ty, To, P, text 5	
First 500	-,-,568,72.26%		-,-,504,76.02%		-,-,410,80.87%		-,-,419,68.35%		-,-,238,76.04%	
K1 words (1- 1000)	209,250,672,85.50%	173,220,555, 83.71%	148,175,456, 89.94%	178,206,493,80.42%	111,137,265,84.66%					
Function content	-,-,418,53.18	-,-,352,53.09%	-,-,280, 55.23%	-,-,298,48.61%	-,-,159,50.80%					
K2 words (1001-2000)	-,-,254, 32.32%	-,-,199,30.02%	-,-,175,34.52%	-,-,193,31.48%	-,-,105,33.55%					
AWL words	56,56,63,8.02%	37,37,44,6.64%	24,25,27,5.33%	19,20,30,4.49%	12,13,16,5.11%					
MED words (technical)	3,3,3,0.38%	8,8,9,1.36%	1,1,1,0.20%	20,21,21,3.43%	11,11,15,7.79%					
Off-list words	-,-,1,1,0.13%	-,-,4,4,0.60%	-,-,1,1,0.20%	-,-,2,2,0.33%	-,-,2,3,0.96%					
Sum	? ,43,47,5.98%	? ,43,51,7.69%	? ,21,22,4.34%	? ,60,67,10.93%	? ,14,14,4.47%					
	268+?,353,786,100%	218+?,312,668,100%	173+?,223,507,100%	217+?,309,613,100%	134+?,177,313,100%					

F= Families; Ty= Types; To= Token; P= percent; note: digits from left to right represent the numbers computed for F, Ty, To and P respectively.

appropriateness. In addition, knowing a word does not refer to just being familiar with the meaning of the words and as Nation (1990) stated, knowing a word means being familiar with the spoken form, written form, grammatical pattern, collocations, frequency, appropriateness, meaning, concept and association of that particular word while, this book does not tackle with the pronunciation of the word systematically at all. One great step in teaching pronunciation of the word, is to introduce and use the world wide IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet), which is very common, in every other English text books. In this way the book can increase students' autonomy and they will be independent forever. Since, the book does not contain any cassette or CD to be used inside and outside the classroom and students have to just rely on teachers' pronunciation including the pronunciation of the words in front of them in the form of IPA is very important.

Furthermore, students need to be familiar with various strategies of vocabulary learning such as semantic mapping, key word, flash cards.... Of course it is clear that during the limited hour of class time it is not possible to cover all the materials but mentioning some vocabulary strategies to be worked on by the students can be helpful.

The easiest way of vocabulary teaching is by highlighting new vocabulary in each unit. Unfortunately the book did not consider this elementary principle of teaching vocabulary. New

words are introduced in the traditional way of grammar-translation method in the form of a list of vocabulary and its definition in English, sometimes the book gives translation in Kannada (the language of Karnataka State) and a mini dictionary at the end of the book. One more point is that, the words are not contextualized at all.

Part B: The second part deals with the statuses of vocabularies of each unit. After pre-processing the selected text, they were submitted to vocabulary profile to be analyzed. Table1 shows the results of the analysis.

Nation (1990) divides English vocabularies based on their frequency into the first 1000 most frequently used words, then 2000, 3000, 5000, Academic words and 10000 words which are used rarely. In this regard vocabulary profile can help analyze the vocabularies of a text into the mentioned vocabulary group which is very important in systematic teaching of vocabulary. Since Nation (1990) argues that learners need to know the 2000, 3000 or so high frequency words of the language first, after these high frequency words are learned the next focus for the teacher is on helping the learners develop strategies to comprehend and learn the low frequency words. To have, a better understanding of the difficulty level and sequence of the units in that book Figure 3 will help more.

It is clear from the above diagram that in all the 5 texts the increasing rate of 500 frequent vocabularies to 1000 most frequent vocabularies is the same except in text number 1 in which the number of easy words is very low. While, as it is shown in the diagram text three consists of easy vocabulary more and in the same vein, the number of academic, technical, and high frequent vocabularies of text three is lower in comparison to text 1. Hence for, it would be better that the book does not start with unit 1. It is recommended that units 1 and 3 will be replaced. Other units are in the right place and each of them represents different vocabularies such as academic or technical words more than the others which is quiet reasonable. Of course, here just some units of the book were put into analysis randomly so if policy makers and writers consider these points the results of which will be a better book.

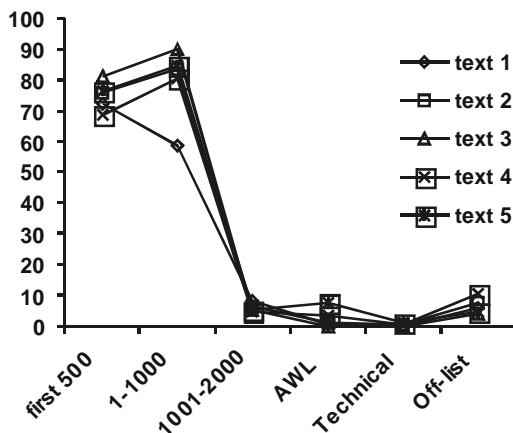


Fig. 3. Sequence of different frequency words of selected texts.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In bilingual and multilingual situations with different educational system and different socio-

economic people like India, a text book should be written and used judiciously, since it cannot cater equally to the requirement of every classroom setting. One way to amend and improve a curriculum is to improve the textbooks and the materials employed in the program. Henceforth, the present article aims at evaluating Pre-University course book in an ESL environment from two different aspects. To achieve the goal, based on available criterion for evaluation a questionnaire considering vocabulary learning strategies was conducted. Furthermore, some texts of the book were randomly selected and submitted to vocabulary profile to be analyzed regarding its vocabulary frequency. The results of data from questionnaire revealed that except some shortcomings that exist in the book generally it is acceptable by 70% of the teachers.

In addition the results of vocabulary analysis showed that it is better to change and do some modification in the sequence of presenting the text so the texts with more frequent vocabularies and as a result easier ones come first and texts with rare and much more difficult vocabularies occur at the end of the book.

Through the interview it was found that the book is not a tyrant in the classroom. Since some students enter central syllabus school from the beginning to which contain much more difficult syllabuses with English as a medium of instruction to 10 standards, then for first and second Pre-University they shift to non-governmental schools, so the book is easy for them and without much effort they can pass the course. While for those who live in rural areas or go to governmental school with their mother tongue as a medium of instruction and even a village library is the distant dream the book proves to be difficult. Since in India where it is alive in her villages schooling is on every parent's mind, but social as well as economic hierarchy determine affordability for a child to enter different schools with different facilities (Bayer 2007).

Catering to the needs of a second language learner in this setting is a complex task also to be reckoned with is the distinction which has to be made between English as a subject and English as a medium of instruction. But, it is often assumed that recognition of a problem is the first step towards solving it therefor, to create an ideal book in such a perplex situation it is recommended that the following steps should be taken:

Language teachers should judge the fitness

of the course book timely, so that policy makers can adapt the existing material so not to need adopting another book and save a lot of expense and efforts.

It is recommended to include and introduce IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) pronunciation system from the lower levels as well as designing a specific place to practice the new words and contextualizing new words more. Highlighting new words as the easiest strategy of vocabulary learning in the units should be also considered, so that students can remember and learn better.

Regarding the topics, it is idealized to pick up more controversial subjects to involve learners more and more in the process of learning. Updating topics to become more congruent with the taste of new generation which might be a bit different from what they used to be is also another way of involving students in the process of learning. And generally speaking including more exercises, to increase students' motivation and autonomy, to reach the final goal of education is recommended.

In selecting the topics specifically, it should be considered to select those which make the role of women more visible and to become more conscious of selecting gender neutral materials.

At the present situation and considering budget limitations, improving the quality of the book is a bonus. Selecting more appealing and colorful pictures of real people and real environment is also important from the view point of students and teachers.

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