

# Textbooks: A Teacher Passage To Teaching

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## Abstract

In the current debate concerning the dominant role of textbooks in language teaching, this paper looked at the perceptions of teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) regarding their textbooks and the interplay between their perceptions and their instructional practices. The paper first examined how 18 university EFL teachers in a Thai university perceived their textbooks. Then, the paper looked at the issue dealing with the relationship between these participants' perceptions of their textbooks and their actual classroom teaching performances. An analysis of qualitative data (interviews, classroom observations, journal entries, and written documents [e.g., EFL course syllabi and textbooks used]) helped the researcher categorize the participants' perceptions of their textbooks into four categories: (1) the applicability of the content in the textbooks, (2) the relevance or otherwise of the content, (3) the lack of systematic organization of the textbooks, and (4) the inaccuracy of the content. Furthermore, the conclusion was drawn that there was little (or almost no) relationship between the participants' perceptions of their textbooks and their instructional practices. Despite their negative perceptions of the textbooks, almost all participants adhered faithfully to textbooks' sequencing of the materials and the exercises.

*Keywords: EFL teachers; Teachers' perceptions; English textbooks; English teaching*

## บทคัดย่อ

ในวงการการสอนภาษาอังกฤษ ณ ปัจจุบัน ปัญหาหนึ่งที่ยังคงหาข้อสรุปไม่ได้คือเรื่องเกี่ยวกับบทบาทของครูเรียนที่เขียนขึ้นและพำนัชหรับใช้สอนนักเรียนที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ บทความนี้นำเสนอข้อมูลเกี่ยวกับความเข้าใจของครูผู้สอนที่มีต่อตัวครูเรียนภาษาอังกฤษดังกล่าว และผลกระทบที่เกิดจากความเข้าใจนั้นต่อการตัดสินใจของครูในการเลือกวิธีการสอน ใน การศึกษาความเข้าใจของครูผู้สอนที่มีต่อตัวครูเรียนภาษาอังกฤษที่ใช้อยู่ ผู้วิจัยได้ร่วบรวมข้อมูลจากครูผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษจำนวน 18 คน จากมหาวิทยาลัยแห่งหนึ่ง นอกจากนี้ยังเก็บข้อมูลในประเด็นที่เกี่ยวข้องกับความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างความเข้าใจดังกล่าวกับพฤติกรรมการสอน จากการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลเชิงคุณภาพ (การสัมภาษณ์ การสังเกตการณ์ในห้องเรียนบันทึกของครู และเอกสารที่เกี่ยวข้อง เช่น คำอธิบายรายวิชา และตัวครูเรียน) ผู้วิจัยพบว่าความเข้าใจของครูต่อตัวครูเรียนแบ่งได้เป็น 4 ด้าน คือ (1) ตัวครูในการนำมาใช้มีความเหมาะสม (2) เนื้อหาไม่สอดคล้องกับความต้องการของผู้เรียน (3) การจัดลำดับแบบฝึกหัดหรือกิจกรรมต่าง ๆ ในแต่ละบทไม่เป็นระบบ (4) เนื้อหาไม่ถูกต้องแม่นยำ นอกจากนี้แล้ว การวิเคราะห์

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## Current Status of EFL Textbooks

In the field of language education, textbooks are considered as powerful dominants. They have been purported to centralize language curriculum development and instruction particularly in EFL education. Sheldon (1988), for example, describes how textbooks dominate the teaching and learning of English. Textbooks are, "the route map of any ELT programme, laying bare its shape, structure, and destination, with progress" (Sheldon, 1988, p. 238). Vellenga's (2004) study echoes Sheldon's remarks further. She concludes, "The textbook plays an important role in English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom where it provides the primary (perhaps only) form of linguistic input" (p. 1). The significance of ELT textbooks is emphasized in McGrath's (2006) study in which he writes, "Coursebooks are a central element in teaching-learning encounters. They will tend to dictate what is taught, in what order and, to some extent, how as well as what learners learn" (p. 171).

Given the authority of language textbooks, recent scholarly efforts have clarified how EFL teachers perceive textbooks and how textbooks influentially shaped teachers' classroom instructional behaviors. Several EFL researchers have reported that EFL teachers often rely on their textbooks for their teaching despite their negative attitudes towards the textbooks. Sato and Kleinsasser's (2004) qualitative study, for example, examined teachers' beliefs about their textbooks and the influence that these beliefs have on teachers' instructional performances. The data these two researchers gathered from 19 EFL teachers (15 Japanese EFL teachers and 4 native English speakers) teaching at one high school in Japan helped them conclude that the beliefs these teachers have towards their textbooks have little (or almost no) relationship with their teaching performances. The majority of these teachers, as the researchers found, "followed a pattern of teaching unquestionably according to the textbook, even though they were not satisfied with and did not query their own practices" (p. 807). EFL teachers in Thailand share this ambivalence as is demonstrated by two qualitative studies by Hongboontri (2003) of 15 university EFL teachers and Panyalert (2005) of 11 university EFL teachers. Hongboontri and Panyalert similarly found that most teachers in their studies are dissatisfied with their textbooks. Nonetheless, they base their teaching largely on the textbooks.

Yet, in the light of what is known about the authority of EFL textbooks and the attitudes that EFL teachers have towards their textbooks, many questions remain unanswered. Thus, this study aims to develop an understanding and to explain the relationship between university EFL teachers' perceptions of their assigned textbooks and teachers' uses of those textbooks in the reality of their classrooms. Two research questions help frame the study.

journal prompts (adapted from Hongboontri's [2003] study) were distributed to the participants. (For six weeks, two journal prompts were distributed each week.) In total, 140 journal entries were collected.

### **Written Documents**

Throughout the process of data collection, samples of EFL textbooks used at the participating university were collected. These samples not only demonstrated the characteristics of these EFL textbooks but also provided a glimpse concerning the development and the selection processes of these textbooks (Silverman, 1993).

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze the data, transcribed interview data, classroom observation fieldnotes, and journal entries were coded using open and axial coding techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding was used to identify general categories of information contained in the participants' responses to the interview questions, the researcher's fieldnotes of classroom observations, and the participants' journal entries. To do this, the data from three different data sources were read and reread to look for both similarities and differences. These data were then labeled and grouped to form tentative categories. Next, an axial coding was employed to reorganize these tentative categories, moving from more general ones to create related and meaningful groups of data. By using axial coding, the researcher was able to not only analyze the gathered data more systematically but also relate them together in more complex and meaningful manner (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Finally, the analyzed data together with written documents were grouped into categories to bring together similar or distinct ideas, understandings, concepts, or themes on a particular issue under investigation (Mathison, 1988). The categorized data revealed how these participants perceived their textbooks and how their perceptions affected (if at all) their instructional practices.

The next section offered the results of this study and it was divided into three sub-sections: (1) the characteristics of EFL textbooks used at Princess University, (2) teachers' perceptions of their textbooks, and (3) teachers' uses of their textbooks.

## **Results**

### **The Characteristics of EFL Textbooks Used at Princess University**

In general, two types of textbooks were used in the four EFL courses offered at *Princess University*. The textbooks used in both Foundation I English and English Composition I courses were the in-house textbooks prepared by the teachers assigned to teach each course. These two textbooks, however, had some differences. The textbook

Josh, a novice American teacher, found that the content in her two textbooks for the English Composition II course was appropriate for the students in her class as this content was important for the students and also matched the objectives of the course. Josh stated;

*The actual material in there is good, especially for the essay writing. There are a lot of examples in the book, different styles of written essays. And then in different chapters there are tests. They go through different tenses and different new vocabulary. Very well, I think, they explain it.*

In brief, Natalie, Olivia, and Josh were satisfied with their textbooks. They similarly found that the content in their textbooks was appropriate for the students in their classes.

### **Relevance**

Almost half of the participants (seven teachers) found that the content in their textbooks was irrelevant to their students' needs. Such irrelevance, in turn, minimized students' motivation to learn English and eventually could impede the learning and achievement of some students. Three Thai teachers of the Foundation I English course had this to say about their textbooks.

*The textbook was designed by the course leader of our team and it emphasized just only the grammatical structure or the parts of speech or how to make a complete sentence. It's very boring for students because we emphasize just only the grammar structure. The activities in the textbook are quite boring because they're just the same in each chapter. (Tricia)*

*The textbook is too dry because only grammar use is presented. (Jane)  
The textbook is very easy. It should be more difficult. It should be more reading techniques, or vocabulary usage, or maybe about grammatical issues. It's not only verb, subject, and parts of speech. (Pamela)*

A Thai teacher, Tracey, who had been teaching at *Princess University* for five years and was dissatisfied with the relevance of the content in the textbook, had this to say about the textbook. "The information in the textbook like facts and figures, for example, is not relevant to my students. I don't think that's interesting for my students." Another teacher teaching the same course with Tracey shared more or less the same feelings towards the English Composition I textbook. A Thai teacher who has just moved back from America, Patricia, agreed, noting, "The teaching material for Composition I doesn't have enough examples, or sometimes the explanation is not clear."

Three teachers (two Thais and one American) using *Know How* (a commercially available textbook) for their Foundation II English courses found that the content in

Another Thai teacher teaching English composition I, Aaron, added;

*It [English Composition I textbook] is not really good for the course especially for the students. Our teaching material is just a copy of chapters which we are going to teach. The materials mostly are from commercial textbooks about paragraph writing. They're quite illogical because the point of each chapter is quite different. The sequence of the teaching material is quite different from the course title.*

Further examples of teacher dissatisfaction with the unsystematic organization of the English Composition I textbook were provided by two American teachers and one Thai teacher. The first American teacher, Josh, commented;

*The Composition I textbook is copied - many things're put together. And so it's confusing to where I am at or which page we should be on. Because they're [students] like, "Which book is that?" They don't have the same book to look at and I have to be like, "Do you have your supplementary materials?" And I can't show them exactly what the books look like because I don't have exactly what they have. So something getting on the correct page of the book is an achievement.*

The second American teacher, Lauren, wrote this down in one of her journal entries to express her dissatisfaction with the English Composition I textbook.

*The textbook I'm using for my Composition course is just a compilation of bits and bits from different sources of materials. Personally, I don't think they were put together well. The whole material, I mean, lacks of focus. It sort of goes here and there. There's no sense of direction or whatsoever. Often I feel like keeping repeating the same things to the students over and over again.*

One new Thai teacher who joined Princess University a few months before this research was conducted, Pamela, shared the same problems with those of Chris, Aaron, Josh, and Lauren. The lack of systematic organization of the English Composition I textbook made her uncertain as to how she could use the textbook and how she could deliver the content from the textbook to her students. She commented;

*I'm quite confused about the textbook of Composition I. When the team leader said, "OK, this is the book that we have to teach," I don't know how I could use it in my class. The book that the team leader did is quite complicated. I didn't know how to start, how to take it to teach the students. I am the new teacher. Is it the new style of teaching here?*

One Australian teacher with seven years' teaching experience also criticized the textbook that she herself prepared for her own course for being unsystematically

Given that Josh was a native speaker of English, she was dissatisfied with the inauthentic language samples contained in *Know How*. She complained, "There are certain portions that I find like, "When I speak, I don't use that format." Or maybe something will be very correct but it isn't the way people speak. So, I let them [*the students*] know. "Yeah, that's correct. But you wouldn't probably say it or hear it said."

These three participants' dissatisfaction with their textbooks arose from the inaccurate content of their textbooks. In general, Patricia and Johnny similarly complained about the errors they found in their Foundation I English textbook, whereas Josh criticized the inauthentic language used in *Know How*.

### Teachers' Uses of their Assigned Textbooks

The differences in the participants' perceptions of their textbooks described in the previous section prompted a further investigation of how these participants used their assigned textbooks in their daily teaching, and to what degree their instructional performances depended on their assigned textbooks. Surprisingly, the researcher found that most participants based their teaching, to a large extent, on their assigned textbooks despite their perceptions of them. Most participants used their textbook (1) to build and shape their lesson plans and (2) to prepare students for the examinations.

#### To Build and Shape their Lesson Plans

The majority of the participants explained that they used their textbooks as a framework for preparation for their instruction. Two teachers who were satisfied with their textbooks had this to say about how they used their textbooks in their teaching.

*I follow the topics from the book. I use the textbook to prepare the lesson and activities for my students. (Natalie)*

*I usually plan my lessons by going through the textbook first and then capturing the language focus presented in the textbook. I also use the text to prepare handouts and activities for my students. (Olivia)*

Many of the participants who earlier expressed their dissatisfaction with their assigned textbooks, however, based their teaching, more or less, on the textbooks.

*I design my lessons on what we had to cover in the materials. (Pamela)*

*My teaching is based on teaching materials. (Tricia)*

*My teaching is based on the course book provided. (Suzanne)*

*I'm using Know How book. I just follow each item for each unit. (Amy)*

*I am, of course, following the textbooks and the schedule. (Aaron)*

*My teaching was largely based on the textbook that I am required to use. (Laura)*

In brief, the analyzed data here indicate that the participants' perceptions of their textbooks had little (or almost no) effect on how these participants used their textbooks in their teaching. No matter how the participants perceived their textbooks, the majority of them used their textbooks to not only build but also shape their lesson plans.

### To Prepare Students for the Examinations

Six participants offered reasons for their reliance on the textbooks to plan their lessons to prepare students for the examinations. For example, Laura who previously stated that she used the textbook to build and shape her teaching wrote in one of her journal entries that, "I have to work though the materials otherwise students are disadvantaged at exam time. What do they need to know for their exams?" For the same reason as that of Laura, Jane explained her need to follow the textbook.

*I need to follow the materials because I know that the examination at the end of the semester will be based on the content in the teaching material. So, if I teach something else, then my students will certainly have difficulties with the examinations.*

Despite her dissatisfaction with the textbook, Patricia also planned her teaching around the content in the textbook to prepare her students for the examinations. She said, "For my teaching, I pretty much try to follow the guidelines and to cover certain parts in the textbook given to me. I have to catch up with the exam."

Although he was dissatisfied with the lack of systematic organization of his English Composition I textbook, Chris based his teaching on the textbook to prepare his students for the examination. He explained, "I'm much more forced to follow the curriculum and the textbook, as it is page by page. Because there're other teachers working in that course and we have a common exam."

Likewise, Lauren's textbook was the major element in her teaching practices. Basically, her teaching was centralized on the content in her textbook to accommodate the examination. In the same journal entry in which she earlier recorded her dissatisfaction with the lack of systematic organization of the English Composition I textbook, she mentioned further, "As much as I despise it [*the English Composition I textbook*], I have to do it because the examination will be solely based on the textbook. If I don't do it, my students surely would have difficulties in the exam."

Like the other five teachers mentioned here, Josh's teaching was largely based on the textbooks to prepare her students for the examinations. In her English Composition I class, Josh worked through the textbook with her students. She explained;

Interestingly, for the six participants mentioned here (Laura, Jane, Patricia, Chris, Lauren, and Josh), textbooks were a major element in their teaching practices. Overall, these teachers based their teaching on the textbooks to accommodate and to prepare their students for the examinations.

In the next section, a summary and discussion will be provided to answer the two research questions posed in this particular study.

## **Summary and Discussion**

In this particular section, the researcher revisited the analyzed data and used them to answer the two research questions posed in the Introduction. As a consequence, new questions could possibly be generated from such data. Wolcott (1990) suggested how to write a conclusion for qualitative research. He contended, "My advice is to work toward a conservative closing statement that reviews succinctly what has been attempted, what has been learned, and what new questions have been raised" (p. 56). With this in mind, the researcher returned to the two questions to guide this Summary and Discussion.

### **How do University EFL Teachers in One Thai University Context Perceive the Textbooks They are Required to Use?**

The analysis and presentation of data gathered from interviews and journal writing revealed participants' diverse perceptions of their textbooks. Of 18 participants, only two were satisfied with their textbooks as they found that the content in the textbooks was applicable to their students. On the contrary, the majority of the participants were dissatisfied with their textbooks on the bases of the textbooks' lack of relevant content, lack of systematic organization, and the inaccuracy of its content.

Yet, additional questions need to be raised to further reveal how other bodies involved in the teaching and learning of these four EFL courses at *Princess University* perceived these textbooks. For instance, would other EFL teachers at *Princess University* apart from those providing information for this data set recognize the shortcomings of these textbooks? What do teachers from other disciplines think about these textbooks? How do students perceive these textbooks? How do EFL teachers and students in other contexts perceive these textbooks? As research widens, the answers to these research questions would not only provide better insights into how actual users perceive textbooks but also help to add depth to an understanding of the processes related to EFL education including curriculum development, instruction, and learning. Schubert (1986) emphasized the need to explore the perceptions that teachers and learners hold toward subject matter including "the usual texts, instructional materials, curriculum guides, and related policy documents associated with subject matter" (p. 300). Schubert contends that;

justify the necessity to memorize English grammatical rules included in textbooks? If teachers felt a need to change their English teaching practices, how would the gathered, analyzed, and presented data here help them to embark on such a journey? What do EFL learners feel about their EFL teachers' (heavy) dependence on textbooks? How do EFL learners recognize and use grammar rules to benefit their EFL learning? The added perspectives and understanding of such inquires would help not only clarify the relationships between teachers' perceptions of their textbooks and the teachers' teaching practices, but also provide a deeper insight into EFL teaching and learning.

As textbooks continue to dominate teaching and learning processes in both EFL education (Huang, 2006; McGrath, 2006) and other fields (Alred & Thelen, 1993; Hewson, Beeth, & Thorley, 1998), it is important to document and define the perceptions that teachers (not only from the realm of EFL education, but also from other disciplines, including mathematics, social studies, and science, among many others) hold towards their textbooks. Data gathered from real classrooms and learning environments would not only help reveal the relationships between teachers' perceptions of their textbooks and their actual classroom behaviors, but also lend a deeper insight into the educational process.

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