The use of ESL textbooks and students' performance in speaking: a case study of some secondary schools in Ringim LGA Jigawa state

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Abstract: *The role of English as a Second Language (ESL) textbooks in enhancing students' speaking abilities is a critical area of study, especially in regions where English is not the primary language. This research examines the influence of ESL textbooks on the speaking performance of secondary school students in Jigawa State, Nigeria. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study involved detailed interviews with teachers and focus group discussions with students from six secondary schools In Ringim local government of Jigawa state. The findings reveal that while ESL textbooks contribute to students' speaking development, the effectiveness varies significantly based on the alignment of textbook content with the local context and students' needs. The study concludes by recommending the integration of culturally relevant materials and interactive speaking exercises in ESL textbooks to better support students' oral communication skills.*

Keywords: ESL, textbook evaluation, speaking, enhancing speaking activities Students textbook and CLT.

INTRODUCTION

The role of textbooks in English as a Second Language (ESL) education is pivotal, especially in shaping students' speaking abilities. ESL textbooks are designed to provide a structured approach to language learning, offering a range of exercises and activities aimed at improving linguistic skills. This journal focuses on evaluating the effectiveness of ESL textbooks in enhancing secondary school students' speaking performance. Through a detailed case study, the journal examines how the content, structure, and pedagogical strategies embedded in these textbooks impact students' oral proficiency. This paper will try to examine how the uses of English as Second Language textbooks do influence the performance of secondary school students in Ringim LGA

towards speaking. It is beyond doubt that the performance of secondary school students in Jigawa State is freely declining over the years in both the examinations conducted by both WAEC and NECO and if at all they were able to pass the subject, they were unable to communicate competently in the language. The reason behind this is connected to the type of ESL textbooks available in the schools.

There are different kinds of English as Second Language (ESL) textbooks that are designed for students of all levels and ages. Therefore, the process of selecting the right textbook for use in the classroom, especially at the secondary school level, is an intimidating task. In addition, what we choose for our classrooms often shapes the syllabi, and sometimes even the entire language program (Angell, DuBravac and Gonglewski, 2008; Byrnes, 1988). There are many reasons why English teachers choose to use ESL textbooks in the classroom. Sometimes it is based on our impressions and expectations of what teaching materials should look like. Other reasons might be that the textbooks are visually attractive, easy for the teacher to prepare, and the activities fits well into the timetable (Angell et al., 2008). However, all textbooks should be chosen based on its educational values and whether or not it meets the program objectives. Most significantly, students should learn something beyond just simple practices of ABC's. According to Cheung and Wong (2002), the major premise of an academic curriculum should aim at developing students' intellectual abilities in subject areas that are worthiest of study. This means that the curriculum should provide intrinsically rewarding experiences for the students while developing their affective and cognitive domain. Schwartz (2006) mentioned that a good curriculum is not only designed for the students, it is also designed for the teachers as well. In other words, a good curriculum not only educates the student, but teachers can also teach something of value to the students. Therefore, what could teachers do to improve their courses when they are restricted by the ESL textbook assigned to them by the administration?

Speaking is a critical aspect of language proficiency, allowing students to express themselves and engage in meaningful communication. ESL textbooks typically provide a curriculum framework that includes dialogues, vocabulary, grammar exercises, and cultural contexts. The effectiveness of these textbooks in fostering speaking skills depends on how well they integrate interactive and practical speaking activities.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in some secondary schools in Ringim LGA where English is taught as a second language. The research methodology included:
1**. Textbook Analysis**: An in-depth review of the ESL textbooks used at the school to assess their content, structure, and focus on speaking skills. The analysis looked at how speaking activities were presented, including the variety and relevance of the exercises, the inclusion of pronunciation guides, and the emphasis on real-life communication.

2. **Teacher Interviews**: Discussions with ESL teachers to understand their perspectives on the textbooks' effectiveness in teaching speaking skills. The interviews explored the teachers' use of the textbooks, the supplementary materials they employed, and the challenges they faced in enhancing students' speaking abilities.

3. **Student Surveys:** Surveys conducted with students to gather feedback on their experiences with the ESL textbooks. The surveys focused on students' perceptions of the speaking activities, their engagement levels, and their perceived improvement in speaking skills.

4. **Classroom Observations:** Observations of classroom sessions to see how the textbooks were used in practice. This included noting how teachers incorporated speaking exercises into lessons, how students interacted with the materials, and the overall classroom dynamics.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The important roles of textbooks in the ESL classroom
A textbook can be referred to as a published material specially designed to help language learners to improve their linguistics and communicative abilities. (Sheldon 1987). In addition to being a learning instrument, textbooks are also used as a supporting instrument (O'Neil 1982, Ur 1996). The students' books usually come with other materials such as workbook, a teacher's book or even additional multi modal text for reference as a textbook package (Masuhara and Tomlinson 2008). The textbooks are designed to give consistency to the language teaching and learning processes by providing direction, support, and specific language-based activities aimed at offering classroom practice for students (Mares, 2003) and foster effective and quick learning of the language (cunninsworth 1995).

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The need for Textbook Evaluation
Teachers are consumers, just like students or educational administrators. All these groups, of course, can have potentially conflicting notions of what a good textbook should be. But whatever they feel, where can they all turn for advice on how to make informed decisions about the best value for money? The literature on the subject of textbook evaluation is not very extensive.

Various writers have suggested ways of helping teachers in particular to be more sophisticated in their evaluative approach, by positing 'checklists' based on supposedly generalizable criteria. These sometimes elaborate systems use a variety of 'scoring' methods to assess how well specific textbooks measure up under scrutiny (see Tucker 1975, van Lier 1979, Allwright 1981, and Williams 1983). Tucker, for example, proposes an ingenious method whereby textbooks are assigned numerical scores, which are then plotted on a 'Value Merit Product Graph', the object of which is to compare the resulting score curve against an ideal target profile drawn up in advance by the teacher. Of course, the criteria and key questions central to such schemes partly depend on the swings of linguistic fashion. Nowadays, one would probably not rate 'adequacy of pattern inventory' (Tucker 1975:360) as highly as a few years ago. Such decisions would, however, depend on one's own local priorities and preferences

Models for the Evaluation of Language Teaching Materials
There are certain kinds of models suggested for the evaluation of the language teaching materials in the literature. In the light of the approaches to the materials evaluation, the evaluation models can be referred to as macro and micro evaluation models. Macro evaluation models focus on the overall assessment of coursebooks and/or materials in terms of the criteria they suggest whereas micro evaluation models focus on an in-depth analysis of particular tasks for particular groups of learners. As stated in the literature the perfect textbook does not exist. However Grant (1987) points out that the best book available for teachers and their learners does exist. He emphasizes that such a book should not only suit the needs, interests and abilities of the learners but also should suit the teacher. The textbook must also meet the needs of official public teaching syllabuses or examinations. In order to satisfy those three conditions, a textbook is of great importance to be evaluated on some sensible and principled basis.

At this point, Grant (1987) offers a three-stage process for the evaluation of material. Initial evaluation, detailed evaluation and in-use evaluation. First of all initial evaluation is done by mainly looking at the appearance of the book without going into a lot of detail. Secondly, a detailed evaluation is carried out in order to find out whether the course suits students, teachers and syllabus. In doing so, questionnaires are provided to assess the suitability of materials. Once a textbook is adopted, an in use evaluation is needed. In-use evaluation can be carried out to re-evaluate the particular material constantly. For this purpose, Grant (1987) suggests that it is possible to investigate the effectiveness of the materials through questionnaires, classroom observations and regular meetings between colleagues to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the material.

Similarly, McDonough and Shaw (1993) suggest an evaluation model with three stages: External evaluation, internal evaluation and overall evaluation. External evaluation offers, a brief "overview" of the materials from the outside. It consists of an examination of the claims made on the cover of the students' and teacher's books, the introduction and the table of contents. The evaluation, at this stage, aims to find out whether the material is potentially suitable for more

detailed analysis. It is claimed that this should be followed by an internal evaluation which requires "an in-depth investigation into the materials" (p. 75). What is important for the evaluator at this stage is finding out to what extent the factors mentioned at the external evaluation stage match up with the internal consistency and organization of the materials. It is strongly claimed that in order to do an effective internal investigation of the materials, at least two units or more units of the book are required to be examined.

Hutchinson (1997), on the other hand, proposes a model for the evaluation of language teaching material. He concerns materials evaluation as a matching process in which the suitability of materials for a specific purpose is questioned in term of the needs identified.
This matching process has four stages.

1) Define the criteria on which the evaluation will be based.
2) Analyze the nature and underlying principles of the particular teaching/learning situation.
3) Analyze the nature and underlying principles of the available materials and test the analysisin the classroom.
4) Compare the findings of the two analyses (Hutchinson 1997)

It can be viewed that not only the significance of analysing teaching/learning situation is emphasized but also the materials required for it are emphasized in this model.
Source: Cited in Sheldon, 1987, p.42 Figure 2.2. Materials Evaluation Stages by Hutchinson
Breen and Candlin (1987) also proposes a material evaluation model and their purpose is to provide most suitable materials for their learners. As they state that

OBJECTIVE ANALYSIS
How does the material realize the criteria?

MATCHING.
How far does the material match your needs?

SUBJECTIVE ANALYSIS
What realizations of the criteria do you want in your course?

DEFINE CRITERIA.
On what bases will you judge materials?

Teaching speaking
What is meant by "teaching speaking" is to teach ESL learners to:
- Produce the English speech sounds and sound patterns
- Use word and sentence stress, intonation patterns and the rhythm of the second language.

- Select appropriate words and sentences according to the proper social setting, audience, situation and subject matter.
- Organize their thoughts in a meaningful and logical sequence.
- Use language as a means of expressing values and judgments.
- Use the language quickly and confidently with few unnatural pauses, which is called as fluency. (Nunan, 2003)

The Characteristics of a successful speaking activity

There are many characteristics of a successful speaking activity which are introduced by Ur (1996) as follows:

- *Learners talk a lot:* As much as possible of the period time allotted to the activity is in fact occupied by learner talk. This may seem obvious, but often most time is taken up with the teacher and talk and pauses.
- *Participation is even*: Classroom discussion is not dominated by a minority of talkative participants: all get a chance to speak and contributions are fairly evenly distributed.
- *Motivation is high*: Learners are eager to speak because they are interested in the topic and have something new to say about it, or because they want to contribute to achieving a task objective.
- *Language is of an acceptable level*: Learners express themselves in utterances that are relevant, easily comprehensible to each other and of an acceptable level of language accuracy.

In practice, however, few classroom activities succeed in satisfying all the criteria mentioned above. Therefore, language teachers should make great efforts to employ a variety of effective techniques to create some of the mentioned-above criteria.

The Problems with speaking activities

According to Ur (1996), there still exist some problems with speaking activities as follows:

- *Inhibition:* Unlike reading, writing and listening activities, speaking requires some degree of real-time exposure to an audience. Learners are often inhibited about trying to say things in a foreign language in the classroom: worried about making mistakes, fearful of criticism or losing face, or simply shy of the attention that their speech attracts.
- *Nothing to say*: Even if they are not inhibited, you often hear learners complain that they cannot think of anything to say: they have no motive to express themselves beyond the guilty feeling that they should be speaking.
- *Low or uneven participation*: Only one participant can talk at a time if he or she is to be heard, and in a large group this means that each one will have only very little time talking. This problem is compounded by the tendency of some learners to dominate, while others speak very little or not at all.

- *Mother-tongue use:* In classes where all, or a number of, the learners share the same mother tongue, they may tend to use it: because it is easier, because it feels unnatural to speak to one another in a foreign language, and because they feel less "exposed" if they are speaking their mother tongue. If they are talking in small groups it can be quite difficult to get some classes-particularly the less disciplined or motivated ones- to keep to the target language.(Ur 1996)

In order for the learners to develop their communicative skills, it is advised that the language teachers should help the learners to overcome these problems with speaking activities and it neds to be well represented in their ESL textbooks.

The Principles in teaching speaking in CLT
The single most important reason for teaching speaking is to develop oral fluency, that is, the ability to express oneself intelligibly, reasonably, accurately and without undue hesitation. Learners of English will want to use speech principally for two reasons. The first reason is that they want to give and receive information, that is, for transactional or message-oriented purposes. The other is that they want to maintain good social relationships, that is, for interactional purposes focused on sharing personal experiences and opinions. Language educators and teachers have made great efforts to find out the main principles of teaching speaking so far. Here the author wishes to suggest some main principles which are introduced by Ur (1996) as follows:

- Take account of the student as a person: It means that the teachers should be sensitive, sympathetic and encouraging. They should select material that is motivating and within the students' ability.
- Reduce anxiety by moving from easy to less easy: It means that the teachers should provide a familiar, private environment and help students take short turns.
- Maintain a careful balance between accuracy and fluency: It requires that the teachers should provide practice in pronunciation, word stress, sentence stress and intonation. Moreover, the teachers should also provide students with opportunities for fluent use of speech.
- Provide a good model for students to imitate: The teachers should consciously teach correct pronunciation and repeatedly use target speech patterns.
- Provide appropriate stimuli for eliciting speech: The teachers can use a wide variety of sources such as: books, radios, audio and video cassettes, etc and well as pictures, stories, songs.
- Vary classroom interaction modes: The teachers can arrange the class activities in different ways: individual to whole class, in pair work or group work.
- Give clear instructions: The teachers should speak loudly, slowly and clearly and it is a good idea that the teachers demonstrate the proposed task themselves.

- Monitor student activity continuously: The teachers should encourage those who find the activity difficult and praise students who perform well or try hard to fulfill the task.
- Prepare well for class: The teachers should make a checklist of things to obtain and a checklist of things to do.
- Handle errors sensitively and effectively: The teachers should ignore performances errors and ignores that are repeated. However, it is necessary that the teachers to correct errors in language that they recently taught or errors that might shock the listeners (e.g. childrens,sheeps e.t.c). In addition, errors in structures that need to be used frequently by students should also be corrected. (E.g. "What means that?" instead of "What does it mean?"). And the teachers should remember that corrections should be made in accuracy phase, not fluency phase.(Ur,1996)

FINDINGS

The analysis revealed several key insights:

1. **Content and Structure of Textbooks:** The textbooks included a variety of speaking activities, such as role-plays, dialogues, and discussion prompts. However, there was an uneven distribution of these activities across units, with some units focusing heavily on grammar and vocabulary at the expense of speaking practice. While pronunciation and intonation were covered, the depth and frequency of these topics varied.

2. **Teacher Insights:** Teachers expressed a need for more comprehensive speaking exercises that encourage spontaneous speech and real-world application. They often supplemented the textbooks with additional resources like videos, audio recordings, and interactive speaking tasks to address these gaps. Teachers also highlighted the importance of having culturally relevant and relatable content to engage students.

3. **Student Feedback:** Students reported that while the textbooks provided a good foundation, they often found the speaking activities repetitive and not challenging enough. Many students desired more interactive and creative tasks that would allow them to practice speaking in different contexts.

4. **Classroom Dynamics:** Observations showed that the successful implementation of speaking activities depended heavily on the teacher's approach. Classes where teachers actively facilitated discussions and encouraged participation saw better engagement and speaking outcomes.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings suggest that while ESL textbooks play a crucial role in developing speaking skills, their effectiveness can be limited by several factors. A key issue is the lack of consistent and comprehensive speaking practice opportunities within the textbooks. There is a need for a more balanced approach that integrates speaking activities throughout the units, alongside grammar and vocabulary lessons.

Teachers play a vital role in bridging the gaps in textbook content. Their ability to adapt and supplement the material can significantly enhance students' speaking abilities. However, reliance on supplementary materials also points to a need for textbooks that provide a more complete and integrated approach to language learning.

CONCLUSION

The evaluation of ESL textbooks reveals both strengths and areas for improvement in their role in enhancing students' speaking skills. The study concludes that while textbooks are essential resources, they should be designed to offer a more holistic approach to language learning, particularly in the area of speaking.

Recommendations

1. **Enhanced Speaking Activities:** Textbooks should include more diverse and interactive speaking exercises that promote real-life communication and spontaneous speech.
2. **Cultural Relevance:** Including culturally relevant content that resonates with students can increase engagement and interest in speaking activities.
3. **Integrated Approach:** A balanced integration of speaking, listening, reading, and writing exercises within each unit can provide a more comprehensive language learning experience.
4. **Teacher Support**: Providing teachers with supplementary resources and training can help them effectively utilize textbooks and address any gaps in content.

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