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## A Course Book Evaluation of the American English File Series

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### Abstract

The present study investigated the American English File series the new edition from the perspective of English Language teachers. The evaluation was done on the basis of a quick reference checklist prepared by Cunningsworth (1995). A total number of 10 EFL teachers who had taught these books before were selected and participated in the study. The data gathered was qualitatively analyzed and the results were reported. Based on the opinions and viewpoints of the participants, the American English File series are suitable for the EFL/ESL contexts and can be beneficial and useful as a reliable resource in English classes.

**Keywords:** *Evaluation, Course Book, Cunningsworth's Criteria, American English File Series*

### Introduction

English Language Teaching (ELT) is affected by many factors such as teachers, teaching context, teaching methods, learners and textbooks. Among these factors textbooks, called course books, have a fundamental and vital role in every classroom. They are seen as resources in obtaining the aims and objectives of the course and they help learners fulfill their needs. According to Cunningsworth (1995), textbooks are sources of activities for learner practice and a good reference for learners' problems in learning grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and different skills. They can be stimulating and support less experienced teachers and reflect learning objectives. The role of a course book is to be at the service of students and teachers.

Textbooks can affect students' learning. They have a clearly identified objective and include what learners are expected to achieve during a course. They have a clear and balanced syllabus and can be followed by students and teachers. As mentioned by MacDonough & Shaw (2003) textbooks are the observable feature of a teachers' methodology. Therefore, the process of choosing a suitable course book which contains all the aims and objectives of the class and can fulfill the needs of the learners is of great importance.

### **Literature Review**

Researchers have always considered examining ELT course books around the world. Tomlinson (2001) mentioned published research about materials development has led to materials evaluation. Ghorbanchian et al. (2014) evaluated Iranian high school English textbooks in terms of vocabulary, grammatical structures and compatibility between reading comprehension texts and grammar exercises. They attempted to show that English American headway and English American File books were at the same level of difficulty and they found no compatibility between the grammatical structure and reading comprehension passages in each unit and also between high school text books and English American headway and English American File books regarding the order of presentation and content.

Alavinia and Siyadat (2013) did a comparative study on the English textbooks used in Iranian Institutes. They mainly focused on American English File 1, American Cutting Edge 1, American Headway 1 and New Interchange 1. The researchers came to the result that a convenient website can be very useful and helpful in making the English learning process motivating and attractive for the learners and the newly published American English File 1 was more preferred and suitable than the three counterparts for it seems to have a more up-to-date content, more beautiful coverage and the helpful website. Gutiérrez Bermúdez (2014) conducted a research on material evaluation using New English File series. He concluded that this material can be suitable if used in a particular context.

In another study done by Haghverdi and Ghasemi (2012), the previous edition of American English File books were evaluated based on Littlejohn's evaluative framework (1998) to find out the merits and demerits of these books. It is worth mentioning that the present study is different from the aforementioned paper in that here the new edition of the American English File series is considered and also the study is done based on another perspective and the books are evaluated based on a different checklist prepared by Cunningsworth (1995). Vakilifard, Ebadi & Aftahi Zangeneh (2015) worked on vocabulary learning strategies in American English File books based on Ranalli's framework (2003) and their findings revealed that the books' perspective towards words and treatment of vocabulary strategies were not satisfactory.

In another study Shahriari and Tabrizi (2014) evaluated American English File books based on the criteria mentioned in Cunningsworth's book (1995) and the conclusion was that these books met the standards of a good test book. It needs to be mentioned that the difference between the present study and the previous one is that new editions of American English File books are

evaluated here and the idea of students are not taken into account and the data analysis process is different in that here there is no quantity- based information.

A paper was published by Mukundan et al. (2011) about the considerations that need to be taken into account in the development of provisional English Language textbook evaluation checklists. The developers considered validity, reliability and practicality in the process of checklists construction. In another paper Mukundan et al. (2011) tried to refine their checklist in an ongoing project. They did a focus group study. As a result of this study, 14 items were added to the previous checklist.

### **The study**

A course book should fulfill the needs of students, teachers, administrators and all stakeholders; it should also meet the students and teachers' needs and reflects the objectives of the course. The purpose of the current study is to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of American English File series. Therefore, based on this objective, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. According to the aims and approaches of the course, to what extent are these course books effective?
2. How is the design and organization of the total course book package?
3. According to language content, how are these course books influential?
4. To what extent are all four skills covered and integrated in these course books?
5. How much are the topics skillfully selected?
6. What approaches to language learning are taken by the course book?
7. Is there enough guidance for the teachers who will be using the course book?
8. How are the practical considerations?
9. To what extent are the subcomponents of the language dealt with in the course books?
10. Are the learners' needs considered in the course book?

### **Method**

#### *Materials*

The materials of this study are American English File series in six levels of starter,1,2,3,4,5 currently been taught in different institutes and colleges in Iran. It should be mentioned that these books were chosen intentionally since these course books where published recently and it is significant to investigate and evaluate new English text books in order to identify how much they are effective and helpful and how much they can fulfill the needs of teachers and learners. Furthermore these books claim that they use real topics and real language and can be used everywhere and they can get everybody talk. The American English File series are as follows:

- Latham-Koenig, Ch., Oxenden, C. & Boyle, M. (2015). American English File Starter. Oxford University Press.

- Latham-Koenig, Ch., Oxenden, C. & Boyle, M. (2015). American English File 1. Oxford University Press.
- Latham-Koenig, Ch., Oxenden, C. & Boyle, M. (2015). American English File 2. Oxford University Press.
- Latham-Koenig, Ch., Oxenden, C. & Boyle, M. (2015). American English File 3. Oxford University Press.
- Latham-Koenig, Ch., Oxenden, C. & Boyle, M. (2015). American English File 4. Oxford University Press.
- Latham-Koenig, Ch., Oxenden, C. & Boyle, M. (2015). American English File 5. Oxford University Press.

### **Instruments**

There are many checklists which can be used for evaluating and selecting EFL/ESL textbooks. One is the quick reference checklist developed by Cunningsworth (1995). This checklist comprised of 44 questions based on the different aspects of evaluation. These questions are grouped in 8 parts. Part one deals with the aims and approaches of the books and includes 4 questions. Part two is about the design and organization of the books and contains 7 questions. Part three deals with language content and has 5 questions about grammatical, lexical and pronunciation information of the books. Part four which is about skills includes 6 questions about all the four skills i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing. Part five deals with topic which contains 7 questions about variety and range of topics in the books. The sixth part deals with methodology and contains 6 questions about the approaches to language learning taken by the course books. Part seven is about teachers' book with 5 questions. And the eighth part which is the last, deals with practical considerations and contains 4 evaluative questions. The checklist is in the form of open-ended questions.

### **Procedure**

#### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Since only one institute in Mashhad was using the new series of American English File books and other institutes were using the previous editions of the books, the questionnaire was given to ten teachers from this institute who had taught the books for some terms. In order to give the teachers enough time to think and reflect on the questions, the questionnaires were collected a few days later. As the teachers' view points and ideas about these books were analyzed qualitatively, they were interpreted as a whole and are reported in the results section.

### **Results and Discussion**

In this part the teachers' views about the American English File books will be reported and discussed. Regarding the aims and approaches of the books, it should be said that the aims of the books correspond with the teaching program and with the needs of the learners and the books

are suited to the learning and teaching situation. It is believed that these books are comprehensible enough if matched with the background and level of the students and can be a good resource for students and teachers. Furthermore, these books are flexible enough and allow different teaching and learning styles.

About the design and organization of the books, it should be mentioned that the course book package at each level contains a student's book, a teacher's book, CD, and a workbook. Different parts are related to one another and can be even used as self-study books. The content of the books is sequenced on the basis of complexity, learnability and usefulness of the material. There is adequate revision and recycling in the books and there are reference sections for grammar and vocabulary so can be suitable for individual study. The books have a clear layout and it is easy to find your way around the course book.

Regarding the language content, the American English File series cover the main grammar items appropriate to each level and take learners' needs into account. This package is adequate for vocabulary teaching in terms of quantity and range of vocabulary. The books also include material for pronunciation work and individual sounds, word stress, sentence stress and intonation are covered. These books deal with the structuring and conventions of language use above sentence level for instance how to take part in conversations, how to structure a piece of extended writing and how to identify the main points in a reading passage.

All the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) are covered adequately and there is material for integrated skills work. There are sufficient reading materials and the passages and associated activities are suitable for students' levels and interest. Listening material is well recorded and authentic and accompanied by background information, questions and activities which help comprehension. The material for spoken English is well designed to equip learners for real life interactions. The writing activities are suitable in terms of amount of guidance, control, degree of accuracy, organization of longer pieces of writing and use of appropriate styles. There is enough variety and range of topics and the topics are of genuine interest to learners. The topics help expand students' awareness and enrich their experience. The topics are sophisticated enough in content and within the learners' language level.

Regarding the methodology of the books, it should be said that CLT method is mostly taken by these books and high level of active learner involvement is expected by the books. Communicative abilities are emphasized and the learners are expected to take a degree of responsibility for their own learning.

As the package contains teachers' books, the role of the teachers is considered as important and viewed as vital. The teacher's role is to act as a presenter of material, manager of learning resources and activities and informant for the students. There is enough guidance for the teachers who want to use the books and there are enough supporting materials. The teacher's book is comprehensive enough and adequately covers teaching techniques, language items and culture-related information. Also, the keys to exercises are given for the teachers.

About the practical considerations of the American English File series, it needs to be mentioned that the appearance of the books is attractive for learners and they are strong and long-lasting. They are easy to obtain and the package does not require any particular equipment.

### **Conclusion**

There are lots of published materials for English Language Teaching (ELT) in the market; as a result, it is a challenging task to select a suitable one for the classroom; therefore, it is necessary to evaluate the course books which are available in the market to be able to choose the best ones.

There are many criteria that can be used for the evaluation of books and lots of checklists are suggested and prepared by different writers. Some of the most important general criteria for evaluation and selection purposes are presented by Cunningsworth (1995) in a quick reference checklist which was used in the present study to evaluate the American English File new series.

The results of the study revealed that American English File series – the new edition- can be reasonably suggested for the EFL/ESL classes due to many merits which were found in these books. Although there is no book which can claim not to have any drawbacks and shortcomings, this series of books are suitable to be used as the main source for English classes.

The findings of the present study can be helpful and useful for teachers, instructors, and material developers, supervisors of the private institutes, test developers, school principals and even learners who are engaged in EFL / ESL situations and who are searching for the most suitable course book available in the market for their different purposes. Publishers and authors can also benefit from the findings of the present study because they can consider the advantages of these books in order to develop new materials for different contexts.

Some limitations need to be considered for the present study. There are lots of checklists and frameworks for textbook evaluations each of which focus on a special aspect of the books and evaluate the course books based on some specific criteria and naturally or purposefully ignore some other aspects of the books. This study cannot claim that all the aspects of the selected books were taken into account and the chosen course books were completely analyzed. There are still lots of other issues to be studied and considered in American English File series.

There are also some suggestions for further studies and research. American English File series can be evaluated and analyzed for the psycholinguistic aspect and cultural matters. Moreover, there are lots of other ELT books available in the market which are widely used by language schools and institutes and need to be evaluated.

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