

Research paper

Evaluating Textbooks in Iranian EFL Context; *Vision 1* in Focus

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Abstract

This study was an attempt to evaluate the *Vision 1* textbook and explore whether all the language skills were covered by the current English textbook *Vision 1* in Iran by the Ministry of Education. To this end, an evaluation checklist was distributed among 30 high school teachers in Isfahan, Iran. It was carried on during the first semester of the schooling year 2023-2024. To perform an effective internal inspection of the material on the part of the participants, it was important to examine all units of the textbook. The analysis of data indicated that most of the participants favored this textbook since it could meet the criteria within the evaluation checklist. However, the teachers were not satisfied with the vocabulary part. They argued that the words were not accompanied by their phonetic transcription in English. Teachers were not satisfied with the grammar area either. Finally, the pedagogical and theoretical implications of the study are presented.

Keywords: Iranian EFL Context, National English Coursebook, Textbook Evaluation, *Vision 1*

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Introduction

Textbook evaluation is a new trend in the language teaching process. As Tomlinson (2001) states, textbook evaluation is significantly important, leading to a better acceptance of the nature of a particular teaching-learning context. In fact, according to McGrath (2002), textbook evaluation is valuable for developing and administrating of language learning programs. Tomlinson (2001) states that teachers administrators, supervisors, and materials developers by evaluating the textbook as a linguistic activity can evaluate the effect of the materials on students. McGrath

(2002) also pointed out that textbook evaluation is also the main factor for developing and administrating the language learning programmers.

No doubt, textbooks play a prominent role in the teaching /learning process, as they are the primary agents of conveying knowledge to learners. Besides, one of the basic functions of textbooks is to make the existing knowledge available and apparent to the learners in a selected, easy, and organized way. Hutchinson and Torres (1994) argue that any textbook has a very important and positive part to play in teaching and learning of English. Tomlinson (2011a) defines a textbook as a book “which provides the core materials for a language-learning course” (p. 14) in which a variety of issues are covered considering the learning requirements of the students within a course period. Generally, such a book consists of activities related to four skills, grammatical and lexical information, and various language functions. Sheldon (1988) suggests that textbooks not only “represent the visible heart of any ELT program” (p. 237), but also offer considerable advantages—for both the student and the teacher—when they are being used in the ESL/EFL contexts. Nunan (1999) argues that “a textbook is the main component of any instructional program and it is difficult to imagine a class without it” (p. 54). According to Ahour and Ahmadi (2012), textbooks easily provide the knowledge to the learners. Therefore, to select a culturally and locally appropriate textbook that corresponds to the needs of the learners and teaching/learning requirements, textbook evaluation is required.

Effective evaluation relies on asking appropriate questions and interpreting the answers to them (Cunningsworth, 1995). Evaluation is widely acknowledged as a powerful means of improving the quality of education. In evaluating textbooks, several researchers, educators, reviewers, and reading specialists provide checklists as a tool to judge (Griffiths, 1995; Harmer, 1998; Miekley, 2005; Peacock, 1997; Sheldon, 1998;). Cunningsworth (1995) suggests a checklist

for the evaluation and selection of textbooks as Aims and approaches, Design and organization, Language content, skills, topics, methodology, teacher's book, and Practical considerations. Alamri (2008) provides a set of criteria for evaluating textbooks. The criteria are covered within twelve areas, such as; general appearance, Design and Illustration, Accompanying Materials, objectives, Topic Contents, Language Content, Social and Cultural Contexts, and Language Skills. Harmer (1998) proposes nine main areas that teachers should consider in evaluating the books; (1) price, (2) availability, (3) layout and design, (4) methodology, (5) skills, (6) syllabus, (7) topic, (8) stereotyping, and (9) the teacher's guide. The scoring system in this checklist is developed based on the descriptive answers provided by the users.

Litz (2005) in his study creates a series of textbook evaluation questionnaires. The questions provide seven areas: (1) practical considerations, (2) layout and design, (3) activities, (4) skills, (5) language type, (6) subject and content, and (7) conclusion/overall consensus. Each of these main categories also contains some evaluative items that are presented respectively for the student and teacher evaluation forms. In addition, Miekley (2005) specifically presents a set of criteria for reading comprehension textbooks based on twenty-two previously developed textbook evaluation checklists. It is a matter of fact that the method of selecting English language textbooks prescribed for students of different stages is unsatisfactory and away from being scientific. There is a need for an evaluative checklist as a supporting way for choosing textbooks.

The primary goal of learning English in Iran is to assist learners in promoting a universal understanding, becoming familiar with the science, literature, and art of English-speaking countries, and finding and accessing sources of information in English (Rahimi & Hassani, 2012). Recently, much research has been done to investigate the merits and demerits of the available textbooks. Findings showed that Iranian English textbooks often did not meet the primary purpose

of learning English in Iran. In addition, the Ministry of Education decided to prescribe a new version of English textbooks based on communication language teaching approaches. Thus, the current study was an attempt to answer the following question:

RQ. Does the current Vision 1 textbook in Iranian high schools comply with the standards to cover four language skills?

Literature Review

Textbooks play an important role in the context of learning and teaching. Although several ELT researchers examined the significance of the textbooks (e.g. Alemi & Mesbah, 2013; Garton & Graves, 2014; Richards, 2001; Riazi, 2003; Zohrabi & Nasirfam, 2024), textbooks are still considered to be the most significant elements of language teaching. According to Riazi (2003), textbooks have a significant role in language pedagogy the same as language teachers. Language teachers are supposed to select the appropriate textbooks based on the pedagogical needs of language learners. One approach to finding an appropriate textbook is textbook evaluation. ELT educators can use the outcomes of textbook evaluations to choose the required teaching materials according to the learners' needs and the educational context. More importantly, the effect of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodology on language education two decades ago resulted in enhancing the language learners' communicative competence. Textbooks can assist language teachers in providing the pedagogical materials most suitably. In addition, textbooks influence the learners' and teachers' perceptions of language learning. According to Alemi and Mesbah (2013), language teachers should be able to evaluate the current materials in terms of the advantages and disadvantages.

Concerning the textbook evaluation, several studies have been conducted in EFL and ESL contexts. In Iran and other countries, several projects have been carried out to evaluate TEFL

textbooks. For Instance, Tok (2010) examined the advantages and disadvantages English language textbook “Spot On”, which is used in state primary schools in Turkey. The results of the study indicated that the ‘Spot On’ textbook proved not well enough compared to a systematic in-depth analysis and the negative attributes were far more than its positive characteristics. In another study, Sahragard et al. (2009) examined the Interchange series, using Little John’s detailed framework (1998). The most significant finding of their evaluation was that in these series it is not learners who initiate the tasks.

Regarding the context of Iran and high school English textbooks, several studies have been conducted on the evaluation of previously published ones. Razmjoo (2007) compared Iranian high schools with private institute textbooks regarding communicative language teaching (CLT) principles. He concluded that although high school textbooks are not conducive to CLT implementation, textbooks used in private institutes greatly represent the CLT principles. Jahangard (2007) also conducted an evaluation to identify the merits and demerits of four EFL textbooks taught at Iranian public high schools. Jahangard examined the textbooks about 13 common criteria extracted from 10 materials evaluation checklists. Although most items in the checklist are considered valuable points, the rating system is descriptive and it is not possible to display the results graphically.

In another study, Yarmohammadi (2002) conducted an evaluation of the senior high school textbooks based on Tucker’s model revised version. The results of his evaluations showed a lot of shortcomings such as not authenticity of the textbook; interchangeable English and Persian names; and ignorance of Oral skills. RimaniNikou and Soleimani (2012) investigated the representation of cultural principles in Iranian and Turkish high school English textbooks and investigated the cultural references in these textbooks. To this end, they used Ramirez and Hall’s (1990)

categorization and carried out their analysis within a coding scheme with eight categories. They concluded that both Turkey and Iranian high school textbooks are not adequate to provide new information or broaden students' worldviews or cultural awareness. In their own words, "the findings of the study present the point that cultural principles are not utilized in the Iranian and Turkish high school textbooks" (RimaniNikou & Soleimani, 2012, p. 654).

In 2013, Farrokhi and Saadi conducted a rather different study and evaluated first-year high school Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of textbooks regarding tasks and speech acts and compared their perceptions with the actual content of their textbooks. The findings of the study showed that the learners generally had a positive perception of the tasks and the teaching of speech acts as being highly effective; however, they rated the language functions section of their textbook to be ineffective in this regard. So, a wide gap between the Iranian learners' perceptions and the actual content of their textbooks was observed (Farrokhi & Saadi, 2013).

In his study, Özdemir (2007) carried out an evaluation study to find out how the fourth-grade students in public schools and the fourth-grade English teachers evaluated the English course book "Time for English 4". To fulfill this aim, two questionnaires were administered to both teachers and students, and an interview was held with six teachers. The results of the study showed that both learners and teachers were satisfied with the course book in general, and they found it effective in meeting their needs related to language learning and teaching. The findings also showed that students were more satisfied with the course book than the teachers were.

Khameneh and Hashamdar (2021) explored to what extent "Vision 3" (the last volume of the English book series entitled "English for Schools") had the characteristics of a CLT syllabus based on teachers' points of view. To fulfill the objectives of this study, 60 male and female high school English teachers, teaching at different high schools answered an online questionnaire. The analysis

of the data indicated that EFL teachers had a positive attitude towards the English textbook based on the CLT principles except for cultural considerations. The conclusion showed that the book needs to be modified to include some aspects of cultural values about the target language culture.

In another study, Alemi et al. (2022) probed into the type and frequency of tasks in the Iranian high school English course books based on Nunan's (1999) framework. The results showed that the linguistic tasks were the most recurrent type, whereas some task types (e.g., affective and creative) were absent. Furthermore, the linguistic competence was overemphasized in these course books. In the same vein, Amiri et al. (2023) evaluated the vertical and horizontal *alignment* among the series' textbooks and lessons drawing on Bloom's revised taxonomy of *educational objectives*. The findings revealed that the lessons were tuned adequately, albeit accommodating mainly lower-order knowledge types and cognitive skills.

In a recent investigation, Zohrabi and Nasirfam (2024) explored whether teachers' tests align with the changes in textbooks or assess students' knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. The results indicated no match between the theory of the tests and the textbooks and showed that teachers' attitudes towards change of assessment tools result in the development of communicative skills.

Method

Research Design

The present study utilized a quantitative descriptive study to explore the Vision 1 textbook based on the language skills based on an evaluation checklist. The obtained results from the checklist were analyzed quantitatively for their frequency and percentage.

Participants

The participants consisted of 30 English language teachers working in three high schools in Isfahan, Iran (male=11; female=19). Based on convenience random sampling, they were chosen

randomly with different experience years. All of them were Persian native speakers ranging from 28 to 33 years old. There was an attempt to select those who had more than five years of experience to have a reliable evaluation of the textbook.

Instruments

The instrument used in this study was an evaluation checklist, adapted from Litz's (2005) and AbdelWahab's (2013) textbook evaluation checklists. To ensure the content validity of the checklist, its items were reviewed by three expert judges, and their comments were utilized in the final draft. To this end, some items were modified and replaced. In addition, it was piloted by 15 participants with the same characteristics as the main participants. Furthermore, utilizing Cronbach Alpha, the reliability of the checklist was evaluated and reported as .82, which was satisfactory for the study. It has 35 items with three sections. Each section has its subsections. Table 1 displays the different sections of the evaluation checklist and their related item

Table 1.
Different Sections of Evaluation Checklist Used in the Study

Sections	Subsections	Related Items
General Attributes	-Methodology	1-2-3
	-Suitability to Learners	4-5-6
	-Physical & Utilitarian Attributes	7-8-9-10
	-Efficient Outlay of Supplementary Materials	11
Learning-teaching Content	- General	12-13-14-15-16-17
	- Listening	18-19-20
	- Speaking	21-22
	- Reading	23-24
	- Writing	25
	- Vocabulary	26-27-28-29
Exercises	- Grammar	30-31-32-33
	-	34-35

In addition, the research material utilized to be evaluated in the current study was *Vision 1*. It was taught three hours per week. It includes four lessons. Each lesson consists of ten different parts such as (A) title page (B) Get ready (C) Conversation (D) New Words & Expressions (E) Reading (F) Grammar (G) Listening & Speaking (H) Pronunciation (I) Writing (J) What You Learned. It consists of different parts such as; a student book, workbook, and Class Audio CD (Recordings contain non-native speakers.) This textbook has been used for the first time in Iran without a thorough pilot study.

Data Collection Procedure

Data procedure was done among 30 high school teachers in Isfahan, Iran. It was carried on during the first semester of the schooling year 2023-2024. To perform an effective internal inspection of the material on the part of the participants, it was important to examine all units of the textbook. The participants were informed by the researcher about the purpose of the study. Then, the evaluation checklist was distributed among them to complete and return to the researcher. The collected data were entered into the SPSS (22. version) for analysis. The descriptive statistics; frequency, percent, valid percent, and cumulative percent were used to analyze the data.

Results

To answer the research question, which investigated whether the current *Vision 1* textbook in Iranian high schools complied with the standards to cover four language skills, the results of the evaluation checklist were analyzed. Table 2 illustrates the results.

Table 2.

Descriptive Analysis of the Evaluation Checklist

I. General attributes	SA	A	N/U	D	SD	Mean	St.D
A. The texts about syllabus and curriculum.							
1. It matches the specifications of the syllabus.	35.4%	24.8%	10.6%	16.8%	12.4%	3.69	2.09
B. Methodology							

2. The activities can be exploited fully and can embrace the various methodologies in ELT.	25.6%	20.3%	11.4%	19.6%	23.1%	3.05	2.55
3. Activities can work well with methodologies in ELT.	33.5%	25.4%	8.4%	11.3%	21.4%	3.66	2.91
C. Suitability to learners							
4. It is compatible with the age of the learners.	22.6%	12.9%	20.4%	22.5%	21.6%	3.29	2.61
5. It is compatible to the needs of the learners.	21.4%	31.6%	11.5%	10.9%	24.6%	3.11	2.11
6. It is compatible with the interests of the learners.	10.8%	9.2%	17.3%	36.1%	26.6%	3.48	2.64
D. Physical & utilitarian attributes							
7. Its layout is attractive.	30.4%	26.2%	5.6%	22.1%	15.7%	3.61	2.47
8. It indicates the efficient use of text and visuals.	13.3%	16.1%	14.4%	30.9%	25.3%	3.09	2.01
9. It is durable.	32.1%	15.9%	6.7%	24.8%	20.5%	3.74	2.66
10. It is cost-effective.	29.2%	11.7%	9.4%	18.7%	20.6%	3.61	2.91
E. Efficient outlay of supplementary materials							
11. The texts are supported efficiently by essentials like audio materials.	9.3%	5.5%	11.4%	37.7%	36.1%	3.82	2.33
II. Learning-teaching content							
A. General							
12. Most of the tasks in the texts are interesting.	11.6%	10.4%	12.1%	39.8%	26.1%	3.06	2.12
13. Tasks move from simple to complex.	21.8%	14.7%	24.8%	17.6%	21.1%	3.94	2.44
14. Task objectives are achievable.	14.4%	29.2%	10.5%	24.6%	21.3%	3.77	2.32
15. Cultural sensitivities have been considered.	18.7%	11.8%	5.0%	30.4%	34.1%	3.61	2.55
16. The language in the texts is natural and real.	30.4%	26.2%	5.6%	22.1%	15.7%	3.61	2.47
17. The situations created in the dialogues sound natural and real.	13.3%	16.1%	14.4%	30.9%	25.3%	3.09	2.01
B. Listening							
18. The texts have appropriate listening tasks with well-defined goals.	29.2%	11.7%	9.4%	18.7%	20.6%	3.11	2.91
19. Tasks are efficiently graded according to complexity.	30.4%	26.2%	5.6%	22.1%	15.7%	3.71	2.47
20. Tasks are authentic or close to real language situations	13.3%	16.1%	14.4%	30.9%	25.3%	3.19	2.01
C. Speaking							
21. Activities are developed to initiate meaningful communication.	30.4%	26.2%	5.6%	22.1%	15.7%	3.55	2.47

22. Activities are balanced between individual response, pair work, and group work.	13.3%	16.1%	14.4%	30.9%	25.3%	3.29	2.01
D. Reading							
23. Texts are graded.	31.4%	25.2%	4.6%	23.1%	15.7%	3.92	2.47
24. Texts are interesting.	30.4%	26.2%	5.6%	24.1%	13.7%	3.61	2.47
E. Writing							
25. Tasks have achievable goals and take into consideration learner capabilities.	32.1%	15.9%	6.7%	24.8%	20.5%	3.74	2.66
26. Tasks are interesting.	29.2%	11.7%	9.4%	18.7%	20.6%	3.51	2.91
F. Vocabulary							
27. The load (number of new words in each lesson) is appropriate to the level.	13.3%	16.1%	14.4%	30.9%	25.3%	3.09	2.01
28. There is a good distribution (simple to complex) of vocabulary load across chapters and the whole texts.	28.4%	28.2%	5.6%	20.1%	17.7%	3.22	2.47
29. Words are efficiently repeated and recycled across the texts.	13.3%	16.1%	14.4%	30.9%	25.3%	3.09	2.01
G. Grammar							
30. The spread of grammar is achievable.	29.2%	11.7%	9.4%	18.7%	20.6%	3.33	2.91
31. The grammar is contextualized.	25.6%	20.3%	11.4%	19.6%	23.1%	3.05	2.55
32. Examples are interesting.	30.4%	26.2%	5.6%	22.1%	15.7%	3.61	2.47
33. Grammar is introduced explicitly and reworked incidentally throughout the texts.	13.3%	16.1%	14.4%	30.9%	25.3%	3.09	2.01
I. Exercises							
34. They are learner-friendly.	28.2%	12.7%	10.4%	17.7%	20.6%	3.65	2.91
35. They are adequate.	32.1%	15.9%	6.7%	24.8%	20.5%	3.74	2.66

According to Table 2, generally, the participants had both positive and negative attitudes toward some aspects of the current *Vision 1* textbook. The following figures show the mean of each section with related items.

Figure 1.

General Attributes (Items 1-11)

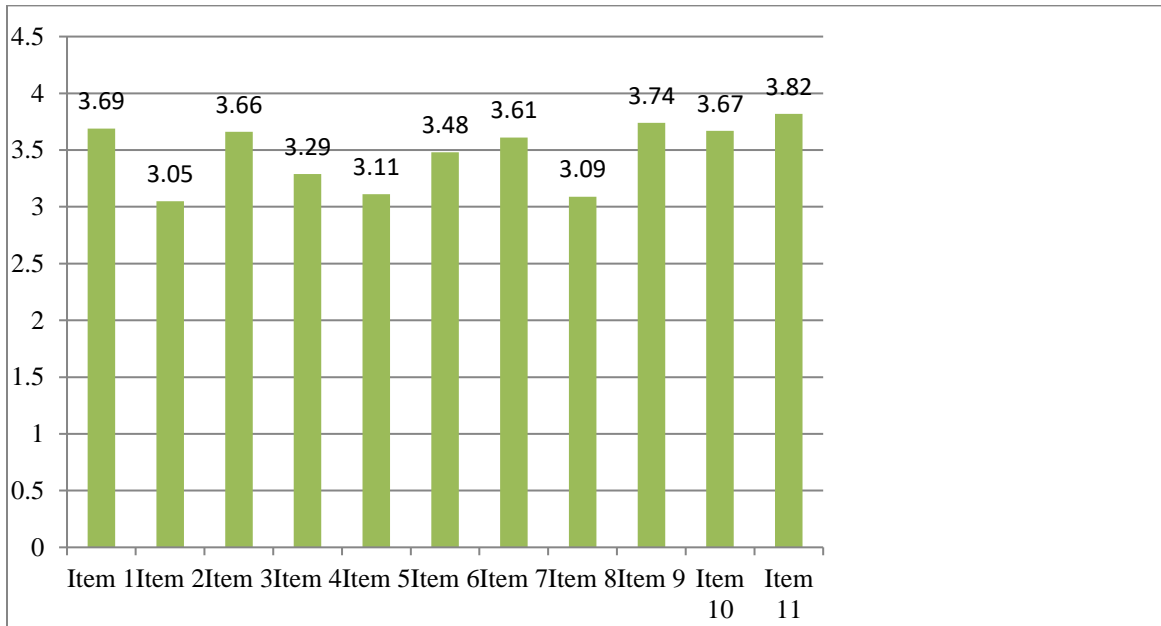
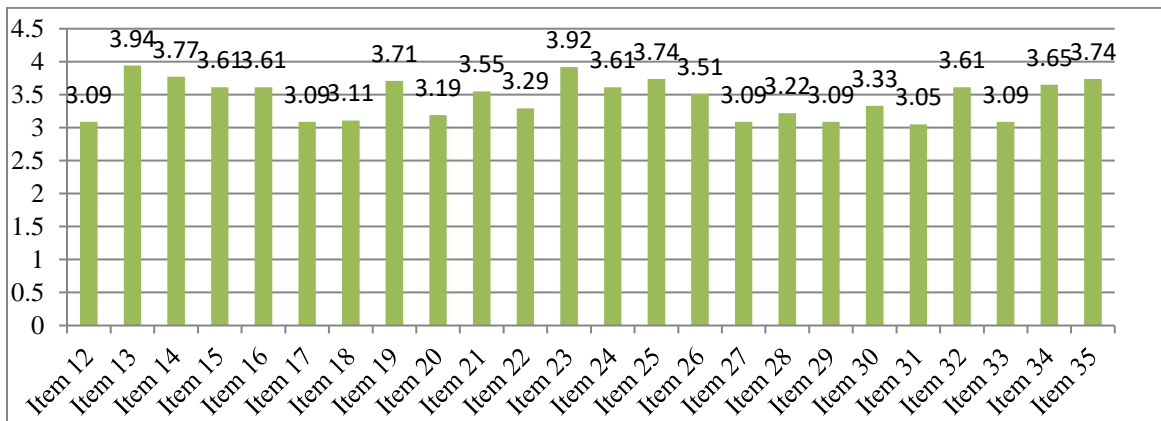


Figure 2.

Learning-teaching Content and Exercises (Items 12-35)



In addition, to see in which set of items namely 1-11 and 12-35 the proportions of the responses were significantly different, the Chi-square test was run on the frequencies of responses in each section. Table 3 summarizes the results of the Chi-square test.

Table 3.
Chi-Square Test on the Frequencies of Responses

	Chi-Square Value	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Pearson Chi-Square	16.405 ^a	2	.001
Likelihood Ratio	16.585	2	.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	13.506	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	35		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 71.91.

According to Table 3, there was a significant difference between the frequencies of the responses in the evaluation checklist ($\chi^2 = 16.40$, $df = 2$, $*p < .05$). The findings revealed that comparing the attitudes toward *general attributes* and *learning-teaching content/exercises* sections the participants favored the general attributes of *Vision 1* textbook, including the texts which

- matched to the specifications of the syllabus.
- The activities could be exploited fully and embrace the various methodologies in ELT.
- Activities could work well with methodologies in ELT.
- were compatible with the age of the learners.
- were compatible with the interests of the learners.

Discussion

The current study was set to evaluate the current English textbook *Vision 1* by a sample of Iranian EFL high school teachers. The findings revealed that most of the participants favored this textbook since it could meet the criteria within the evaluation checklist. However, the teachers were not satisfied with the vocabulary part. They argued that the words were not accompanied by their phonetic transcription in English. Teachers were not satisfied with the grammar area, too. Based on the results, the first element to be evaluated is its general appearance. According to the findings, the participants' perception of *General Attributes* was positive. The EFL teachers mostly agreed

with the texts about the syllabus and curriculum, matching the specifications of the syllabus, embracing the various methodologies in ELT, suitability to learners' age, needs, and interests, and provided by the supplementary materials. Their positive attitudes are confirmed by the ideas of Cunningsworth and Tomlinson (1995) on the good balance between visual material and written text. In the same vein, Nunan (2004) maintained that language learners' view of language is a blend of the way materials are organized and the types of textbook content and activities.

As far as the learning-teaching content of the textbook is concerned, the participants argued that Vision 1 was realistic, challenging, and interesting in terms of the subject and content. These results are in line with Pouranshirvani's assumptions (2017b), which are supported by Richards (2001b) who believed that the content of the textbooks should be different enough to meet different learning styles. In addition, in the same vein, Richards (2001) argued that the tasks in the textbooks should be flexible and dynamic. The findings are also consistent with the results of Khodabandeh and Mombini (2018), in which cultural content like socio-cultural factors, students' requirements, stereotypes, generalizations, and intercultural interactions should be taken into account in the content of the textbooks. However, the results showed that Iranian EFL teachers mentioned that the target culture is ignored in the textbook, confirming the findings of Asadi and Kiany (2014), as well. Finally, most participants had positive attitudes toward the inclusion of four language skills, except vocabulary and grammar exercises, which are provided by Thompson (1996) and Wu (2008), the two most common misconceptions of CLT are that it does not teach grammar and that it means teaching only speaking (Dailey, 2010). The outcomes are consistent with those of Salehi and Amini (2016), who indicated that textbooks should enable the languages in four skills.

Conclusion

Vision 1 textbook English features a communicative, task-based approach where the content and concepts reflect students' own lives and interests. There is a structured, active approach to grammar with regular revision and evaluation. This textbook is effective with mixed-ability classes and emphasizes learner choice, decision-making, and autonomy. Regarding the obtained information based on the checklist, *Vision 1* textbook English seems appropriate to be used, but it needs some revisions in terms of the vocabulary and grammar exercises. Innovations in education psychology geared the attention towards the students, recognizing diverse students' needs. Different learners have different needs. Students' needs have a significant impact on their motivation. If the learners are more motivated to learn, they are more interested in the context of learning. Thus, the innovations in educational psychology, elaborating on the reasons for learning, and the great need for English to address specific learners' needs, brought the rise of textbook evaluation in EFL/ESL contexts. The outcomes of the study might guide EFL high school teachers, syllabus designers, textbook writers, evaluators, and curriculum designers in planning and designing future textbooks. In addition, policymakers in the Ministry of Education can take into account the deficiency of the current *Vision 1* textbooks. For future research, it is suggested that the learners' attitudes are to be investigated. It is also recommended that the *Vision 1* textbook be compared and contrasted with other textbooks, as well as other evaluation checklists.

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Dr. Mohammadreza Sadeghi received PhD. in TEFL (Teaching English as Foreign Language). He has been working as an English language teacher in different educational and academic centres. He also published in national and international conferences and journals. His main research interests lie in the areas of language and gender, second language skills, pragmatic, discourse analysis, media research, and cross-cultural studies.