

A BRIEF REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON EFL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF COURSE BOOKS

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Abstract - Although research has mainly focused on coursebooks in a general sense, the number of the studies investigating English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' perceptions of course books has been limited. Thus, this study aimed to review the studies on EFL teachers' perceptions of course books. For this purpose, studies on the issue were reviewed to make recommendations for teachers and researchers. Studies reviewed were categorized under the sections of positive perceptions, negative perceptions and factors affecting teachers' perceptions. Results showed that while pre-service EFL teachers mainly have positive perceptions of course books, in-service teachers experience some problems regarding the lay-out and design of skills. It was also concluded that certain factors such as teaching experiences, institution, curriculum, teaching styles and learner characteristics affect teachers' perceptions. It was recommended that teachers should be flexible to convert course books into authentic materials according to their student's needs and levels. It was also recommended that further research should focus on the factors that affect EFL teachers' perceptions of course book.

Index Terms - English as a foreign language; course books; teachers; perceptions

I. INTRODUCTION

A course book is one of the most significant elements of the EFL teaching and learning processes as it brings several benefits for teachers. First of all, course books provide a useful framework for teachers to achieve the aims of the course. Course books which offer the necessary input addressing the teachers' goals and objectives positively contribute to the teaching process. Although teachers are knowledgeable about identifying the needs, interests and experiences of their particular group of learners, they may need a map with main routes to go along with allowing them to create their own modified parts [1, 3]. In this respect, course books first provide the teachers with a sense of security by clearly progressing specific learning goals in a coherent design. Second, they serve as a guide to the teachers for lessons. As an example, according to Arıkan [1], course books help teachers not to lose their ways as teachers. As teachers may not always come up with creative ideas for each topic to be revised, course books can enlighten teachers by offering some ideas and directing them to maps which show the routes to go. Third, they are the sources of input for EFL learners. In this context, Delen and Tavil [5] emphasize the

importance of course books by seeing them as the main source of input along with the teachers. Fourth, textbooks not only make the teachers confident but also demonstrate the knowledge in an organized, easy and selected way. In that way, both students and teachers may find necessary knowledge without risk of deviation. In other words, teachers can get rid of the risk of swimming in a river in which he or she does not intend to be as interests of themselves and their learners may take them away from what they really plan. Furthermore, course books expand general knowledge as well as the culture of the target language. Arıkan [1] reveals that the students see course books as not only sources of language but also a resource book about the Western World. The characters and life styles presented by course books reflect the target language culture. The names, the titles, even the photos give us hints about the country where the target language is spoken. Sometimes songs in course books even convey their messages through lyrics. Another advantage is that they can be seen as a self-study source for individual learners. Students in the same class can never be in the same levels. There are always some individual differences in learning, which is something that almost all the teachers know; that is why, course books present plenty of opportunities. In this sense, level based tasks and activities on book may be helpful for appealing to students with different levels. O'Neill [15] claims that course books allow teachers and learners to look ahead and look back on what they have done so far. In that way, they give a possibility of checking understanding and missing parts in learning. Considerable progress to make learners achieve one step forward of their capacity might be possible with such course books. Lastly, they are more practical to carry and keep all the time to read, see all the materials in an organized way unlike personal notes and papers supplied by teachers which may be lost easily [15].

The benefits mentioned above do not mean that there are not any potential problems regarding course books used in EFL teaching and learning contexts. Course books may cause some potential difficulties and problems for teachers and learners. First, the lack of authenticity is one of the most crucial problems in many course books. For instance, Richards [17] argues that course books are specifically written for classroom usage and do not represent the real language. In other words, they are not so functional in the ways through which cultural elements of the

target language are represented if language is believed to be provided within a cultural context. Especially in lower grades, songs in listening activities are not authentic songs adjusted to the levels of learners. Second, course books may not satisfy the needs and interests of students. In other words, *textbooks are for students. To meet their needs, the textbook must have not just the English language or communication skill content demanded by the curriculum, but it must also fit the needs of students as learners of English* [13; p. 417]. Third, course books may restrict creativity of teachers. In other words, they could have the tendency of following the course book in a strict way without adding any extra materials supporting and enriching the lessons. Moreover, course books may cause laziness in teachers' capacity of creativity. Last, the content in the book may not match with students' cultural values. That is to say, they cannot internalize what they have learnt with what they already know in their prior schemata. Despite all these difficulties and problems encountered while using course books, teachers are indispensable in the learning process as they can create a beneficial, effective and facilitated learning environment. Their perceptions of course books and their abilities of solving problems caused by course books are directly related to each other. Apart from having positive effects, teachers' perception of course books may create some problems.

EFL teachers' perceptions of course books seem as a vital factor that may affect teaching and learning processes. As stated by Mcgrath [12; p. 1], since "teachers' attitudes to course books are likely to have an impact on how they use them and learners' attitudes, and learning, will be affected by how teachers use them, it seems vital to seek to understand what these attitudes are". For that reason, how teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards course books influence the learning process should be examined. If the teachers' perspectives are positive towards course books, there are many reflections of it in learning. First, when students and teachers both enjoy revising the course book, the quality of learning and teaching increases. Second, as teachers like using course books, they give various exercises and homework from course book. Thus, students have a chance of practicing language from a ready portable source in a systematic way. Third, it becomes practical as it may help students to carry their source with them all the time. They may have opportunity to revise some parts again and again wherever they want. Furthermore, dealing with errors and giving feedback becomes easier for teachers.

Teachers might also have negative perspectives towards course books due to several reasons. First, as teachers do not enjoy using course book so much, they avoid giving homework from course book, which deprives students of more chance to practice. Second, if teachers are not good at designing a learning programme including writing, speaking, reading and listening activities, they may have the risk of emphasizing particular skills more than the others. In other words, some skills may be overshadowed by the others. To sum up, teachers' positive perceptions towards course books contribute to teaching and learning processes, while their negative perceptions might create problems. Thus, there is a crucial need to review the studies

discussing the effects of teachers' perceptions of course books on teaching and learning.

II. RESEARCH ON EFL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF COURSE BOOKS

This section presents a brief review of literature of the studies on teachers' perspectives on course books. For this purpose, the review of the studies was presented under three sub-sections. First, the studies which have positive inferences about teachers' perspectives of course books were reviewed. Then, research that shows negative implications on teachers' perspectives of course books was synthesized. Last, the studies which display variables about teachers' perspectives of course books were reviewed briefly.

Research indicates that teachers' perspectives of course books are mainly positive. To begin with, Aydın [3] aimed to research how teachers see the arrangement of major language skills in a course book. In the study, 48 pre-service teachers of English were included and a questionnaire aimed at assessing their perceptions of these major skills in the course book "Spot on 8" was used. It was concluded that pre-service teachers had mostly positive perceptions of these major skills presented in the course book, whereas they also had some negative perceptions regarding speaking skills. According to them, speaking skills were lacking in practicing pronunciation, while they were moderate in terms of meaningful tasks. However, reading skills were useful as they supported the improvement of grammar and vocabulary knowledge. Listening was presented and dealt with more before the other skills, whereas writing tasks were found learner centered and the culture of the target language was not found to be emphasized through the tasks. In a similar study, Arıkan [2] collected and analyzed opinions of future teachers of English to demonstrate what happens in Turkish EFL classrooms in regards to the use of English language course books. A descriptive study was used with a qualitative research design and the reports of twelve volunteering practicum students were analyzed in it. Arıkan [2] concluded that participants thought the quality of course books was acceptable in general despite some problems based on the teachers who make use of course books. For them, the visual parts of the book were just there for decoration instead of carrying out a function. Course books also supported activities which could be done individually rather than pair or group work, whereas listening tasks were found less in number and insufficient. Above all, the most prominent conclusion was that teachers use course books in a boring way without supporting them with colorful teaching materials. Fester [6] explored the impact that a range of syllabus design proposals had, directly or indirectly, on a sample of English language textbook writers and English language teachers. One part of the research programme reported in this study focused on English language teachers and language programme managers operating in the tertiary education sector. A sample of English language teachers completed a questionnaire-based survey and a sample of language programme managers and coordinators participated in semi-structured interviews. Fester [6] came to the conclusion that in

the case of the teachers who took part in the questionnaire-based survey, there was evidence of considerable reliance on commercially produced textbooks in determining detailed course content. Program managers also stressed the importance of having explicit syllabuses for the courses and programmes offered by their institutions.

Research also showed that teachers had also negative perceptions of course books. To begin with, Tok [19] aimed to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of not using various teaching materials and English language the course book "Spot On", used in public primary schools in Turkey. Randomly chosen 46 English teachers from primary state schools in Malatya and Adiyaman cities were included in the study. In data collection, a Likert type scale was preferred. In this study, the course book was assessed regarding design, the layout, tasks and activities, language style, subject, content and skills in general. Tok [19] found that "Spot On" course book was not good enough to stand up to a systematic in-depth analysis and negative attributes overshadowed the positive ones. Results showed that the way of presenting the culture within the materials was not biased. Nearly half of the teachers found the activities in the book insufficient and not practical, as they did not stand up group or team work. What's more, grammatical structures and vocabulary were not presented in a motivating way within a realistic frame. In another study, Kayapinar [10] examined teachers' views of English course book packages at different levels used in English preparatory classes in 25 high schools. These course books with other course books similar to those were chosen with the aim of being examined by teachers. The results were obtained from 99 teachers working in English preparatory classes and using these course book packages in their classes through questionnaires and 40 teachers through open ended interviews. The study revealed that teachers generally did not find those course book packages satisfactory. In addition, teachers' findings supported that a course book should be adapted according to the needs of the learners within the curriculum. Additionally, it was stated that course books should not be considered as parts of international industry as they directly affect learning and teaching. Namaghi et al [14] also aimed to examine language teachers' perspectives on a course book which was sent by Ministry of Education for third grade high school students. Theoretical sampling and coding schemes presented in grounded theory were used. They examined the course book under eight subcategories including "Dullness of Pictures", "Disregarding Learners' Interest", "Grammar Overload", "Inadequate Explanations", "Inefficient Presentation of Pronunciation", "Contrived Dialogues" and "Decontextualized Vocabulary" and "Ignoring Language skills". They concluded that course book should be empowered along with a curriculum development. In another study conducted in Indonesia, Zacharias [20] investigated the perspectives of teachers of internationally-published materials. In data collection procedure, the questionnaire interviews and class observations were used. According to the results obtained, most respondents believed that internationally-published materials were preferable over those published locally.

Moreover, it had implications that local teachers should empower themselves to design their own materials for answering various teaching environments. Last, Özeş [16] evaluated the English course book "Spot on English" and revealed the teachers' perspectives of course book through questionnaires. She reported that textbook use was an important factor and constituent of English language teaching (ELT) instruction in Turkey. In a great number of state schools, teachers tended to regard these books as their main tools for the language teaching. Her study aimed to evaluate an English textbook, "Spot on 8", used in state primary schools in Turkey, with respect to general criterion in terms of layout and physical makeup, activities, skills, language type, subject and content, vocabulary and structure and general opinions. In the study, a Likert-type teacher questionnaire and student questionnaire were used to collect data. Findings suggested that the teachers had more negative attitudes towards the textbook they used. Results of the research also indicated that the textbook used had potential shortcomings and it could not be particularly recommended.

Studies also focused on certain variables regarding teachers' perspectives of course books. First of all, in a study, Lee and Bathmaker [11] investigated teachers' beliefs in using English course books in teaching in the upper secondary Normal Technical School in Singapore. Their aim was to find out factors which influence teachers' perceptions of course books. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to reveal the perspectives of teachers on English textbooks used in upper secondary NT stream in Singapore. The results supported that there was a relationship between teachers' use of course books and their approaches to less academically inclined students. Lee and Bathmaker [11] concluded that teachers' perspectives were influenced by some factors within and beyond the classroom. Factors which were related to institution and classroom were the noteworthy ones compared to others in terms of teachers' usage of course books. Teachers were so fixed at reaching the necessary scores in English exams, NT students' academic weakness and behavioral problems. This study indicated not only the need for further research but also implications such as curriculum evaluation and the education of teachers working at technical-vocational streams in Singapore. The study also suggested that teachers should be included in the development of materials actively as they are the real reflections of course books in classes. Second, Criado and Sanchez [4] investigated teachers' professional skills and the complexity of learning in using course books. For this purpose, they aimed to define to what extent ELT course books used in Spanish education match with the general frame of official regulations and how suitable to Communicative Language Teaching Method (CLT). Seven representative course books of different levels such as Spain-secondary, upper secondary, teenager and adult course books were chosen to be analyzed. A whole unit selected from course book was assessed in terms of "their communicative potentials". Results showed that communicate nature of activities in those course books was above 50%. The rest of activities were non-communicative including grammar and vocabulary tasks. The

results showed that the dissociation between official regulations and the teaching materials found in class may be positive. In addition, Sosniak and Stodolsky [18] reported on the working conditions of elementary school teachers in their perspectives of course books. They dealt with the roles course books play in primary schools. Four grade teachers from two urban schools supplied data for the study. An ecologically based research was included in the study. It was concluded that the influence of course books on class instruction and teachers' perspectives was less than expected. The patterns of course book use and thinking about them were not related with each other. Also, the conditions of elementary teachers' jobs encouraged the careful use of course book materials. Considering the crucial role of textbooks in ELT programs, Kamyabi's [8] study found positive elements of course books along with shortcomings of course books which need to be examined. Kamyabi [8] aimed to investigate to what extent "Prospect 1" had the characteristics of a CLT curriculum, the strengths and weaknesses of this newly published book, how the instructors who use the book evaluated its practicality and how this textbook could be improved. Kamyabi [8] revealed that the curriculum was able to integrate the four language skills, to increase student-student and student- teacher interaction and to promote pair and group work. However, the dialogues and the contexts lacked authenticity, recordings were artificial, new words were not reviewed in next lessons; there was no phonetic transcription for new words. Instructors believed that the book had some shortcomings despite its great potential compared to its predecessors. Results of this study indicated that the new book served for its purpose and up to some extent met the instructional objectives of the approach, but still had some important deficiencies if willing to meet the expectations of a CLT approach. Moreover, Israelsson [7] dealt with differences between experienced and inexperienced teachers in their attitudes to course book usage. Thus, the study examined how four English teachers chose teaching materials for their lessons. The aim was to identify and understand how and why those teachers select their materials to use in their classes. A qualitative research was preferred in this study. In data collection process, separate interviews were applied. Israelsson [7] concluded that inexperienced teachers might tend to use course books more than experienced teachers. However, as they gained more experience and became more confident, their own creative materials replaced course books to a certain degree. In addition, it was an important factor for teachers to become more relaxed when they use their own materials.

III. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From this review of research, several conclusions were reached. First of all, pre-service teachers have mainly positive perceptions of the presentation of basic skills. They believe that basic language skills are given in an ideal balance between accuracy and fluency. They also think that course books help learners develop grammar and vocabulary knowledge. Second, EFL teachers have some negative perspectives of course books. For instance, they consider that various language teaching methods are not given in the book to improve speaking skills,

and they do not help learners to improve their pronunciation skills in meaningful contexts. Moreover, for teachers, course books do not include cultural elements exemplifying authentic language. They also reckon that the course books do not support students well in terms of layout and design, activities and tasks, language type, subject and content, whereas they think course book packages are not empowered along with curricula. Third, there are some factors which affect EFL teachers' perspectives of course books. These can be listed as institutions, learning groups, working conditions, curriculum and teaching experiences. For example, the institution and classroom tend to have a greater influence in the way teachers use their textbooks. In addition, learning styles and the individual teaching differences affect their perceptions of course books.

In the light of all these conclusions, some recommendations can be listed. First of all, EFL teachers should create a balance between creating their materials and using course books. For instance, if teachers believe that course books do not reflect the cultural elements of the target language or include enough authentic materials to catch students' attention, they should support course book by bringing additional materials to their classes. Second, course book writers need to consider teachers' perceptions and learners' interests while designing reading texts, listening activities, speaking sections and writing tasks. Moreover, they should be careful with including all the basic skills and knowledge areas in a meaningful context. Third and last, curriculum developers should work in collaboration with school managers and teachers as teachers know real learning environments and students' needs and interests. They should be open to new creative curriculum models especially fostering productive skills along with authentic materials by making connections with daily life.

For further research, some recommendations can be noted. First, more research is necessary on the elements in course books which affect teachers' perspectives of course books such as layout, illustration, grammar sections, writing activities or listening parts. Second, research should focus on learners' perspectives of course books and the relationship between teachers and learners' perceptions. Finally, studies should concentrate on the relationship among certain factors such as age, gender, teaching experience and graduation programs.

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