

## Distance Learners Evaluating an EFL Distance learning Textbook

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### Abstract

Present study conducted to evaluate Payame Noor University General English Textbook from students point of view. To this aim, in the first phase of the research Nominal Group Technique was employed to explore a sample of distance learners' opinions about the textbook. In the second phase, key issues arose from NGT phase were used to form a survey questionnaire. Survey analysis identified three main groups of problems pertained to the textbook, students' study skills and assessment method. Textbook shortcomings' resulted from vague explanation of grammatical points, inappropriate teaching of reading comprehension skills and inconvenient corresponding exercises. Problems with students' language learning skills were derived from their traditional language learning skills i.e. reliance on translation and memorialization. Ultimately, neglecting reading comprehension assessment in the final exams and utilizing a fix format of test items, multiple-choice items, culminated to the textbook not fulfilling its main objective to improve reading comprehension skills.

**Keywords:** Textbook Evaluation, Nominal Group Technique, Distance learning, Assessment method, Study skills

### Introduction

Rowntree (1997) believed that distance learning educational materials should promote the interaction between student and educational context, explain difficult meanings, give students self evaluation ability, provide students with appropriate feedback in every exercise and activity, and give students ability to define the place, time, and pace of their study. Since textbooks comprise the main educational sources that present educational materials to distance learning students, exploring students' attitudes about textbooks efficiency, shed light on the process of learning at distance and gave rise to precious information about the textbook success in a distance learning context, ultimately could be considered as a base for any probable change in the textbooks. The focus of the present evaluation was evaluating Payame Noor University General English textbook (GE) through considering students' attitudes. Foreign language program is an introductory English course in Payame Noor University. Except English-major students, undergraduate students in other majors should take foreign language course as a compulsory, prerequisite course for their future ESP courses. Foreign Language course has a 3-point credit and worth 18 hours of problem solving and/or instruction, participation in the classes is not obligatory. Foreign Language final exam is composed of 30 to 40 multiple-choice items, designed and administered by the university.

### Objectives:

The purpose of the present study was to evaluate Payame Noor University General English textbook through exploring students' ideas.

### Methodology

This evaluation was a retrospective evaluation and was conducted at the end of the term. To gain as representative range of students views as possible, the research followed a two-phase procedure. In the first phase which had a qualitative nature, an adapted form of NGT first devised by Keily (2003) was applied to explore the nature and origins of students probable problems with PNU GE program, and its textbook. Participants in the first phase of the study were 128 undergraduate freshman students of Garmsar PNU, taking General English course in fall semester.

They were students of three General English classes, participated in groups of four in three NGT sessions.

In the second phase or the quantitative section of the study, views generated through NGT phase were used to form a survey questionnaire to evaluate the textbook. The themes identified by analyzing NGT data were classified into 4 major categories: Issues related to PNU General English textbook, guidance books, class participation and the teacher. To evaluate GE textbook, frequencies and percentages of generated issues related to General English textbook were considered (Table 1).

Table 1 - PNU Textbook Issues

Theme of Question 1. What has worked for you well?	F	P
Type, presentation and examples of new words	7	7/95
PNU textbook in general	2	2/27
Grammar presentation	2	2/27
Attractiveness of reading passages	1	1/13
Answer key	1	1/13
English to Persian word list	1	1/13
Question 2. What has not worked for you well?		
PNU textbook in general	15	27/27
Exercises in PNU textbook	8	14/54
Reading comprehension passages in PNU textbook (too lengthy, boring and difficult)	6	10/90
Lack of Persian translation in PNU textbook	4	7/27
Grammar presentation in PNU textbook (lack of Persian translation, inappropriateness of explanations and exercises)	4	7/27
Level of PNU textbook is low	4	7/27
Level of PNU textbook is high	4	7/27
Degrading grammar in the PNU textbook	2	3/36
New words presentation in PNU textbook (insufficient examples)	2	3/36
Existence of answer key in the PNU textbook	1	1/81
Question 3. What is your suggestion for the program improvement?		
Reduce PNU textbook content (by reducing reading passages' length & new words' number)	8	10/81
Increase grammatical explanations and examples	5	6/75
Add Persian translation to the textbook	4	5/40
Simplify the textbook by explaining readings	4	5/40
Use English stories in the book to make it more interesting	4	5/40
Pay attention to speaking skill	3	4/05
Present related sample tests at the end of each unit	2	2/70
Increase grammatical exercises	2	2/70
Translate grammatical explanations into Persian	2	2/70
Emphasize on pronunciation (provide the book with a CD or use Persian transcription)	2	2/70
Apply high school textbooks' new words	1	1/35
Use colors in the book	1	1/35
Use pictures in the book	1	1/35
Revise grammar sections (to provide the book with more important grammatical points)	1	1/35
Present new words meanings at the end of units	1	1/35
Present new words parts of speech in example sentences	1	1/35
Add group activities to the book	1	1/35

**Survey Participants:** All of the Garmsar university students who had taken GE course in fall semester, that is 161 students took part in the survey. Most of the students were freshman students, with high school diploma qualification. 74% of participants were female and 26% were male.

### Results

While it is believed that distance learning materials should provide appropriate feedback in every exercise and activity, explain difficult meanings, increase interaction between students and educational context, give self-evaluation abilities to students to monitor their progress (Pierrakeas et.al 2003), the results of survey analysis showed that GE textbook did not possess these characteristics. 38% of survey participants believed that without class participation and the use of Guidance books GE was not an applicable textbook for distance learning education.

Inadequacy of explanations for exercises, and grammatical points, inappropriateness of new words presentation, along with lack of pronunciation guide in the General English book caused students to use guidance books to solve their learning problems. Because of unattractiveness and long length of reading comprehension passages, GE failed to provide students with intrinsic motivation to pursue readings enthusiastically. Lack of review units and expansion activities culminated to make GE an unsatisfactory textbook that did not give students opportunities to monitor their learning. In addition to these shortcomings, mere attention to reading comprehension skills, even its better to say talking about reading skills instead of practically providing opportunities for students to practice reading skills, is a prevailing weakness of GE and most of Iranian EAP books (Amiryousefi & Ketabi 2011).

### Conclusion

Exploitation of distance learners ideas, in this study gave raise to precious information about the deficiencies of GE as a distance learning textbook, strategies students use to overcome their challenges in learning a language through distance and problems which were originated from assessment method.

It seems that because of previous traditional language learning methods in high school, students perceived language learning as a matter of learning translation and grammar rules.

While the majority of participants in NGT and survey were freshman students their suggestions for increasing instructional hours and their preferences for participating in classes could be an indication that they still need more frequent interaction with teachers to solve their learning problems and transfer from passive learners to more active autonomous learners. Distance learning education requires learners to be autonomous and make appropriate decisions about what to learn, how and when to learn. Zhang and Cui (2010) found out that third-year language learners were more confident and have developed more autonomous beliefs about their learning in a distance but first-year students have a higher degree of anxiety and frustration. In accordance with Zhang and Cui (2010) suggestions, it seems that PNU distance learners, specially beginners, need special help to develop learning strategies which help them to be autonomous, active learners.

Survey analysis showed that recognition multiple-choice format of questions was the main reason of students not to pay much attention to production exercises in the book. Through reviewing previous GE final exams, students found out that all the questions were in multiple-choice format and there was no trace of questions assessing reading comprehension skills. The fixed format of final exams caused students to skip learning reading comprehension skills that were covered in the book; instead they paid attention to learning grammar rules and new words with their Farsi equivalences to pass the exam. This is an instance of harmful effect of Washback or "the effect of testing on instruction (p.283)" that Bachman & Palmer (1995) stated. They believed that negative Washback will result when taught skills and abilities in the course are not reflected in testing procedure.

However, when tests are constructed based on the carefully established objectives of the course, they can be precious instruments to help students and teachers to stay on truck and provide them with valuable results about the effectiveness of their teaching and learning process. According to Brown (1996, p.7) "Criterion Reference Test scores can provide useful information for evaluating the effectiveness of the needs analysis, the objectives, the materials, the teaching, the students' study habits and the tests themselves".

Here it can be proposed that if General English final exam could be constructed based on the purpose of the book to develop reading comprehension skills and assess reading comprehension ability, to pass such an exam, students would feel the need to improve their reading skills. Also applying other instruments of measurement that tap more higher-order processing such as multiple-choice cloze can help to assess higher order competencies than multiple choice items that focus mainly on recognition.