

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Today, the English language enjoys a special status in the world. Consequently, English language teaching and learning has become increasingly important. Generally, three important elements in every instructional context are: teachers, learners and materials. Coursebooks, part of the last element stated, namely materials, play an essential role in almost every ELT program. “Probably nothing influences the content and nature of teaching and learning more than the books and other teaching materials” (Cunningsworth, 1995, p.v). Among the different roles which the materials serve, Cunningsworth (1995), Grant (1994) and Richards (1998) agree that they determine the language content, help to provide a route map for both teachers and students, are the source of language practice, are the resource of language contact for learners and are helpful means for inexperienced teachers.

However, depending on the type of educational system, syllabus or materials imposed by education authorities as well as the nature and amount of training for teachers, the degree of using coursebooks may differ among teachers (Cunningsworth, 1995). On the whole, some language teachers may not use coursebooks. They prefer to prepare their own materials because they believe that nobody knows their students better than they. Some of

the teachers, like ESP practitioners, have to prepare their own materials because of the lack of material for their special purposes. Nevertheless, some other teachers may adopt the existing materials for their own use. That is, they make the necessary changes to the available materials in order to make them suitable for their own students and context. But in cases where the syllabus is set officially and a coursebook is prescribed, the coursebooks should be followed very closely.

To a large extent, Iran is one of those countries in which the ministry of education determines the syllabus and the coursebooks which must be used at schools. Usually, in these situations the objective of the language program, the skills being taught, the context in which the students study, and the assumptions about learning and teaching are determined by the coursebooks. In short, coursebooks represent the curriculum of the language course and play an important role in the process of learning and teaching (Richards, 1998).

However, not every coursebook is good for use in every context. So, analyzing and choosing the right coursebook and making sure that the appropriate material has been selected are always a concern of the teachers and course administrators. Evaluating the book and making sure that it is the right and appropriate one gains greater importance when it is used on a large scale. Every year, in Iran, millions of students use the English coursebooks which are prescribed by the ministry for different grades. The large number of students, their time and energy, their learning experience and level of proficiency in English as well as the great budget which is being spent by the government on free education makes the importance of choosing the best material increasingly significant.

Towards this end, the main aim of the present study is to evaluate a English coursebook used at the Pre-university level in Iran. It attempts to elicit the perceptions of

the two main stakeholders, i.e. teachers and students towards the coursebook. My investigation into the literature in the field reveals that, there are only a relative handful of published studies (e.g. Jahangard, 2007; Razmjoo, 2007) on this topic in Iran. Moreover, these studies have not included the teachers and the students who are the main users of the coursebooks. Therefore, what the teachers and the learners think about the coursebooks remains an unanswered question.

After this initial introduction, the layout of this chapter is as follows. At first, the importance of the English language is discussed in the General Background. This is followed by an exploration of the status of the English Language in Iran and also in secondary schools in Iran. The next section, Statement of the Problem, examines the reasons for conducting the present study. The aim of the study is discussed under the Purpose of the Study. The next section deals with the Objectives of the Study which is followed by Research Questions. Naturally this study has significance for the teachers, material writers, other stakeholders in the learning/teaching enterprise, and this is stated under the Significance of the Study. Every study also has its limitations. The limitations of the present study are mentioned in the Limitations and Scope of the Study. The next section explains the organization of the dissertation which is followed by the Definitions of the Terms. The chapter concludes with a summary which contains a brief discussion of what has been presented in this chapter.

1.2 GENERAL BACKGROUND

The English Language enjoys an important role in communication among the non-English speaking nations. The importance of English is mostly in what it is used for. It is a common communication tool used by people from different language backgrounds for

educational, political, scientific and business purposes. It is also the major language of news and information in the world. It also enjoys a strategic position in the academic fields where almost every important journal and books are published in English and the international conferences are mostly held in the English language. As Bhatia (2001, p. 74) states “English is the most dominant and widely used global language for academic as well as professional purposes”

Regarding the status of the English language, the need for learning it becomes more crucial. In societies where English is a foreign language, ELT (English Language Teaching) receives much attention. In such situations, as there is no direct exposure to English, classrooms play a vital role in learning English. It is clear that the main goal of learners is to be able to communicate in English. However, this goal is not fulfilled sometimes and some learners do not become proficient language user. Many factors influence the rate of success in the ELT programs. For many years the linguists’ and researchers’ ultimate aim has been to find out ways in order to help the foreign/second language learners to reach an acceptable proficiency level in language. However, this goal has not been achieved yet in many places. Meanwhile, the important role of the materials in EFL situations cannot be denied. For most learners, materials are the only source of language. Even the content of the materials shapes the learners views towards the language. To some extent, the materials decide what is to be taught in the class and to some extent what is to be learnt. Consequently, materials become one of the most important elements that can influence the degree of success or failure of the ELT programs.

1.2.1 Status of the English Language in Iran

The official and instructional language in Iran is Persian. However, because different languages such as Azerbaijani, Kurdish and Arabic are used in different parts of Iran, most of the Iranians are bilingual or multilingual. Meanwhile, as the official language, the medium of instruction and the medium of mass media is in Persian there is a lot of exposure to this language. Consequently, most of the children become bilingual and familiar with the Persian language before they start school.

On the other hand, English is a foreign language in Iran. The starting of teaching and learning English language in Iran goes back approximately to the 1960s and 1970s when the British Council and the Iran-America society were active in offering English courses (Yarmohammadi, 2005).

As English is a foreign language, the learners do not have exposure to it in real situations. Thus, English is limited to classrooms and the learners learn it with very little chances of using it. As Brown (2000, p. 193) states, learning English as a foreign language involves learning it “in one’s own culture with few immediate opportunities to use the language with the environment of that culture.” Also, Oxford (1990, p. 6) refers to this point by stating that “a foreign language does not have immediate social and communicative function within the community it is learned; it is employed mostly to communicate elsewhere”.

1.2.2 The English Language in Iranian Schools

The period of schooling in Iran is from grade 1 to grade 12. It includes 5 years of primary school, 3 years of guidance school and three years of secondary school and one

year of pre-university level. The English course is only introduced to the curriculum from the first grade of guidance school where it is studied for 2 hours a week during each school year. It continues in secondary and pre-university level where the students study English for 3 hours per week during each school year. As almost all of the government schools are not equipped with laboratory facilities, the students do not have a chance to watch or listen to English movies and tapes.

In all these grades, English is offered as a compulsory course that the students should take and pass. Therefore, each student studies English for 6 or 7 years (depending on whether they attend the pre-university level). The exam is usually held in written form and the only requirement for passing the course is getting satisfactory results in the written exam. Even the university entrance exam, which is a multiple choice test and based on the secondary schools English coursebooks, do not include any spoken exam. Practically, the English exams at schools and even the university entrance exam are mostly limited to grammatical points, vocabulary and some reading comprehension questions. This is possibly one of the reasons that the speaking, listening and writing skills are mostly ignored.

1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

As was mentioned in the last section, in Iran the English course is introduced into the curriculum as a core course in grade 1 of the guidance school and continues until the students graduate from high school. Thus, the students study English for 6 or seven years. However, the main problem is that students work through these books for several years, but despite spending so many years on it most of them are still not able to use the English language appropriately. Askari Arani (2005, p. 128) asserts that “It is common knowledge

that although students spend seven years studying English as a school subject, this is not sufficient for them to achieve an intermediate level of proficiency in the language.”

While in recent years more Iranian students have become interested in furthering their studies either inside the country or overseas, acquiring a knowledge of the English language and the ability to use it enjoys special status. Whether they study inside the country or in other countries, the students need all four language skills perhaps some more than others. Even most of those students who enter the university for undergraduate studies have problems in following their EGP (English for General Purposes) and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) courses. As Sadegi (2005, p. 52) maintains, “Most of the students who come to the university carry with them the problem they had when they were at high schools. Unless they have attended English classes at institutes, they are basically poor at almost all aspects of language, especially at the productive skills, and listening.”

Although there are many factors which influence the success or failure of a language program, the present study is focused only on evaluating the pre-university coursebook. Because, as Hutchinson (1987, p. 37) states, materials are not just an ‘everyday tool’ for the teacher, “They are an embodiment of the aims, values and methods of the particular teaching/learning situation.”

1.4 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

As was stated earlier, the coursebooks are one of the most important elements in the ELT program. However, not every coursebook is appropriate to be used in every context. Therefore, the overall purpose of this mixed methods study is to evaluate the coursebook which is prescribed by the ministry of education for the Pre-university level at the Iranian secondary schools. To this end, it delves into the teachers’ and the ex-students’ perceptions

concerning the coursebook by collecting statistical and quantitative data. At the same time, it interviews a few individuals to gather qualitative and more in depth data.

1.5 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The overall objectives of the present study are as follows:

1- Identifying and describing high school teachers' perceptions towards the coursebook: *Learning to Read English for Pre-university Students* in terms of the:

- Objectives
- Language Content (in terms of grammar and vocabulary)
- Language Skills (specially reading skills)
- Subject Matter/Topic
- Exercises and Activities

2- Identifying and describing ex-students' perceptions towards the coursebook:

Learning to Read English for Pre-university Students in terms of the:

- Objectives
- Language Content (in terms of grammar and vocabulary)
- Language Skills (specially reading skills)
- Subject Matter/Topic
- Exercises and Activities *

3- Identifying and describing ways of modifying the coursebook: *Learning to Read English for Pre-university Students* based on the teachers' and students' suggestions.

* These items for consideration have been adapted from the literature on materials evaluation that I have read (please read chapter two for a more detailed explanation on this).

1.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions of the present study will be as follows:

1- What are the high school teachers' perceptions towards the coursebook: *Learning to Read English for Pre-university Students* in terms of the:

- Objectives
- Language Content (in terms of grammar and vocabulary)
- Language Skills (specially reading skills)
- Subject Matter/Topic
- Exercises and Activities

2- What are the ex-students' perceptions towards the coursebook: *Learning to Read English for Pre-university Students* in terms of the:

- Objectives
- Language Content (in terms of grammar and vocabulary)
- Language Skills (specially reading skills)
- Subject Matter/Topic
- Exercises and Activities *

3- What are the teachers' and ex-students' suggestions regarding how the coursebook: *Learning to Read English for Pre-university Students* can be modified?

* These items for consideration for RQ1-3 have been adapted from the literature on materials evaluation that I have read (please read chapter two for a more detailed explanation on this).

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

It is hoped that the present study can bring about some satisfactory results that could be beneficial to some stakeholders involved in this field. To this end, the results and findings of this study can be helpful to the teachers who are teaching the coursebook at schools but do not have enough time to conduct a systematic evaluation of it. Understanding the students' and other colleagues' viewpoints on the coursebook can help the teachers to gain broader insights into this coursebook which can help in making better decisions in the classrooms. Moreover, material writers might find the results of this study useful since they provide information on what the teachers and the learners think about this coursebook.

Finally, as every year, millions of students are using this coursebook all over Iran, it puts a heavy responsibility on the ministry of education to make sure that the right material are selected and used. Therefore, the results of this study may contribute to this decision making process.

1.8 LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Naturally, every study has some limitations. The present study is not an exception and has its limitations as well. These are as follows:

- The pre-university level coursebook is chosen for this study because it is the exit point for the students who want to continue their studies. After entering the university, the students have to attend EGP (English for General Purposes) and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) courses. Therefore, it is expected that it prepares the students for their academic studies.

- Furthermore, although this book is used nationwide, the data for this study will be collected only from Tabriz, a city in the Northwest of Iran. This is because the researcher lives in this city and is familiar with the situation and context. Furthermore, collecting data from all over the country is beyond the scope of this research.
- There are several universities in Tabriz city; however, only the University of Tabriz will be used for collecting data. This is because of the easy access to it in collecting data.

1.9 ORGANISATION OF THE STUDY

This dissertation consists of five chapters. The first chapter, Introduction, currently under discussion, discusses the primary issues and sets the ground for the research on the evaluation of the English coursebook used at Pre-university level in Iran. The second chapter, Literature Review, covers the theory and practice related to material evaluation. In chapter three, Design and Methodology, the subjects, materials and procedures for carrying out the research are presented. Chapter four describes and discusses the findings of the research. Finally, chapter five which is the Summary and Conclusion presents a summary of the research and makes some concluding points.

1.10 DEFINITION OF THE TERMS

Some terms have been used in a particular way in this research and need to be described a little more. The following definitions, arranged alphabetically, are the most common ones in the present study.

Criteria: these are the principles which the coursebook evaluation is based on. For instance, for evaluating the structure in the coursebook (which is a broad area) some specific yardsticks are selected which are referred to as criteria for structure.

Ex-students: Students who have completed Pre-university level and are now the university freshmen.

Pre-university English coursebook: The English coursebook which is written by a group of Iranian writers for the Pre-university level. This book is prescribed by the ministry of education and is used nationwide.

Pre-university level: This is a level after the high school in Iran. It is a part of the secondary school. However, after three years at secondary school, the students receive their Diploma and do not have to attend the Pre-university level. Nevertheless, those students who want to sit for the university entrance exam and continue their studies have to attend the Pre-university level and pass it.

Teachers: English language teachers who teach at the Pre-university level.

The University of Tabriz: A state university in the city of Tabriz located in the Northeast of Iran where this research is carried out.

1.11 SUMMARY

This chapter introduced the present study. To summarize: the English language enjoys a special position in the present global era. It serves as a means of communication between different nations who speak different languages. Iran is not an exception. English is considered important and is a compulsory course at schools and universities. However, as

English is a foreign language in Iran there is rarely any exposure to the real language. Meanwhile, English language learning and teaching is gradually gaining greater importance. But still the classrooms are the only places that the learners are exposed to the English language. Therefore, the teachers and coursebooks play an important role because they are almost the only source of the language for the learners.

The coursebooks are prescribed by the Ministry of Education. The English language exams at high schools and even the university entrance exam are based on these books, therefore, the teachers have to follow the coursebooks very closely. In this situation the coursebook's role becomes extremely important in the Iranian context. They set the syllabus, they decide what should be taught and to some extent what should be learnt, and they represent the English language for the learners.

Apparently, the ultimate goal of every ELT program is to enable the learners to communicate fluently and accurately. However, after studying English for several years at school, most of the Iranian students have problems with appropriate use of the English language. It is clear that many factors are involved in determining the success or failure of an educational program. However, due to the important role of the coursebooks (especially in the Iranian schools) the present study is focusing only on them. Meanwhile, because of the importance of the pre-university level, the coursebook used for this level is selected for this study. The objectives of the present study is to elicit the teachers' and ex-students' perceptions towards the English coursebook used at pre-university level.

The next chapter explores the theory and practice in the field of the material evaluation.