SCIENCEDOMAIN

Conversation Textbook Assessment: A Critique of *Survival English*

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Author's contribution

This whole work was carried out by the author YP.

Review Article

ABSTRACT

The development of the oral proficiency of EFL learners is facilitated when conversation textbooks contain two key features: contextualization and realism. The seven critical guidelines for the selection of such textbooks are the students' backgrounds, meaningful activities, cultural aspects, focusing on language forms, extended practice, and, finally, a synthesis of the preceding factors. With these features and guidelines as theoretical underpinnings, this paper presents a critique of the conversation textbook *Survival English*, the goal of which is to improve EFL students' interaction skills so that they may thrive in the English-speaking world. While *Survival English* enjoys a reputation as a good textbook, it certainly could be a better textbook if the authors were to take several improvements into consideration. This paper provides constructive suggestions for textbook writers that could contribute positively to the instruction of English as a foreign language.

1. INTRODUCTION

Students attend conversation classes with the primary goal of learning to be able to orally communicate with speakers of English, a concept known as Basic Interpersonal Interaction Skills (BICS) [1]. With BICS, students can better facilitate their interaction in different aspects of the real world, such as the workplace, when traveling, and when attending social events. How can teachers assist students to achieve this goal? Selecting effective textbooks is a

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crucial step in making this goal a reality. Textbooks provide a clear framework that directs students to a destination. Through a well-organized structure, students will be able to acquire the language necessary for communication in a systematic manner [2,3].

This paper describes the features of conversation textbooks necessary for the enhancement of students' oral abilities. Following this description are the guidelines for selecting conversation textbooks and a critique of *Survival English*, one such textbook used by several colleges and universities in Taiwan. It is hoped that the critique will inspire textbook writers to develop more beneficial teaching materials, which, in turn, will enhance students' oral proficiency in the long run.

2. FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE CONVERSATION TEXTBOOKS

Crawford [4] advocates the use of well-developed textbooks. Those textbooks, based on sound learning principles, are appropriately paced, which might alleviate students' anxiety and further promote learning. Furthermore, they cover a variety of language functions, which is facilitative in the development of communicative abilities. On the whole, textbooks serve as a helpful scaffold for improving students' skills and advancing them to higher levels.

2.1 Language must be Contextualized

Effective conversation textbooks have at least two features [4,5]. First, language in textbooks must be contextualized. Language is used for a purpose, such as arguing, persuading, interpreting, complaining, negotiating, or informing. As language is functional, dialogues, activities, and any other contents in textbooks must be language in use. Ideal conversation textbooks should design a setting (such as choosing a major) in which language functions (such as giving opinions, in this case) can fit. It just does not make any sense to scramble a bunch of unrelated sentences in a lesson. According to Coelho [6], effective instruction should focus primarily on context-embedded tasks. The contextual or interpersonal cues in such tasks will provide students with assistance in determining the meanings of the oral communication. It is highly likely that decontextualized tasks will confuse students and result in a breakdown in communication.

2.2 Language must be Realistic

Language is a social practice. Every social situation requires its own distinct language type. Therefore, genres or registers have to be taken into account when textbook writers design dialogues, activities, and any other contexts [4,5]. For instance, it sounds very unnatural when a mother says, "Would you please kindly open the door for me, sir?" to her child. Second language learners must learn not only what to say but how to say it appropriately. Realistic language provides students with a concept of how language is used in different social situations, and this will minimize sociolinguistic inappropriateness.

In general, effective conversation textbooks must offer students ample opportunities to experience authentic language use. Through meaningful learning in contexts, students will have better opportunities to sharpen their communicative competences [7]: grammatical competence (enables speakers to speak accurately), discourse competence (enables speakers to speak clearly), sociolinguistic competence (enables speakers to speak appropriately), and strategic competence (enables speakers to prevent communication failures).

3. GUIDELINES FOR SELECTING TEXTBOOKS TO DEVELOP COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

The following sections summarize and synthesize concepts proposed by several researchers [8-10] to offer guidelines for the selection of textbooks for conversation classes at colleges or universities.

3.1 Students' Background

The background of the students (age, language proficiency, purpose for learning English, etc.) is one of the considerations for selecting conversation textbooks [8-10]. In terms of age, the contents of the textbooks must be compatible with the maturity and interests of the students. Suitable topics for college students may include hot issues, such as the upcoming Presidential election, or their favorite form of entertainment, such as online games. It is simply not suitable to offer such topics as "How to Tie Your Shoes" or "How to Dress your Barbie Dolls" to college students.

As far as language proficiency is concerned, Cummins' four quadrants [1] can be applied to material selection. For low-proficiency students, we can start with the top-left quadrant, offering a 'simplified' version, material with high context and low cognitive demand. The simplified version contains not only easier linguistic elements but also the addition of visual supports such as 'context-embedded' organizers [11], which facilitate low-proficiency students' comprehension of the material. Then, with the students' proficiency improving, we can move to the second quadrant, which is low context and low cognitive demand. Personal components (such as conversational cues and visuals) are reduced in this stage. The goal of the materials used in these two stages is to improve the BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) of students.

For intermediate and advanced students, however, we can start with Cummins' third and fourth quadrants. In these two stages, students receive less or none of the context clues. It is recommended that teachers use as many authentic materials as possible. The underlying principle behind this is that authentic materials can reinforce the direct relationship between the language classroom and the outside world for students. Moreover, the high context and high cognitively demanding material can help students improve their Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), which they need in both schools and the workplace.

Purposes for learning English are another consideration in choosing conversation textbooks. Most university students learn English for daily communication with speakers of English. *Survival English* may be a good starting point. Contents such as the bargaining process, how to describe medical symptoms to a doctor, or making small talk with someone new might be of interest to university students. On the other hand, workplace English such as how to stand out at a job interview has to be taught to university students who are about to graduate. In general, the contents of the textbooks must address the goals of the students. If the goal is for students to strengthen their basic interpersonal communication skills, then high context and low cognitive material is recommended. If, however, the desired result is an improvement of students' cognitive academic language proficiency, then high context and high cognitively demanding material will be a more effective solution [1,11].

3.2 Meaningful Activities

In addition to the students' background, another consideration is whether or not textbooks offer a variety of meaningful interactive activities that will elicit student participation [8,3,9,10]. The key to enhancing oral abilities is speaking up. Students feel more motivated to speak if activities are meaningful. If university students are asked to practice a dialogue that is unlikely to take place in the real world, they might be reluctant to talk. An example such as the following might make even beginner university students feel stupid, and not want to practice:

A. What time do you get up every morning?
B. I get up at 6:00.

A. What time do you go to school?
B. I go to school at 7:00.

A. How do you go to school?
B. I take the bus.

It seems very unlikely that such a conversation would occur in real life. The conversation is unnatural and robot-like. Dialogues in textbooks should be those that will happen in real life, not just mechanical sentence drills.

3.3 Cultural Aspects

It is suggested that conversation textbooks should include cultural aspects. Understanding cultures in the target language will equip students with an awareness of social appropriateness [8,3,9,10]. Therefore, conversation textbooks need to include cultural contents that might prevent university students from asking absurd questions like, "Are all Americans as fat as you are?" to a person they meet for the first time.

3.4 Focus on Language Forms

Effective conversation textbooks also need to focus on the three major elements of a language: pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar [12,8,3,9,10,13]. With a solid foundation of a language, students will be better able to express themselves. It is no surprise that students often fail in communication because they don't have sufficient lexical knowledge to convey what they want to say. Also, sometimes their utterances are unintelligible to speakers of English as a result of poor sentence structures and inaccurate pronunciation. It is critical that conversation textbooks offer opportunities to practice pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. Without mastering these three language elements, it is unlikely that students will develop their speaking proficiency.

3.5 Extended Practice

Practice is vital to the enhancement of oral abilities. Textbooks are considered more effective if supplementary materials such as workbooks and interactive audio/visual aids are available [8,9,10]. Given the limited nature of classroom time, not every student will be able to do enough practice in class. Practicing outside the classroom can compensate for this limitation. Teachers can assign activities in workbooks as homework and see the results in class. An

old proverb states, "Practice makes perfect." This is quite applicable to the improvement of student's speaking proficiency.

3.6 Putting Them All Together

Overall, teachers need to take the background of their students, including their age, language proficiency, and purposes for learning English, into account when choosing conversation textbooks. In addition, it's better to adopt conversation textbooks that feature a variety of meaningful activities, which will increase the students' involvement. Cultural aspects cannot be ignored in conversation textbooks, either. Guiding students toward social appropriateness will develop their tact and reduce the chance that they will engage in impolite communication. Another indispensable element in effective conversation textbooks is that they must provide opportunities for students to improve their knowledge of pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, as these three elements are the foundation of developing oral proficiency. Furthermore, supplementary activities included in workbooks or interactive CDs will be facilitative in the enhancement and reinforcement of students' speaking abilities. All of these characteristics should be integrated in conversation textbooks to hone students' communicative competence [5,8,9,10].

4. A CRITIQUE OF *SURVIVAL ENGLISH*

Survival English [14] was first published in 1994 by Heinemann English Language Teaching. It is designed for people who need English for work or travel. The topics include business, socializing, travel, hotels, money, and food and drink. By offering learners important new language which they can read, listen to, practice, and use, the book writer hopes that learners will be able to engage in simple everyday conversations, order meals, change travelers checks, check into a hotel, have meetings, and so forth. The ultimate goal of the book is to help learners succeed in scenarios such as business trips, vacations, or social situations where the medium of communication is English.

Having decided on the essential features of conversation textbook and more important, having established the criteria to be applied to conversation textbooks, now is the time to apply the already-established criteria to determine whether a typical conversation textbook, namely *Survival English*, meet the standards or not.

4.1 Sequence of Topics

Survival English is a conversation textbook that covers various topics in food, shopping, housing, transportation, education, and entertainment. The diversified topics in this book familiarize students with practical expressions used in daily life. However, the sequence of presentation is not very organized. For instance, Lesson 1 is about travel, Lesson 2 is about education, and Lesson 17 is back to travel again. It would have been more beneficial if the authors of *Survival English* had grouped lessons of the same topic, so that it would be more convenient for teachers to plan their lessons. As the forward design approach [5] necessitates, educational materials should be linear. More specifically, such materials should be clustered in sequences, for example, arranged by increasing complexity or categorized by subject or theme. The discursive organization of topics in this textbook results in teachers not having a very fluid presentation of lessons if they follow the sequence of the lessons as they currently appear in the book. It is, thus, suggested that topics should be followed by related subtopics, which will provide a sense of structure for teachers to teach and for students to learn.

4.2 Types of Texts

Survival English is presented in the form of dialogues, which results in two negative elements. First, the dialogues are too short in length to demonstrate how they are integrated into real-world communication. Quite often, students are frustrated by the fact that they want to know what happens next, but the dialogues just stop. More in-depth discussion should be incorporated into the dialogues. Second, different types of texts should be provided in textbooks, such as lectures, speeches, announcements, and jingles. With different forms of texts, students will gain a better understanding of how language is used in a variety of social situations.

4.3 Degree of Focus on Language Forms

Insufficient focus on language forms is another shortcoming of *Survival English*. Each lesson in the book begins with a dialogue. Following the dialogue is a related listening task. The book provides no more elaboration upon vocabulary building, grammar enforcement, or pronunciation sharpening. With this textbook, teachers will need to spend a significant amount of time producing materials to consolidate the three basic language elements. The writers of *Survival English* should have designed more tasks to develop students' knowledge in these three areas.

For example, consider vocabulary building. The textbook writers can first use a listening close task in which students fill in the blanks by using words and phrases that appear in the dialogue. Reviewing these words and phrases will reinforce students' knowledge of these new vocabulary items. After that, teachers can provide students with another opportunity to use the vocabulary items in the form of answering questions. If, for instance, the target word is "freezing," ask a student to answer the question, "Which is worse for you: to be *freezing* or to be too hot?" using the target word in their answer. In this way, students first recognize a new word in a dialogue, then review it in a related listening task, and finally internalize it by using it in various exercises.

In terms of pronunciation, emphasis should be placed not only on segmental parts like phonemes but also on suprasegmental parts like intonation. Activities such as "Listening for Stressed Words," "Comparing Unreduced and Reduced Pronunciation," and "Listening for Reductions" are facilitative in the development of students' aural sensitivity.

Equipping students with a solid foundation of language elements can promote the four basic skills. On the contrary, a weak foundation of language elements results in the failure of students to develop skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. A competent speaker must possess good knowledge of language elements in vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar.

4.4 Cultural Aspects

Survival English offers students little knowledge about different cultures. Because every culture is unique, students should be exposed to the distinctive qualities of different cultures to minimize culture shock when they travel abroad. For instance, when the topic is dining, the textbook can offer culture capsules about formal dining. Students often complain that they don't know how to eat a Western meal. Should forks be placed on the left or the right side of the plate? Should they eat bread with their hands or with forks? If table manners

were covered in the textbook, students would feel more at ease when they have the opportunity to attend a formal dinner with American friends. Also, when the topic is dining, regional foods from America can be introduced to students to increase their cultural knowledge. EFL learners should be exposed to cultural elements for which they lack sufficient knowledge. After all, learning a language is learning a culture, to some extent.

4.5 Extended Practice

Survival English provides teachers with very few extended activities, necessitating the development of their own tasks that will consolidate students' speaking skills. The textbook writers should have provided a greater variety of resources such as role playing, making speeches, summarizing ideas, and interviewing to provide students with more opportunities to practice the language and develop their oral skills.

5. CONCLUSION

Conversation textbooks can function as a syllabus to assist teachers to address fundamental aspects of language that will foster students' oral proficiency. Effective conversation textbooks must provide meaningful language used in real-life situations. In addition, various activities should be embedded in textbooks, so students will have more opportunities to practice the language. Furthermore, cultural aspects must not be overlooked. With sufficient cultural knowledge, students will be better able to speak appropriately. Effective conversation textbooks, a critical element in developing the communicative competence of students, possess the aforementioned features [3,5,13].

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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