

Evaluating the ELT Coursebooks for Young Learners: The Issue of Affective Engagement

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Abstract

Coursebooks are known to be the most well-acknowledged language learning and teaching materials. The effectiveness of the coursebooks for fruitful language learning can be augmented with considerations of the second language acquisition theories. Among these, affective engagement is one of the significant contributors to language acquisition characterized by the active involvement of the learners' emotions, such as enthusiasm, excitement, curiosity, enjoyment, and purposefulness. This study investigates the affective engagement elements of a series of coursebooks used in private elementary schools in Turkey. To this end, six commonly used coursebooks were evaluated based on one criterion set by Tomlinson and Masuhara (2013) to determine to what extent they are likely to be affectively engaging. A group of four researchers made a consensus on the selection and evaluation process of a coursebook from the series, as well as two chapters from each coursebook. The affective engagement was evaluated according to the content delivery, activity types, visual elements, and possible involvement of the audience of the coursebook, and each coursebook

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was scored 1 to 3. Results indicated that coursebooks have the potential to be effective in terms of emotional engagement; however, this potential has been minimally utilized. The results are discussed in alignment with the literature, along with recommendations to the coursebooks designers and practitioners.

Keywords: Affective engagement, coursebooks evaluation, material evaluation, EFL learning

Çocuklar için Hazırlanmış ELT Ders Kitaplarını Değerlendirmek: Duyuşsal Bağlılık Sorunu

ÖZ

Ders kitaplarının en çok kabul gören dil öğrenme ve öğretme materyalleri olduğu bilinmektedir. Verimli bir dil öğrenimi için ders kitaplarının etkinliği, ikinci dil edinimi kuramlarının dikkate alınmasıyla artırılabilir. Bunlar arasında, duyuşsal katılım, öğrenenlerin şevk, heyecan, merak, zevk ve amaçlılık gibi duygularının aktif katılımı ile karakterize edilen dil edinimine önemli katkı sağlayanlardan biridir. Bu çalışma, Türkiye'deki özel ilkokullarda kullanılan bir dizi ders kitabının duyuşsal katılım unsurlarını incelemektedir. Bu amaçla, yaygın olarak kullanılan altı ders kitabının, ne ölçüde duyuşsal olarak ilgi çekici olduklarını belirlemek için Tomlinson ve Masuhara (2013) tarafından belirlenen bir kritere dayalı olarak değerlendirmesi gerçekleştirilmiştir. Dört araştırmacıdan oluşan bir grup, seriden bir ders kitabının ve her ders kitabından iki bölümün seçilmesi ve değerlendirilmesi konusunda fikir birliğine varmıştır. Duyuşsal katılım, ders kitabının içerik sunumuna, etkinlik türlerine, görsel öğelere ve olası dinleyici katılımına göre değerlendirilmiş ve her ders kitabı 1'den 3'e kadar puanlanmıştır. Sonuç olarak ders kitaplarının duyuşsal açıdan etkili olma potansiyeline sahip olduğu, ancak bu potansiyelden asgari düzeyde yararlandığı ortaya konmuştur. Sonuçlar, ders kitabı tasarımcılarına ve uygulayıcılarına önerilerle birlikte literatürle uyumlu olarak tartışılmıştır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Duyuşsal katılım, ders kitabı değerlendirmesi, materyal değerlendirmesi, EFL öğrenimi

1. ELT Coursebooks

In learning a second or a foreign language, anything that facilitates the process of learning can be categorized as materials (Tomlinson, 2001), and coursebooks are known to be the most mostly used learning and teaching materials, acknowledged by second or foreign language (L2) teachers and learners. The coursebooks have gained this crucial role in being designed for the purpose of learning and teaching and thus providing a structural path to L2 acquisition. In this systematicity, contemporary English language teaching (ELT) materials provide complete learning and teaching solutions, indicating that they more

effectively contribute to L2 learning (Littlejohn, 1998). Hence, coursebooks are deemed reliable and valid resources that shape the learning route and uptake rate of the students by structuring the language lessons. This effect manifests in the function of language coursebooks as an important contributor.

The literature includes studies that confirm the role of the coursebooks are confirmatory in language learning and teaching process. From this perspective, the positive traits of the ELT coursebooks may include helping the students to develop their intercultural competencies (McKay, 2003), exhibiting an important role in structuring a language lesson (Gray, 2006), presenting important values and culture (Bahman & Rahimi, 2010), and functioning both as a general framework and a syllabus for the language process (Tsiplakides, 2011). Moreover, these materials also support the teachers with help by offering a facilitative tool for the evaluation procedures (Abdelwahab, 2013) and being economical in terms of time spent on the lesson preparations (Dodgson, 2019; Tsiplakides, 2011).

2. Affective Engagement

Engagement, one of the hot topics among researchers, is an umbrella term for understanding individuals' dispositions for specific tasks or general devotions. Affective engagement is directly related to the emotions such as enthusiasm, excitement, curiosity, enjoyment, and purposefulness. These affective factors may engage the learners in the language learning process (Oga-Baldwin, 2019). Indeed, the language learning process "crucially involves a range of social and affective phenomena" (Svalberg 2009, p. 243). Hence, learning processes seem highly susceptible to affective factors along with other engagement domains. According to Izard (2009), the role of emotions, in general, play a crucial role in young learners' development by functioning as an inducement necessary for the activation of cognitive resources. Emotions such as interest, joy, and excitement are reported to have increased selective attention and thus provide long-term benefits in learning processes (Frederickson, 1998, 2001; Frederickson & Branigan, 2005).

Positive affect (e.g., interest, attitude, emotions) is not only an essential requirement for effective learning of languages but also a necessity for the fruitful development of materials (Tomlinson, 2013d). According to the text-driven approach, in preparing the reading materials, materials developers need to give priority to texts with a potential for cognitive and affective engagement and then produce relevant activities (Tomlinson, 2013b). Hence, affective engagement maintains its importance when it comes to coursebooks as it can effectively reinforce learners' task performance.

3. Affective Engagement in ELT Coursebooks

The background knowledge of the students and how they exhibit emotional responses to the contents in ELT coursebooks need to be taken into account in materials development. Texts in ELT coursebooks, for example, need to pave the way for students to talk about their emotional reactions and affectively make connections with the content. However, despite being cognizant of the fact that affective engagement is a vital necessity for long-term acquisition, both material developers and teachers continue to provide trivial, neutral, and bland texts for learners to read (Tomlinson, 2013d).

Indeed, the reading materials that are void of affective stimuli (Tomlinson, 2011, 2013a) and thereby failing to arouse curiosity is less likely to facilitate affective engagement.

As mentioned above, EFL coursebooks have a prominent role in language education (Bahman & Rahimi, 2010). Coursebook analysis and evaluation studies are significant because they guide the choice of quality materials. According to Dörnyei et al. (2014, 2015), a directed motivational current (DMC) is a phenomenon of motivation defined by the density of engagement and sustainability of effort in which people exhibit highly motivated target attitudes and achieve outcomes that surpass initial expectations. For this reason, affective engagement has a vital place for language learners in general and particularly young learners, on whom the foundations of language acquisition are established. As a significant contributor to the learning-teaching process, coursebooks and their affective potential are worthwhile to examine. In light of the literature, the research question of the present study was formulated as follows:

RQ. How likely are the coursebooks to emotionally engage the learners?

4. Methodology

Affective engagement is one of the fifteen coursebook evaluation criteria put forward by Tomlinson and Masuhara (2013), in which the long-term effectiveness of coursebooks is taken into account. In their comprehensive frame, they underline extensive exposure to the target language, cognitive and affective engagement, personalization, learner-led discoveries about the subject matter, providing an achievable challenge to make the input comprehensible, developing communication skills and cultural awareness among learners, and making learners motivated to use English outside of the classroom, as the criteria for a long-term effective coursebook. The criteria have been acknowledged as a universal, aiming baseline for coursebook evaluation studies.

In the present pre-evaluation study, we investigated the affective engagement of six different young learner coursebooks, taking into account affective and emotional factors such as amusement, excitement, and stimulation of the coursebooks contents. In doing so, four different researchers evaluated the coursebooks that are mainly used in private elementary schools. The evaluation process was run separately, and after the process, all researchers gathered to reach a consensus on the evaluation report. In order to establish reliability, third and sixth-level coursebooks were chosen in each coursebook series, and third and sixth chapters were chosen, and it was acknowledged as they represent the whole units in question. The evaluated coursebooks in this study were selected for being the most preferable ones by teachers and school administration in private elementary schools.

5. Findings of Evaluation

Whilst evaluating each unit, we made comments on the likely effectiveness of the unit in relation to our criteria and scored each criterion on a scale of 1 to 3 (with 1 indicating ‘Unlikely to be effective in facilitating the long-term acquisition,’ 2 indicating ‘Likely to be partially effective in facilitating long-term acquisition’, and 3 indicating ‘Likely to be effective in facilitating long-term acquisition’). The coursebooks and the result of the evaluation are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Evaluated Coursebooks and Results

Name of the Coursebook	Authors	Publishers	Score
Discover 3	Kathleen Kampa & Charles Vilina	Oxford	3
Kids’ Box 3	Caroline Nixon & Michael Tomlinson	Cambridge	2
Let’s Go 3	Karen Fraizer, Ritsuko Nakata, Barbara Hoskins & Steve Wilkinson	Oxford	1
Fairyland 3	Jenny Dooley & Virginia Evans	Express Publishing	2
Family and Friends 3	Tamzin Thomson & Naomi Simmons	Oxford	2
Primary Skills Reading & Writing 3	Helen Casey	Oxford	1

5.1. Discover

Unit 3 is mostly about moving to a new place, and it starts with a picture of a girl who's carrying a box. Next to the picture, there is a question, 'How do they feel?' In terms of affective engagement, this type of question is beneficial as it helps to develop a learner's sense of empathy. It cannot be overlooked that the coursebook gives a great part of emotional elements. On page 30, a girl, Sati, who has just moved to a new place, writes a letter to her friend Nisha about her experience. We can also witness how Sati's feelings towards her new place change as time passes and she meets new friends. Additionally, learners can observe more different emotions than getting accustomed to a new place, such as getting bullied. In one of the letters, Sati wrote about a boy who bullied her because of the smell of her Indian lunch. The picture accompanying the paragraph describes the events vividly so that the script makes sense for the construction of the meaning.

In addition to this, the coursebook includes many affectively engaging activities and elements. Poetry is treated in a manner of personalization from, say, the general attitudes of the learners to the poems to their imagination for specific verses. For instance, learners are expected to read a poem and write three things that cross their minds. This activity is far from ordinary and practice-oriented grammar activities since learners' imagination, attention, and emotions get involved. Besides, there are various poems that the learner is asked to imagine while reading the poem, such as 'What pictures do you see in your mind when you read the poem?' It seems that in this coursebook, the learner's feelings and emotions are prominent elements and are treated as a valuable source that creates involvement.

5.2. Kids' Box

In terms of general evaluation, the activities are void of affectively engaging activities despite being potentially interesting. In the accompanying picture, there is an activity in which learners are expected to listen and match the lyrics with the pictures. The pictures could have been used for more engaging activities, and the questions related to the song are more mechanical-focused, which seem to fail to involve the learners affectively. These questions could be potentially turned into more emotionally engaging and personalized questions. The second activity is where students put their hands on their hearts and feel the heartbeat can be a beneficial one because, in this activity, they stop whatever they are doing for a minute and feel what is going on in their bodies. This activity is capable of engaging learners in personalization and having them focus on their own feelings. Besides, at the end of every unit, there are cartoon-strip stories with pictures that include different facial expressions.

5.3. *Let's Go!*

In these book series, visuals are generally used to describe the events in the activities. Besides, the use of colorful visuals can arouse a sense of curiosity and amusement in the student. However, there is not much space for emotional description. There are no activities where students can connect and feel about the visuals except the “What about you?” activity on page 21. Students can express their feelings, such as amusement or tiredness, while answering these questions. In the “Let’s Sing” activity on page 26, the song consists of repetitive words. Students might find such activities boring, but if acting out is included in the singing, it could have been more emotionally engaging. On page 48, images describe what the characters are doing. Still, there is no evidence of their facial expressions or body movements, so there are no visuals that students can connect with or evoke emotion. Although on page 50, there are pictures pertaining to facial expressions and body language, the sentences under the images seem to express the event without emotion. In addition, the colorful visuals are used mainly for decorative purposes with little function. All in all, the activities related to these images do not involve emotionally engaging elements.

5.4. *Fairyland*

The book contains extraterrestrial characters and visuals, such as a fairy and a genie, which can create a sense of curiosity and interest for the learner. The dialogues contain exclamatory sentences to support students in terms of affective engagement by including them more in the activity, such as “Be careful, oh no!” However, it seems this is the only activity that attempts to engage learners emotionally. The questions in other activities do not seem to pave the way for personalizing.

5.5. *Family And Friends*

Each chapter starts with a cartoon-strip story depicting friends and family relationships. We witness a conflict among the group, and each character wants a different thing. At the end of the story, they find a way to smooth the battle over. The story successfully presents something we experience daily in colorful visuals and authentic depictions of characters with realistic facial expressions. The pages are mainly occupied with colorful drawings primarily utilized to demonstrate the objects in vocabulary enrichment. The passage seems relatively dull in the reading section, in which three different students mention their collections. The only salient thing about the text is the fonts, which allude to students’ handwriting. This small change may grab learners’ attention since reading a note from a peer might induce curiosity. In general, this unit neither provides affectively engaging content nor presents it this way.

5.6. Primary Skills Reading & Writing

The chapter includes a reading passage with small photographs that refer to the text. The text also refers to the pictures, for example, “Look! Can you see... They are...” which creates a meaningful context. Nevertheless, comprehension check questions take place after reading the passage, which cannot exceed knowledge-level assessment. The writing activity targets creative writing skills guided by some questions. Indeed, this activity may enhance students’ imaginary skills. Unfortunately, the creative writing activity has little face validity and seems little convenient. Students’ creativity could have been boosted with the help of visual elements, or the page could have been designed for this activity with writing space. As such, the activity creates an impression of being prepared for the sake of filling the space.

6. Results

6.1. Discover

This coursebook provides an emotional investment with its different types of contents and activities. Emotional elements can be easily observed throughout the coursebook. For instance, in the letters that Sati wrote to her friend, there are so many emotions, ranging from happiness and yearning to being bullied and sadness. In unit 6, different forms of emotional engagement are included with poetry.

6.2. Kids’ Box

We can see some potentially engaging activities as well as a lot of pictures and cartoon-strip stories, but they are not used to engage students affectively. For example, in unit 3, there is a song about a daily routine and adverbs of frequency accompanying a couple of questions. These questions could be more creative in terms of engaging them emotionally or personalizing learning.

6.3. Let’s Go

There is no description of emotions, and the language elements in the book are too basic. The activities could have been designed in a more engaging way. There are so many cartoon-strip stories and songs in this coursebook, but they are rather mechanical and not engaging, especially for young learners. To exemplify, on page 48, there are pictures and sentences about the things people are doing, but they don’t state how they are feeling. Nor are they used to engage the learners emotionally.

6.4. Fairyland

The activities in the coursebook include some expressions that can engage learners affectively. Besides, they can arouse feelings of hilarity and curiosity in the learners. On the other hand, some of the questions in the activities fail to help students to personalize and create a bond. Visuals in the coursebook are great resources to arouse emotions, but the remaining parts of the unit are about grammar or vocabulary.

6.5. Family and Friends

The coursebook has colorful visuals, and the stories look amusing, but overall, it can be described as insufficient in terms of affective engagement. For example, on page 44, although there are many facial expressions in the cartoon-strip story, they are not used effectively for the purpose of learner engagement. There are stories in nearly every unit; however, they are void of emotional elements. On page 50, there are pictures and sentences about ‘good at, bad at, terrible at’ and the facial expressions that demonstrate them. Despite being informative and engaging, they do not seem to be affectively engaging.

6.6. Primary Skills Reading & Writing

Despite the potential of the activities in the unit, and a wide range of pictures, dialogues, and passages, it seems to be inadequate for provoking emotion. On page 15, for example, there is a passage about a child going to a zoo in Kenya. The excitement of the event could be easily influenced by the story, but they lack emotional elements. Additionally, the coursebook has so many writing activities about different topics. Before writing, it asks some questions or requires some details, but none of them include emotions.

All in all, the pre-evaluation of the coursebooks regarding the affective dispositions in this study showed little evidence of affective engagement. Despite the fact that the evaluated coursebooks have great potential for young learners to stimulate emotionally, the majority of the activities are only for the purpose of language practice, and they seem to be inadequate in terms of affective engagement.

7. Discussion

Coursebooks have been accompanying L2 learning and teaching processes for many years, yet coursebook evaluation studies have gained interest recently. Since the coursebooks are indispensable contributors to the process, and they seem will be so far, selecting the most convenient and effective coursebook will remain an area of interest both for practitioners and researchers.

Studies conducted to this end so far indicate similar results to the current findings. For example, Tomlinson and Masuhara (2013) conducted a pre-evaluation study for six global coursebook series. In the same study, they set fifteen universal criteria to be a guideline for further pre-evaluation research. The evaluation showed that coursebooks were limited in terms of offering affectively engaging elements. While the researchers indicated that there was potential in the contents and presentation of the topics, the coursebook designers failed to turn this potential into engaging content. Limited use of affective engagement was also reported from the teachers' point of view. The teachers stated that there is a void in relatable and provoking elements in the texts in language coursebooks (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2008). Following the same criteria set by Tomlinson and Masuhara (2013), Solhi et al. (2021) evaluated the coursebooks used in Turkish public high schools. The results of the evaluation showed that coursebooks were void of including affectively engaging elements, while this deficiency manifest itself in a lack of creativity, personification, and development of cultural awareness. In another study in which public elementary school English coursebooks were evaluated, the results indicated that the dull and disinterested content in the materials was excessive, thus hindering students from engaging with the language that is necessary for long-term acquisition (Solhi et al., 2020).

Assessing the compatibility of the core SLA principles to the English coursebooks, Renandya et al. (2015) investigated nine extensive reading coursebooks used in China. More than half of the materials yielded low scores on the basis of predetermined criteria, which were set as a reflection of the basic premises in the language acquisition procedure. Strikingly, the researchers emphasized the lack of engaging components both cognitively and affectively and proposed a revision for coursebook designers to include target learners' dispositions to active engagement.

Similarly, Melliti (2013) investigated the users' perspectives on a global English coursebook and found that more than half of the participants were dissatisfied with the dull and irrelevant content presented in the material. One of the possible reasons that limited engaging opportunities have not been exploited is attributed to steering clear of potentially taboo concepts that can be varied across cultures, hence creating a restriction for global coursebook designers (Gray, 2001; Mishan, 2021). However, affectively engaging content and presentation of the materials can still be relatable, stimulating, and bright in terms of addressing the potential readers' interest without including taboo content. All in all, the literature in the material evaluation indicates coherent

findings that coursebooks are needed to be revised so that the potential for long-term effectiveness in language acquisition can be exploited by affectively engaging elements.

8. Conclusion

The utilization of coursebooks in the process of language teaching and learning is a pivotal aspect, given their widespread acceptance as materials for the purpose. However, the efficacy of these materials can be further augmented through the integration of theoretical advancements within the domain of language learning research. From a theoretical perspective, it is widely acknowledged that exposure to language, the ability to recognize and analyze linguistic differences, and the motivation to employ the language both inside and outside the classroom are critical factors in the process of language acquisition.

In order to truly leverage the advantages of the factors previously discussed, it is essential to understand the significance of engagement. It is important to note, however, that engagement is a unique and integral aspect of the language acquisition process. To enhance the affective elements in coursebooks, it is necessary to create a personalized and localized experience that resonates with the target audience. This involves accurately reflecting a diverse range of emotions and exploring the full spectrum of human experiences beyond just binary feelings of good and bad. By humanizing everyday situations and incorporating a variety of perspectives, we can foster greater engagement and more effective language learning outcomes.

In the present study, all coursebooks were appealing in appearance, with vivid, colorful pictures and illustrations indicating high face validity. However, the pre-evaluation showed that the activities and the presentation of the content failed in terms of utilizing the potential of affective engagement. Out of the six coursebooks, only the Discover series had a significant affective element contributing to the learners' engagement. The five remaining coursebooks did not make as much effort to engage the reader emotionally. Instead, repetitive exercises and dull activities were present. Along with the activities, the presentation of the content failed to include thought-provoking and stimulative delivery.

Designers of coursebooks should take advantage of the fact that stimulating emotions in learners has a significant impact on the long-term effectiveness of the learning process. This can create a valuable opportunity to engage learners in a more meaningful way.

Addressing the learners' inner worlds, presenting the content with more per-

sonalization and localization, including stimulative reading texts, and designing thought-provoking questions might lead to affective engagement. Therefore, learners assimilate the material in a way that connects it to their personal experiences and individual learning journey.

As with all research studies, this one has limitations in several aspects. Before deciding whether to use a material, it is essential to conduct a pre-evaluation to determine its value. This involves assessing the material beforehand. This study is a pre-evaluation study; even though it bears insightful information, it would be more comprehensive to implement a while- and post-evaluation phases. Secondly, including the users of the material and their opinions might enable us to comment more precisely on the coursebooks' value. Further studies would be more informative in light of these precautions.

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