

AN EVALUATION OF THE TEACHING-LEARNING CONTENTS IN THE TEXTBOOK “ACTIVE SKILLS FOR READING 4” FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF LECTURERS AND STUDENTS AT THE FACULTY OF ENGLISH, HANOI OPEN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: *This study was conducted to find out the opinions of lecturers and students about the teaching-learning contents in the textbook “Active Skills for Reading 4” used to teach Reading Skills level 6 to third-year students majoring in English at Hanoi Open University. The author used a mixed research method, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods to analyze data. The list of textbook evaluation checklists compiled by Litz (2005) and the authors Mukundan, Nimehchisalem, and Hajimohammadi (2011), after being edited to suit the research object, is used as the main research tool. Eight lecturers and eighty-four third-year students majoring in English at Hanoi Open University participated in the study, and two teachers were invited to participate in interviews to clarify some information. The data collected revealed that most surveyed lecturers and students highly appreciated the diversity of topics, their interest in reading comprehension, and the clarity of instructions for the exercises in the textbook Active Skills for Reading 4. However, the criteria for the diversity of question types, quantity and variety of vocabulary, and way of introducing vocabulary are not highly appreciated. Based on the findings, the interviewed lecturers made some recommendations on how to use this textbook more effectively. The study has helpful theoretical and practical contributions to textbook selection, evaluation, and effective use of textbooks.*

Keywords: *textbook evaluation, exercises, tasks, Active skills for reading 4, course learning outcomes.*

I. Introduction

There are many factors that lead to successful English learning, and choosing the right textbook is very

important. According to Miekley (2005), a textbook provides learners with a systematic, focused, planned curriculum and standardized knowledge content.

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Accordingly, Ahour and Ahmadi (2012) also assert: “Textbooks are the main source that can impart knowledge and information to learners in an easy and organized manner”. Therefore, the evaluation of the textbook is an indispensable step. The question is how it can be assessed whether the textbook is suitable for the objectives of a course, as well as whether the textbook is appropriate to the needs and requirements of the course and level of learners or not.

The textbook “*Active Skills for Reading 4*,” published by Cengage Learning in 2014, has been officially put into use at the Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University, for Reading 5 and 6 subjects (for 3rd-year students) for several years. However, so far, no research has been conducted to evaluate the teaching-learning content in this textbook. To address this issue, there is an urgent need to conduct an evaluation of the textbook to determine its suitability to the course learning outcomes of the Reading 6 module for English majors at Hanoi Open University in order to provide suggestions for better use, as Ahmadi and Derakhshan (2016) asserted that evaluating textbooks helps teachers find suitable textbooks and allows them to make adjustments and modify these books to meet students’ needs.

For the above reasons, the authors decided to carry out the research entitled “An evaluation of the teaching-learning contents in the textbook *Active Skills for Reading 4* from the perspective of lecturers and students at Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University”. This research aims to:

(a) Evaluate the teaching-learning contents in the textbook *Active Skills for Reading 4* from the perspective of

lecturers and students at the Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University;

(b) Suggest ways to use the textbook to suit students’ needs and meet the course learning outcomes.

To achieve those goals, the author proposes two research questions as follows:

1. To what extent do the teaching-learning contents in the *Active Skills for Reading 4* textbook satisfy students’ needs and meet the course learning outcomes?

2. How should lecturers use *the Active Skills for Reading 4* textbook to meet student’s needs and the course learning outcomes?

II. Literature review

2.1. Overview of textbook evaluation

2.1.1. Definition

Different authors have different views of educational evaluation. The most extended definition of evaluation has probably been proposed by Beeby (1977), who described evaluation as “the systematic collection and interpretation of evidence leading as a part of the process do a judgment of value with a view to action.”

In Tomlinson’s opinion (1998), material evaluation “refers to attempts to measure the value of materials.” Tomlinson (2003) also states that “material evaluation is a procedure that involves measuring the value of a set of learning material”. In conclusion, textbook evaluation is the assessment of the suitability of the textbook to specific requirements, including learner goals, learner context, available resources, etc.

2.1.2. *The role of evaluating teaching materials*

Many materials are used to support English teaching and learning activities. According to Tomlinson (2011, pp. 13-14), textbooks, workbooks, cassette tapes, CD-ROMs, videos, copies, reports, or passages, and anything that represents or informs about language learned are considered teaching materials. However, it is unreasonable to say that any document is invalid, unreliable, impractical, and unclear. Therefore, evaluating teaching materials plays an important role in the language teaching process (Ahmad et al., 2014; Branch, 2009; Cunningsworth, 1995; Sabzalipour & Koosha, 2014; Soori & Jasmhidi, 2013).

Instructional materials need to be carefully evaluated for the purpose of determining the results of the teaching process. Importantly, textbook evaluation should be based on criteria and processes. For example, Branch (2009) mentions identifying assessment standards, selecting assessment tools (e.g., checklists (Cunningsworth, 1995; Miekley, 2005; Mukundan et al., 2011), and conducting the assessment. Cunningsworth (1995, p. 35) adds that “evaluating language teaching materials thoroughly is to meet the learning needs of learners, the requirements of the curriculum, and the teaching methods. and linguistic aspects.”

2.1.3. *Methods of textbook evaluation*

The researchers devised the stages of textbook evaluation:

According to Cunningsworth (1995), textbook evaluation has three stages: pre-use, in-use, and post-use evaluation.

Pre-use evaluation: According to Tomlinson (2011), this is usually

conducted before a textbook is used to predict the value of a textbook to users to help them choose the right course for the course and put it to use in a particular classroom. The pre-use assessment seems the most difficult because there is no real experience using the textbook.

In-use evaluation: an *evaluation* of the suitability of the curriculum in terms of specific requirements, including learner goals, learner’s context, available resources, etc. (Cunningsworth, 1995).

Post-use evaluation: is an *evaluation* of the suitability of a textbook over a period of continuous use. According to Tomlinson (2011), this type of assessment can be the most valuable because it can measure the actual effect of the textbook on users. Evaluators can make reliable decisions about textbook use, adaptation, or replacement based on measured data.

The above explanations of the researchers suggest that the evaluation of documents can be done flexibly as long as necessary. However, post-use assessment yields better results because it fully reflects cognition (Cunningsworth, 1995). That is also the reason why we apply this form to evaluate the textbook Active Skills for Reading 4.

A number of researchers have proposed ways to develop a reliable framework for materials evaluation. Some of the most popular ones are those suggested by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), Littlejohn (1998), Mc Donough and Shaw (1993), Cunningsworth (1984), Ellis (1997), Litz (2005) and Mukundan et al. (2011). In this study, based on the list of textbook evaluation criteria of Litz (2005) and Mukundan et al. (2011), the author made some adjustments to suit the reality of teaching and learning practices at the Faculty of English, Hanoi

Open University, where the research was conducted.

In Litz's (2005) list of textbook evaluation criteria, there are a total of 40 criteria divided into different sections: Practical Considerations, Layout and Design, Activities, Skills, Language Type, Topic and Content, and Conclusion. Each criterion is evaluated on a 10-level scale, in which level 1 equates to disagree strongly, and level 10 equates to agree highly. With the list of textbook evaluation checklists proposed by Mukundan et al. (2011), the authors provide two main parts, including a total of 27 criteria. Part I: General attributes includes 5 subsections: The textbook about syllabus and curriculum, Methodology, Suitability to learners, Physical and utilitarian attributes, and Efficient outlay of supplementary materials. Part II: Teaching-learning content includes 9 subsections: General, Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, Vocabulary, Grammar, Pronunciation and Exercises.

III. Methodology

3.1. Context of the study

3.1.1. An overview of the textbook "ACTIVE Skills for Reading 4"

"ACTIVE Skills for Reading", written in 2014 by Neil J. Anderson, a reading specialist, consists of thematically organized non-fiction reading texts to help learners improve their reading comprehension and vocabulary skills.

The book introduces 12 different reading topics with common exercises to help learners improve their reading ability in general. Each topic clearly notes what areas of skills will be improved and precisely how they improve reading ability in practice. Some of the basics include:

- Before you Read: A brief overview of the topic
- Reading Skill - Scanning: Practice scanning skills (each topic will apply different skills)
- Reading Comprehension - Check your Understanding: Two exercises to test reading comprehension
- Critical Thinking: Practice critical thinking with knowledge and questions in the book
- Vocabulary Comprehension - Words in context: Read and understand vocabulary in specific situations.

Apart from the main 12 units, there are 4 review units, each of which consists of 3 reading passages for students to practice and improve their reading skills.

3.1.2. Overview of the course Reading Skills Level 6

The Reading Skills 6 module is taught in the 2nd semester of the third year of the curriculum. The module aims to help learners have reading comprehension skills in English equivalent to level 5 according to the 6-level Foreign Language Competency Framework for Vietnam, or equivalent to level C1 according to the European Framework of Reference (CEFR). The module includes 6 units of lessons with core content to form and develop reading comprehension skills for students.

The course learning outcomes (CLOs) are as follows:

- CLO1: Recognize the structure of long and complex academic texts
- CLO2: Determine the correct meaning of words in long and complex academic texts.

- CLO3: Proficiently apply reading skills to determine the meaning of the text.

3.2. Participants

The research subjects of this study are 8 lecturers and 84 third-year students at the Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University. They are the ones who have directly used the Active Skills for Reading 4 textbook in the past school year.

Lecturers: The 8 teachers participating in the study are all full-time lecturers at Hanoi Open University, 100% of whom have Master's degrees and have many years of experience teaching at the university level and teaching Reading skills of English Language majors.

Students: This study surveyed the opinions of 84 third-year students, majoring in English Language. The students have many different backgrounds, but all have an English level equivalent to B2 or higher, and all have used the Active Skills for Reading 4 textbook for 2 semesters.

3.3. Methods of the study

The authors used a mixed methods approach in this study, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Quantitative research is helpful for summarizing large amounts of data and achieving generalizations based on statistics (Babbie, 2008). On the other hand, a qualitative approach is used to gather in-depth information to gain a broad understanding of the assessment and suggest improvements. The present research collects quantitative data through a survey questionnaire, including evaluation criteria, and qualitative data is obtained through in-depth interviews.

3.4. Instruments of the study

There are two instruments to gather data for the present study. First, the author used a questionnaire to evaluate the evaluation of the participants' textbook study. The questionnaire has two questions: multiple-choice and open-ended questions on a Likert scale. A five-point Likert scale was used where responses ranged from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." More importantly, the necessary data were collected about the characteristics of the books, the textbook series, and additional comments from teachers about the Active Skills for Reading 4 textbook. In this study, the authors relied on the list of textbook evaluation checklists proposed by two groups of researchers, Litz (2005) and Mukundan et al. (2011), to adjust and design a list of evaluation checklists for the teaching-learning content in the textbook Active Skills for Reading 4. This checklist includes 22 criteria, divided into 4 main parts: Topic and content, Reading skills, Vocabulary, Exercises, and tasks. The second instrument is the in-depth interview. The author conducted interviews with two teachers to seek teachers' opinions on the textbook based on their experiences in using it or to clarify any misunderstandings (if any).

3.5. Data collection and analysis procedures

The questionnaires were delivered to the teachers and students online through the Google Form application. Directions were also given to the participants. Responses were manually entered into computer software, specifically Microsoft Office Excel 2016, and processed to find numbers and percentages. The statistics were presented in tables consisting of both numbers and percentages. Besides, two

lecturers were interviewed independently and their responses were recorded and noted down.

IV. Findings and discussions

4.1. Participants' evaluation of the topic and content in the textbook

When the participants were asked to evaluate the topic and content of the textbook, they gave some fairly similar responses. First, both lecturers and students were uncertain about the compatibility between the textbook's topics and content with the needs of English learners. Besides, most lecturers and students believed that the topics and content in the *Active Skills for Reading 4* textbook were not realistic. This is completely reasonable because, as described before, the goal of Reading Modules 5-6 is to help students understand long academic texts on abstract topics. Regarding the criteria of diversity and exciting and challenging topics, the majority of lecturers and students highly appreciate these aspects, with 87.5% of lecturers and 57.2% of students saying that the textbook contains diverse topics. The number of lecturers and students who agree with the criteria that the topic and content of the textbook are interesting, challenging, and motivating are 50% and 44.8%, respectively. The criteria that the textbook is not culturally biased and does not depict any negative stereotypes also had similar evaluation results, with 75.0% of lecturers and 64.3% of students agreeing.

4.2. Participants' evaluation of the Reading skills in the textbook

In the next group of criteria, the authors asked individuals participating in the survey to give their opinions on aspects of Reading skills in the textbook,

including the length of the reading texts, the topic of the texts, and reading comprehension strategies and exercises for those skills. The results show that half of the lecturers and nearly half (47.6%) of the students thought the textbook reading comprehension passages were appropriate length. Similarly, 50% of lecturers and 40.5% of students shared that the readings had exciting topics, creating interest for students. Through the authors' research, the textbook includes 12 different topics, such as jobs, travel, archaeology, astronomy, and languages, which are exciting topics and attract the attention of students. However, the criteria "Texts are graded" show contradictory results. 62.5% of lecturers and 52.3% of students questioned opposed this. According to teachers and students, the readings are on different topics and do not increase in difficulty. When asked about reading comprehension strategies, 50% of lecturers and 42.9% of students did not think the strategies were fully introduced in detail and understandably. Through studying the textbook, the authors found that the textbook introduces a number of reading comprehension skills such as skimming, scanning, and identifying meanings of words in context, understanding inference, and predicting... However, they are only generally introduced, and no specific step-by-step instructions for applying the strategies are provided. The plus point is that for each reading comprehension skill introduced, there is an activity and exercise to practice.

4.3. Participants' evaluation of the vocabulary in the textbook

According to Ur (1996), Sabzalipour and Koosha (2014), teaching and learning English also depends on other factors such

as vocabulary and grammar. Therefore, these factors need to be considered in order to improve English reading skills.

Survey results show that most vocabulary criteria are not highly evaluated. The first is about the number of new words in the reading passages. 62.5% of lecturers and 45.3% of students surveyed said that the vocabulary introduced in each lesson was inappropriate for the student's level. From my observations, each chapter in this textbook introduces 10 words related to the topic (in bold, blue). Students who use this textbook already have an English level equivalent to B2 and need to reach a level equivalent to C1 according to the CEFR, so this is quite a limited number. The majority of lecturers (62.5%) also thought that the amount of vocabulary was not distributed properly (easy to difficult) across the lessons as well as throughout the entire textbook because each lesson in the book is related to a different topic. Similarly, the vocabulary is not repeated in a reasonable and effective way in the syllabus. There was only one criterion of vocabulary receiving a positive evaluation: "The textbook includes a vocabulary list and a glossary at the end."

4.4. Participants' evaluation of the exercises and tasks in the textbook

The final group of checklists relates to the practice exercises and activities provided by the *Active Skills for Reading 4* textbook. The first group includes criteria for evaluating the practice exercises in the textbook. According to the participants, the textbook provides clear, easy-to-understand instructions for exercises, with 75% of lecturers and 47.6% of students agreeing. However, the remaining criteria in this group were not highly appreciated by surveyed participants. 75.0% of lecturers and 47.6% of students thought that the number of exercises was reasonable for each unit

of study. The researcher found that each chapter in the book only introduces two reading comprehension exercises and two vocabulary exercises, and each exercise only includes 4 to 8 questions, so this number is quite limited for Reading comprehension at the C1 level. Similarly, the criterion of the diversity of reading comprehension exercises is also rated quite low, with 75.0% of lecturers and 54.7% of participating students disagreeing that the textbook provides a variety of exercises.

According to the researchers' examination, out of a total of 60 reading comprehension exercises presented in the textbook, there are only 6 types of questions, and in particular, the type of question that appears most frequently is Multiple Choice, with nearly half of the total—number of exercises in the textbook (45.0%). Exercise types, including written responses and true/false statements, are the most popular types, with 20.0% and 18.3%, respectively.

The second group of this set of criteria is to evaluate activities in the textbook. In contrast to the previous group, the activities in the textbook *Active Skills for Reading 4* received positive feedback from users (lecturers and students participating in the survey). They largely agreed that the activities in the curriculum allow learners to work individually, in pairs, and in groups, contributing to promoting creative, unique, and independent responses for learners, and activities in the textbook can be easily modified and supplemented.

4.5. Lecturers' suggestions on how to improve the effectiveness of the textbook Active Skills for Reading 4

The interview questions asked lecturers to give suggestions on how to

use the textbook *Active Skills for Reading 4* effectively to improve the quality of teaching and learning Reading skills to meet the needs of learners and course learning outcomes in the future.

First of all, the interviewed lecturers thought that teachers who used the textbook needed to overcome the weaknesses of the textbook by making some adjustments; even a new textbook needed to be considered to replace the present one.

The *Active Skills for Reading* textbook contains interesting topics and provides students with basic reading strategies. However, for better use, some adjustments and modifications need to be made". (said *Pham To Hoa, MA. Interviewed on 12th March*)

"I prefer a new textbook that provides more academic topics, vocabulary, more practices with questions of various types and step-by-step instructions. I personally believe that this will help learners easily achieve their targets" (said *Nguyen Minh Thu, MA. Interviewed on 12th March*).

When being asked about what modifications should be made, the participants suggested the following ways:

"For each session, lecturers should explain reading comprehension strategies in detail, then have step-by-step guided exercises for students to practice that strategy. Reading comprehension strategies and types of questions should be provided in each class session. In each class, teachers should provide a different type of exercise or question. It is necessary to supplement the types of questions that appear in the final test such as: matching headings, summary completion, True/False/ Not given, Yes/ No/ Not given..."

(said *Nguyen Minh Thu, MA. Interviewed on 12th March*).

"From my experience, lecturers should refer to IELTS textbook and actual tests because the reading passages and question types in the final test are mainly referred from this source. Besides, lecturers should help students broaden their vocabulary by introducing some applications or books and assign homework after each lesson." (said *Pham To Hoa, MA. Interviewed on 12th March*)

V. Conclusion

In short, through the survey and interview, research reveals the majority of teachers and students highly appreciate the diversity of topics, the interest in reading comprehension, and the clarity of instructions of the exercises in the *Active Skills for Reading 4* textbook. However, the criteria of diversity of question types, quantity and variety of vocabulary, and way of introducing vocabulary are not highly appreciated, but this can be overcome through adjustments, designing additional activities, and providing supplementary materials by the teachers to motivate students as well as ensure the success of the course. From the results of the curriculum evaluation, the writer can conclude that *Active Skills for Reading 4* is an exciting textbook and should be used in the future with some adjustments and supplementary materials.

Textbook evaluation is a complicated process that requires much time and effort. To find a textbook that perfectly suits the needs of students and meets the course learning objectives, the evaluators need to consider a lot of criteria. In the present research, the author only investigated teaching-learning content, more specifically the subject and

content, reading skills, vocabulary, and exercises and tasks of the book, and did not look at the general attributes such as appearance, durability, price... of the textbook. The researcher also surveyed only the representatives of the textbook users. These limitations raise a number of issues for future research.

In conclusion, apart from the above limitations, the results of this research are unique and important for evaluating the effectiveness of reading textbooks and may serve as a model study for other post-use textbook evaluation studies in the future.

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ĐÁNH GIÁ NỘI DUNG DẠY-HỌC TRONG GIÁO TRÌNH “ACTIVE SKILLS FOR READING 4” DƯỚI QUAN ĐIỂM CỦA GIÁNG VIÊN VÀ SINH VIÊN KHOA TIẾNG ANH, TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC MỞ HÀ NỘI

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Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này được thực hiện nhằm tìm hiểu ý kiến của giảng viên và học sinh về nội dung dạy-học trong cuốn giáo trình “Active Skills for Reading 4” được sử dụng để giảng dạy kỹ năng Đọc 6 cho sinh viên năm thứ ba, ngành Ngôn ngữ Anh tại Trường đại học Mở Hà Nội. Tác giả đã sử dụng phương pháp nghiên cứu hỗn hợp, kết hợp phương pháp nghiên cứu định lượng và định tính để phân tích dữ liệu. Danh sách các tiêu chí đánh giá sách giáo khoa do Litz (2005) và nhóm tác giả Mukundan, Nimehchisalem, và Hajimohammadi (2011), sau khi đã được chỉnh sửa cho phù hợp với đối tượng nghiên cứu được sử dụng làm công cụ nghiên cứu chính. Tám giảng viên và tám mươi tư sinh viên năm thứ 3 chuyên ngành Ngôn ngữ Anh, trường đại học Mở Hà Nội tham gia nghiên cứu, với hai trong số giáo viên được mời tham gia phỏng vấn để làm rõ thêm một số thông tin. Dữ liệu thu thập được cho thấy đa số giảng viên và sinh viên tham gia khảo sát đánh giá cao sự đa dạng về chủ đề, sự thú vị của các bài khoá đọc hiểu và hướng dẫn rõ ràng trước các bài tập Đọc hiểu. Tuy nhiên, các tiêu chí về sự đa dạng của các dạng câu hỏi, số lượng, sự đa dạng về từ vựng cũng như cách giới thiệu từ vựng chưa được đánh giá cao. Trên cơ sở đó, các giảng viên được phỏng vấn đã đưa ra một số khuyến nghị về cách sử dụng cuốn sách này một cách hiệu quả hơn. Nghiên cứu có một số đóng góp hữu ích về mặt lý luận và thực tiễn trong việc lựa chọn, đánh giá và sử dụng giáo trình có hiệu quả.

Từ khóa: giáo trình, đánh giá, đánh giá giáo trình, câu hỏi đọc hiểu, giáo trình Active skills for Reading 4.

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