

## An Evaluation of the Writing Tasks within “English for Me” Omani Textbook: A Book Review

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**ABSTRACT:** *Acknowledging the crucial role that writing tasks play in developing curriculum and fostering language skills, this study sets out to evaluate an English skills book utilized in the public schools of the Sultanate of Oman, particularly targeting eighth-grade students. The study used an in-depth analysis of the writing exercises within the book, employing eight evaluation criteria derived from existing literature. The primary discovery from this research is the book's adept incorporation of impactful writing exercises, employing modals, genre and process approaches. Nevertheless, the findings suggest certain limitations of the book, such as its failure to integrate writing activities with other skills like speaking, listening, and reading, its neglect of the specific types and themes of writing questions in exams, and its minimal emphasis on the appropriate level of formality in the activities.*

**KEYWORDS:** textbook, writing tasks, evaluation

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### INTRODUCTION

It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the role of materials in language teaching. There have been increasing concerns about the use of course books in recent years which allow the publishing of diverse types of course books with various purposes and levels. Queries have been raised about the acceptance and the reliability of the use of course books in language classrooms. Littlejohn (1988 cited in Hutchinson and Torres, 1994 p. 316) claims that teacher's character is becoming inconsequential and being replaced by the course book use. McDonough and Shaw (2003) (following line with Littlejohn, 1988) argue about the gap between artificial course books content and students' needs. In contrast, the course book is considered to be an accommodating element in leading to the improvement of learning language (Allwright, 1981). Sheldon (1988, p.237) advocates that the course book is “the visible heart of ELT program”. Course books' influence in language classroom cannot be neglected in terms of providing teaching content and resources (Richard, 2001).

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The materials developments have led to course books' evaluation. It has been initiated due to prompting effects in developing materials. McGrath (2002) and Ellis (1998) have divided the evaluation into compound approaches and stages. Furthermore, a checklist has appeared to assist the evaluation process. Several evaluation criteria were established by several scholars (William, 1983, Cunningsworth & Tomlinson, 1984, Sheldon, 1988, Littlejohn, 1998, McDonough & Shaw, 1993, Ellis 1998, McGrath, 2002 and Tomlinson 2003).

This paper seeks to evaluate the 'English for Me' skills book used in the public schools in Sultanate of Oman specifically grade eight level. The evaluation is going to critically examine the writing tasks in this book based on criteria which are adopted and adapted from the literature review. The paper is organized in four sections. The first section gives a brief review on the history research in the materials evaluation. The second section will establish the context where the book is used and illustrate the analysis process using evaluation criteria. The third part will demonstrate the analysis while results and reflection on the evaluation conducted will be discussed in the fourth part. Throughout this paper the term evaluation will refer to "a procedure that involves measuring the value of a set of learning materials. It involves making judgments about the effect of materials on people using them" (Tomlinson, 2003 p.15).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Purpose of Course Book Evaluation**

Although evaluation is claimed to be extended and complex process (Tomlinson, 2003), there is a consensus among linguists that evaluating course books has several intentions. This view is supported by Sheldon (1988) who considers evaluation to be the only way of providing a reliable measurement process. It aims at the comprehensible understanding of learning and teaching process (Littlejohn, 1998). Moreover, it narrows the gap between students' need and content through suggesting obtainable solutions (Hutchison and Waters, 1987). It has been demonstrated that it widens the knowledge of how the materials are structured (Tomlinson, 2003). In addition, it draws the evaluator's attention to the growth in the field of materials development (McDonough and Shaw, 1993). Richards (2001) highlights the importance of evaluation in the development of analysis, the modification skills. Furthermore, they have a predisposition to make the person qualified to evaluate in prescribed circumstances (Tomlinson, 2003). It results in useful modifications in materials such as adjusting or accepting it without changes (Littlejohn, 1998).

### **Evaluation Approaches:**

Despite the interchangeable use of the terms analysis and evaluation to refer to the same process, a fine distinction has been drawn by McGrath (2002). He has conclusively shown that analysis is the investigation of what the materials have while evaluation is making a decision about the materials (McGrath, 2002). Data from several sources have traced the process of course book evaluation (Ellis, 1998, McGrath, 2002 and

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK Tomlinson, 2003). Preliminary work on the process of evaluation was undertaken by Ellis (1998 p.215) who distinguishes between “macro” and “micro” evaluation. Macro evaluation investigates all wider aspects of the program whereas micro evaluation analyses an individual feature (Ellis, 1998 p.215&16). Moreover, Time and effort are crucial factors in this process aiming at reducing the inaccuracies in the published materials (Tomlinson, 2003). Three methods of evaluation were identified by McGrath (2002 p.25) which are “impressive, checklist and in-depth”. “The impressive method” addresses an overview of the material such as examining the schema of work and the surface appearance (McGrath, 2002 p.25). “The in-depth” approach is a detailed analysis (McGrath, 2002 p.27).

### **Evaluation Criteria and Checklist:**

Major contributing factors in the course book evaluation are evaluation criteria and checklists. A considerable number of studies have mentioned criteria for evaluating course book (William, 1984, Cunningsworth, 1984, Sheldon, 1988, Littlejohn, 1998, McDonough and Shaw, 2003, Ellis 1997, McGrath, 2002 and Tomlinson 2003). Checklists are pre-set questions or phrases used as evaluation tools and they save time and effort and simplify the process of evaluation (Littlejohn, 1998). McGrath (2002 p.27) and Sheldon (1988) advocate that checklists are ideal for comparison between teaching resources. McDonough and Shaw (2003 p.61) divide the evaluation criteria into “internal and external”. Tomlinson (2003) establishes criteria based on learning and teaching theories and suggests the use of research methodologies. Chnningsworth (1984) categorizes the evaluation criteria into aims, design, language content, skills, topics and methodology. Littlejohn (1998, p.189) offers three broad frameworks from which he provides an explanatory checklist based on levels of analysis. In addition, Ur (1996) mentioned overall and explicit criteria. In his analysis of evaluation criteria, Sheldon (1998) identifies a long list of categories covering different aspects under which there are particular questions that investigate each aspect. Detailed examination of the evaluation criteria was shown by Williams (1983, p.255) who includes general, technical and language skills criteria. In contrast, Littlejohn (1998) has contended that evaluation criteria reflect the view of admirable materials. The evaluation criteria should be adjusted before using it in any context (Tomlinson, 2003 and McGrath, 2002). Williams (1983) critiques the fixed dependence on a checklist and recommends the use of additional methods such as observation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **The Data:**

The book that has been evaluated is called ‘*English for Me*’ which is the fifth level of the new curriculum used in the Omani basic education schools to teach English as a foreign language. It is a skills book that is used for one-semester course. The main reason is that it is a curriculum developed in Oman based on language acquisition theories (Tomlinson, 2003) so it is worth evaluating. Another reason is the familiarity with the content with context. The writing activities in this book are merely presented

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in the skills book rather than course book. Three units have been evaluated which are  
units two, three, and four.

### **Method**

A variety of criteria are used to evaluate textbook. It was decided that the suitable criteria to adapt for this evaluation were William's criteria (1983) and McDonough and Shaw's criteria (2003). They matched with the specific aim of the evaluation and usefully supplement a good start. However, there are certain drawbacks associated with these criteria such as being very broad and not concentrating on a specific context. Accordingly, they are modified in order to match with the context. For this evaluation, Raimes' approaches to teaching writing (1983) were used to specify and extend the analysis. The evaluation criteria are divided into internal and external (McDonough and Shaw, 2003).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Introduction and Table of content (McDonough and Shaw, 2003 p.62):**

The book title is 'English for Me' 8A. It is published by the Ministry of Education in the Sultanate of Oman in 2013-2012. The target audiences are teenagers' students aged 13 years old pre-intermediate and have been studying English for seven years. The book is taught to males and females in separate schools. The book takes into consideration that students at this age are more mature and be able to deal with more analytical activities, motivation and interest and learn at the first stage. Therefore, the book introduction claims that the topics are determined by learners' interests rather than language. The book is used in integral with a class book. It is structured around a series of topics that adopt a multi-layered, task-based approach. It takes account of real situations which students are likely to encounter. It introduces the 'IKC International Teenagers Club' which is a way that allows students to access information about people from speaking countries. Each unit has project and portfolio work which are works students do outside the classroom. They vary between practicing the structures and creative activities such as designing posters. The book has grammar references and other activities to help students with the four skills in addition to pronunciation and spelling. It aims at expanding English skills which students have already encountered in the previous levels. It includes individual, pair and group work activities. The book has an introduction, contents, what's in 8A, four units, self-study activities, grammar reference, list of irregular verbs, word list, learning journal pages and cut-out pages. The topics of the units are 'More Free Time', 'Creature Features', 'Inventors and Inventions' and 'Great Cities'. It has 91 pages. The overall numbers of lessons are sixty lessons. Each lesson lasts for 45 minutes. It does not explicitly locate the number of lessons in the book. However, such a design tends to overlook the fact that some students wish to prepare for the lesson but may not easily locate the lesson due to the integration between the two books and not labelling the lessons.

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**4“The Availability of Lists/ Index such as Self-check Units, Appendixes, Vocabulary Index with Phonetic spelling, Lists of Irregular Verbs and Listening appendix”(McDonough and Shaw, 2003 p.62).**

An Appendix is ‘Grammar Reference’. It has ten rules that students learned in the book. Metalanguage input highlights both form and meaning supported by examples. In its comprehensible analysis, a comparison between two rules is sometimes presented to draw students’ attention to the differences between them. A key strength in this task is the use of timeline to illustrate several tenses. The value of these materials occurs when students complete tasks individually outside the class (McDonough and Shaw, 2003). However, such expositions are inadequate because they should expand what was taught and add more detailed explanations instead of repeating what was mentioned in the unit. The book has additionally a ‘list of irregular verbs’. The verbs are represented in infinitive, past simple and past participle forms and are ordered alphabetically. Another list is ‘Word List’. It is divided according to the units. The keywords of the units are listed identifying the part of speech and phonemic transcriptions. These lists are ideal for the teacher to supply additional materials (Chnningsworth, 1984). Additional appendix is ‘Club Corner’. It is an additional feature in which different club members express opinions and views on the given topics. Its objective is to act like a catalyst for discussion and reflection in interesting ways.

However, the book does not have self-check units. It only has a reflection on unit one in the form of an interview. Furthermore, no listening appendices are attached so students will not be able to access the listening transcripts. The book should have included the listening appendix.

**The Availability of Model in Writing Activities to Ensure the Exposure to the Language Needed to Be Used (Raimes, 1984):**

A clear feature of writing activities could be identified which is the successfulness in the use of modal in the writing. Although Harmer (2004) does not support the idea that students should be exposed to a sample rather than a typical model to emulate, there are several significant benefits that can be identified. The use of the modal is not fundamentally to control students’ writing. It can be deliberated to be a way of highlighting writing features, and language structures or showing how a piece of writing is organized. There is a similar attitude expressed by Freez (1998), Badger and White (2000) that writing context should be stimulated through modal to highlight the structure and the features of a text. It is a way of helping students to explore the addressees, determination, and the shape of a particular type (Cheng, 2008).

**The Extent of the Use of Writing Approaches:**

Comparing the writing approaches adopted in this book, the current evaluation confirms that the book has effectively implemented different types of writing approaches. What is interesting is that genre approach is the most common approach applied. A possible explanation of this might be the use of tasks that aim at the integration of real-life situations which stimulate students’ future needs. This accords with what Reppen (2002) says which emphasizes the prominence of illuminating students to different types of genres and pointing out the constructions of each one. Badger and White (2000)



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add that this approach enlarges students' knowledge with the distinction between the types of genres in terms of lexis, register, and formality. Moreover, students will have different knowledge types including genre, social, world, and cultural knowledge.

Another approach is competently incited by the book is the process approach. The book encourages drafting, planning, and editing in specific tasks. There are two sections predominantly encouraging and applying the process approach which are 'Learning Journal' 'Club Corner'. This seems to be consistent with the literature which demonstrates the influential change in the view of teaching writing. Writing is viewed to be a compound phase process (Tribble, 2010). Nation (2008) advocates that writing instruction should focus on the process of composition rather than the final result. Writing is considered to happen in stages rather than at once involving experiment creativity (White and Arndt, 1991). It is a 'continuous cycle' (Nation, 2008). The process of writing is the stages students use to compose which includes proposal of writing, editing and revising (Richards, 2001 and Seow, 2002). According to this approach, time does not appear to limit the writing (Raimes, 1984). This approach gives a chance for feedback to be provided from different readers (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996). In terms of the level of formality and audience awareness, the book has efficiently incorporated these two concepts. The book has drawn students' consideration to the audience. This corroborates with Hedge (1988) and Yasuda (2011) who underline the value of writing for the audience. A key problem, however, is the implicitness of the level of formality for each activity in each genre in the book. It needs to pay more attention to the level of formality to make students aware of it.

### **The Controlled and Guided Writing Activities (William, 1983 p.255).**

Strong evidence of the use of distinction types of activities including controlled, guided and freer activities. Comparing the results shown in Table 1, it can be noticed that guided activities are the most common category of writing activities presented in the book. This matches with the criteria mentioned by William (1983). Based on the analysis, the guided activities were gradually increasing in the level of difficulty and purpose. This type is an essential type which can improve learners writing through sense of balance amount of control and freedom. Guided composition helps student to write with aid and guidance (Raimes, 1984). Learners are anticipated to write efficacious pieces of writing (Harmer, 2004). In the fourth task, students complete missing part of the sentences (Nation, 2009). It is determined to improve learners' structural knowledge (Raimes, 1984). In addition, it provides modal and pre-writing tasks in which students write a similar text (Raimes, 1984).

One question that needs to be asked, however, is whether the controlled writing activities should be limited to the first units. The book seems to fail in finding an instability between controlled and freer writing activities. The writing activities are more controlled in the first units however they gradually disappeared in the last units. Despite the importance of freer activities, controlled activities cannot be excluded. Both types should be presented to allow the practice of accuracy (controlled writing activities) and fluency (free writing).

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Another striking point is even though the book encourages extended written output from the learners through containing the practice of written discourse extending the sentence level to writing paragraphs, a manageable amount of activities focusing on meaning cannot be identified. Writing activities concentrating mainly on meaning should be taken into account when designing this type of activity. Meaning should be as important as language structure.

**“The Extent of the Integration Written Work with Other Skills and Language System” (William, 1983 p.255):**

The book has profitably integrated writing with language system and vocabulary. However, the main limitation is the ineffectiveness of integrating writing with other three skills namely speaking, listening and reading. The integration between reading and writing is crucial thus more activities should be obtainable. It was propositioned by Oxford et al (1994) who emphasize incorporating language aptitudes which helps in learning and developing better in a second language.

**“The Degree of Match between Writing Tests Students are taking, their Needs and the Materials Taught in the Book” (McDonough and Shaw, 2003 p. 65).**

There is a mismatch between the writing activities presented in the book and the one used in the final exams. Two final exams that students at this grade had taken were compared with the writing activities in the book in terms of types of writing and topics. It can be identified that the exam and writing activities in the book vary in types and topics. The book does not focus on the types of the exams. However, this tends to overlook the fact that students will not be acknowledged to write this type as it is not being taught by the book. Another inconvenience is the gap between the topics in the exam and the book. Students’ poor performance in writing exams can stem from the lack of lexis associated with the themes presented in the exam which does not correspond with the themes of the book. Hence, the exams should be changed to reflect actual writing tasks presented remarkably in the book.

**“The claim and provision for self-study activities and the degree of justification of the claim” (McDonough and Shaw, 2003 p. 65):**

The book has self-study activities at the back of the book. Answer keys are provided. A more comprehensive way would be inserting them after each unit. Although they are stated in the introduction of the book, it fails to take references to these activities in each unit into account as a reminder because students are not expected to look for them unless the teacher mentions them. The self-study activities are mainly centred on grammar and vocabulary. Some pronunciation and writing activities are included. The book provides controlled, traditional practices with answer keys. They are useful sources for students to study independently due to their clarity in structure and instructions. The existing activities fail to resolve the integration of more than one language structure in each task for example. A much more systematic style would include additional self-study activities that mix the language structures of the four units in tasks and reflect test structure.

### **Implication to Research and Practice**

The findings of this research provide an insight into the implication of this is the modification of some aspects of writing activities such as integrating meaning focus and making a good balance between controlled and guided writing activities.

### **CONCLUSION**

The present research aimed to analyse and evaluate the writing activities in the Omani textbook *'English for Me'* using eight evaluation criteria mentioned in the literature which are of two levels. The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is that the book has successfully adopted effective writing activities in terms of using modals in writing, using genre and process approaches and the uses of guided and controlled writing practices. However, the results indicate that there are some drawbacks of the book for instance the ineffectiveness of integrating writing activities into other skills such as speaking, listening and reading, not focusing on the type and topics of the writing questions in the exam and less attention to level of formality in the activities. The main weakness of this study was the paucity in appendices of the book due to the word limit

### **Future Research**

Considerably more work will need to be done to determine students' and teachers' perceptions of the 'English for Me' textbook.

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