

# EVALUATION ON THE SUITABILITY OF THE NEW CUTTING EDGE TEXTBOOKS IN AN EFL TEACHING CONTEXT

## A CASE STUDY AT THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY, VIET NAM

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### ABSTRACT

*Textbooks have been a subject of hot debates in education. A wide array of issues related to textbooks has been highlighted in recent years and evaluating textbooks is one of the most striking matters which should be adequately addressed. This article presents an evaluation of a language textbook in a specific institutional context. It uses descriptive research design to investigate the perception of the ten educators on the level of suitability of the New Cutting Edge Textbooks to non-English major students at Thai Nguyen University. Results from the study serve as the basis for proposing changes and suggesting recommendations regarding teaching methods and material adaptations that could enhance the quality of English learning and teaching at an EFL context.*

**Key words:** *evaluation, suitability, New Cutting Edge, non-English major students, Thai Nguyen University.*

### INTRODUCTION

Textbooks are “an effective resource for self-directed learning, an effective resource for presentation material, a source of ideas and activities, a reference source for students, a syllabus where they reflect pre-determined learning objectives, and supports for less experienced teachers...” [2]. This means textbooks play a pivotal role in guiding teachers and learners to obtain the goals of language teaching and learning. In Vietnam, textbooks can be considered a powerful instrument and backbone for classroom activities. Located in the Northeast of mountainous area in Vietnam, Thai Nguyen University (TNU) has some striking features which are typical of the region. There remains a gap in evaluating language textbooks although they are considered a great tool in English education. What is more, the remarkable proportion of the students is of different minor ethnic groups with poor educational background. They are mainly non-English majored; so they demonstrate lack of motivation and a low level of English language proficiency. The majority of tertiary institutions in Vietnam also face the similar challenges. A good signal which is supposed to help solve the above educational problems is the launch of the National Foreign Language 2020 Project (NFLP 2020) by Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam in 2010 [5]. The implementation of NFLP 2020 has made dramatically changes in English education in Vietnam. In order to actualize the NFLP2020, Thai Nguyen University (TNU) Director signed the approval of “Project on standardizing language skills for TNU academic staffs and students of the 2013-2015 and the 2016-2020 periods” in 2014. Under this project, it is a compulsory requirement that non-English major students (graduating from the academic year of 2018 onwards) have to achieve

level B1 in the Common European Framework of References (CEFR) or have B1 equivalent certificates in English in order to graduate from any bachelor training programs in TNU [3]. To meet the above requirements, English educators at TNU chose New Cutting Edge Pre-intermediate levels [4] as the core textbooks during their general English teaching. Nevertheless, a question is whether these course-books meet the expected outcome of the targeted level. As a matter of fact, no “textbook is perfect” for all context [1]; thus, an attempt to carry out a critical evaluation on these materials is crucial to formulate the principles for their quality improvement and further development through corrections, revisions, and adaptations. With the above-mentioned concerns, “Evaluation on the Suitability of the New Cutting Edge (NCE) Textbooks in an EFL Teaching Context” came into conception with the main aims of investigating strengths and weaknesses of NCE textbooks and their compatibility with the intended learning outcomes as seen from the points of view of 10 TNU educators. From that, some suggestions are going to be proposed to promote the effective uses of these materials to help students to achieve level B1 at least as a compulsory requirement of graduation.

## METHODOLOGY

The research employed the descriptive method to find out educator respondents’ perceptions on the suitability of the currently used textbooks of New Cutting Edge Pre-intermediate levels to non-English major students and to the course’s intended learning outcomes at Thai Nguyen University.

The respondents of this study were 10 tertiary educators working full time at the Faculty of Basic Sciences of Thai Nguyen University. Descriptive design endeavors to illustrate and interpret the situation of the research. In this study, it was used to describe the respondents’ profile, perceptions on the suitability of teaching-learning contents of New Cutting Edge to Thai Nguyen University students and to the course outcomes. Due to the time constraints, the research instrument used in the study is a self-made questionnaire to seek for the English educators’ insights on the suitability of the course book in their teaching contexts. The first part consisted of the respondents’ demographics, followed by the evaluation on the teaching-learning contents of the textbook New Cutting Edge and the last part is the evaluation on the suitability of the textbooks using the Likert’s scale rating. The gathered data was described statistically using percentage, frequency for respondents’ profiles and mean and standard deviation for perceptions on teaching-learning contents and suitability of the textbooks to the target students and courses.

## FINDINGS

### 1. The respondents’ demographics

Results of the survey questionnaire clearly show that most of the respondents (80%) are females and only two out of ten were males which supported that teaching is a female-dominated profession. Besides, their ages range from 28 to 53, with the average age of 34. In terms of experience in teaching English, the educators vary from 6 to 31 years of profession. This means that teachers at TNU were quite experienced in the teaching career, with an average mean of 13.2 years. Furthermore, 10 educators at TNU hold a PhD degree. However, with regard to number of professional training courses, programs, workshops or seminars attended, seven out of ten (70%) respondents claimed that they had never participated in any textbook evaluation activity. Moreover, only two educators (20%) admitted that they had actually joined textbook evaluation activities. It can be concluded that most of the respondents have never taken part in professional training or experienced doing any textbook evaluation during their teaching career.

### 2. Evaluation on the general attributes of the course-books

**Table 1. Evaluation on the general attributes of the course-books**

No.	General Attributes	Mean	SD	Interpretation
1	Most of the tasks in the book are interesting	3.30	0.84	Strongly Agree
2	Cultural aspects have been contextualized to your EFL setting.	2.40	0.42	Disagree
3	The language in the textbook is natural and close to real-life	2.90	0.62	Agree

	language situations to EFL context			
4	The situations provided in the textbook sound authentic and applicable to real-life context.	3.10	0.69	Agree
5	The material is up-to-date with a variety of topics from different fields.	2.70	0.99	Agree
	<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>2.88</b>	<b>0.71</b>	<b>Agree</b>

Table 1 shows the results of data gathered through a questionnaire related to TNU educators' perception on general attributes of the course-book named New Cutting Pre-intermediate. It is obvious that the respondents strongly agree that most of the tasks in the textbooks are interesting with the mean of 0.84. Moreover, they agree that the language, materials and situations used in the books are authentic and close to real-life communication. However, they did not think that the cultural aspects of their EFL context have been integrated in the textbook with the mean of 2.40. All in all, general attributes of the course-books receive much agreement from TNU educators as reflected in the overall mean of 2.88 with the verbal interpretation of Agree.

### 3. Evaluation on the learning-teaching content of the course-books

**Table 2. Evaluation on the learning-teaching content of the course-books**

No.	General Attributes	Mean	SD	Interpretation
<b>Listening</b>				
1	Listening tasks are appropriate to students' English proficiency levels.	2.30	0.61	Disagree
2	Listening tasks are authentic or close to real language situations	2.80	0.77	Agree
<b>Speaking</b>				
3	Activities are developed to initiate meaningful communication and motivate students to talk.	2.90	0.94	Agree
4	Activities are balanced among individual response, pair and group work.	2.80	1.15	Agree
<b>Reading</b>				
5	Texts are interesting and motivating students to seek for in-depth knowledge	2.40	0.70	Disagree
6	Texts are interesting and motivating students to seek for in-depth knowledge	2.70	0.64	Agree
<b>Writing</b>				
7	Writing tasks take into consideration learner capabilities	2.80	0.77	Agree
8	Different genres help to develop appropriate writing skills for daily and future exchanges	2.70	0.64	Agree
<b>Vocabulary</b>				
9	The load (number of new words in each lesson) is appropriate to the students' level and matches with the required vocabulary for level B1 in CEFR tests (or B1 equivalent tests).	2.70	0.64	Agree
<b>Grammar</b>				
10	The spread of grammar is achievable and practical to daily uses	3.10	0.95	Agree
<b>Pronunciation</b>				
11	Pronunciation is diversified with examples and exercises involving accents from EFL countries	2.40	0.43	Disagree
<b>Exercises</b>				
12	They help both under/over-achievers develop language skills	2.70	0.64	Agree
<b>Overall Mean</b>		<b>2.94</b>	<b>0.81</b>	<b>Agree</b>

Results of the data analysis as shown in Table 2 indicate the evaluation on the learning and teaching content of the course-books. TNU lecturers generally agreed on the teaching and learning content of the two textbooks with the overall mean of 2.94. However, it was worth noticing that the respondents disagreed on the appropriateness of the listening tasks to students' English levels. With the mean of 2.30 at 0.61 SD, it seemed that they thought the

listening tasks in the textbooks are beyond students' competence level, or in other words, it was too difficult for students to do listening tasks. Having the same opinion, teachers also shared that the reading materials of EFL contexts were in shortage, and pronunciation tasks or exercises were in need of sources involving accents from EFL countries with the same overall mean of 2.40. In general, they agreed with all other learning-teaching contents of the textbooks. In terms of four major skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing, they acknowledged that tasks of each skill were appropriate, interesting, motivating and close to real language situations which helped students develop meaningful communication for daily and future exchanges in foreign language. In terms of vocabulary, they agreed that the load of vocabulary is appropriate to students' level and matches with the required vocabulary for level B1 in CEFR with the mean of 2.70. For grammar, TNU educators are in accordance with each other that the spread of grammar was achievable and practical to daily usage with the mean of 3.10. With regards to exercises of the textbooks, with the mean of 2.70, they positively thought that the tasks can help both under and over-achievers develop their language skills.

#### **4. Evaluation on the suitability of the textbooks to TNU learners and to the course intended learning outcomes (CILOs)**

**Table 3. Evaluation on the suitability of the textbooks to TNU learners and to the course intended learning outcomes (CILOs)**

No.	General Attributes	Mean	SD	Interpretation
<b>Suitability of the textbook to TNU learners &amp; CILOs</b>				
1	They are compatible to background knowledge and level of students	2.80	0.61	Agree
2	They are compatible to the socio-economic context	2.40	0.82	Disagree
3	They are compatible to the needs and interests of the learners	2.50	0.48	Agree
4	Different activities and tasks help TNU students familiarize and practice the required English proficiency tests to achieve level B1 in CEFR	2.60	0.60	Agree
5	The book promotes the development of the language knowledge and skills as necessary prerequisites for TNU students to achieve level B1 as a compulsory requirement for graduation	2.70	0.64	Agree
	<b>Overall Mean</b>	2.60	0.63	Agree

To investigate the respondents' perceptions on whether the textbooks are appropriate to TNU learners and the course intended learning outcomes, the five item questionnaires were delivered to the ten educators at TNU. Results from the data analysis indicate that the respondents generally agreed that the textbooks were suitable for TNU learners and the course intended learning outcomes with the overall mean of 2.60. Specifically, they agreed that the course-books were compatible to students' level, needs and interests. Moreover, the activities and tasks in the series helped students familiarize and practise the required English proficiency tests and promote the development of language knowledge and skills needed to achieve level B1 in CEFR as stated in the course learning outcomes. However, it is also noticeable that some of the contents in the books were not appropriate to students' socio-economic context as reflected in the mean of 2.40.

#### **CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the foregoing findings, the following conclusions were drawn: PhD English educators at TNU were experienced in teaching English but lack of professional trainings on textbook evaluation and in shortage of opportunities in evaluating course-books or teaching materials. A good signal for the practices of using the New Cutting Edge pre-intermediate was that TNU teachers all agreed that the textbooks were interesting, motivating and could help students develop language knowledge and skills needed in pursuing their required level of language (level B1) and enable them to use in daily communication and future exchanges at workplaces. However, some of the aspects in the textbooks were not really appropriate to students' socio-economic and cultural contexts. Besides, some of the listening tasks are too difficult for students to master. In the light of findings gathered in the study, the researchers hereby recommend that to ensure the successful practices of exploiting the textbooks, TNU educators should adapt some parts of the listening tasks to be easier for students instead of asking them to do what the



textbooks require. Besides, reading texts of native English speaking countries should also be replaced by the ones of the national and local cultures so as to motivate students to participate in the lessons. Finally, as a suggestion, frequent activities regarding textbook evaluation or material development and adaptation should be offered to educators at TNU so that they can first have chance to be more professional in assessments of text books and then better help their students be able to use English as a means of communication as well as achieve level B1 in CEFR as a compulsory requirement for graduation.

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