

“Life A1-A2” Coursebook Evaluation and How to Exploit it from Teachers’ Perspectives at Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration

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ABSTRACT

Inappropriate use of coursebooks may de-skill teachers and tire students. This paper explores the role of Life A1-A2 coursebook in EFL teaching based on teachers’ evaluation and suggests how teachers can make effective use of the coursebook together with its online supports. It mainly applies to the teachers at TUEBA and educational institutions that have been using this coursebook. The first part of the paper refers to the role of coursebooks in general, their impact on teaching and learning processes. The second part of the article is an attempt to demonstrate how LIFE A1-A2 can be appropriately exploited by using important processes such as evaluation, selection, adaptation and supplementation. The research results reveal that despite some weaknesses in terms of unfamiliar cultural contents, inadequate activities for grammar and vocabulary and errors related to typing and mismatched content in its software, this coursebook is useful for EFL teaching and learning. This study can be a useful source of reference for English teachers who are considering the authenticity of a textbook.

Keyword: *Life A1-A2, coursebook evaluation, ELT, English teaching and learning*

1. INTRODUCTION

Coursebooks are considered the most used learning resource by teachers. They not only provide a framework to help teachers achieve their teaching goals but also guide the teaching process. For learners, the curriculum can have a positive impact on the attitudes and outcomes of the lesson and throughout the course. According to Richards JC (2001) [1], training programs will not bring results without textbooks because they provide structure as well as outline for the subject. In addition, the use of textbooks in a training program will ensure that students in different classes can be taught the same content, which will be assessed equally. According to the same point of view, Cunningsworth (1995) [2] argues that the textbook acts as a course outline and as a source of learning materials for students to self-study. In particular, the curriculum can be considered as an effective support tool for young teachers who do not have enough experience and confidence in teaching

However, many educators, as well as researchers, are skeptical about the benefits and applicability of the curriculum as it can cause socio-cultural biases, sometimes too artificially in the classroom. They point out that many sample texts or conversations are unnatural and unsuitable for communicative language teaching. Allwright (1982) [3] argued that the curriculum was too rigid and generally reflected the author's inclination, linguistic forte, psychology as well as pedagogical skills. Furthermore, textbooks that contain informal language are not communicative, but instead simplify language and unrealistic views of real-life situations (Cathcart, 1989, cited by Litz DRA, 2005) [4].

It is difficult to consider whether or not to use textbooks in teaching according to the above points of view, but the fact that the number of textbooks published in recent years has been increasing proves its usefulness. Their

popularity is undeniable. Therefore, curriculum evaluation is an integral part of the training process, it provides teachers with a lot of useful information for future teaching practice, course plans as well as helps learners control their learning (Rea-Dickins and Germaine, 1994) [5]. A carefully selected curriculum reflects the goals, methods and values of the curriculum (Cunningsworth, 1995).

In brief, a coursebook provides teachers and learners with a structure of teaching and learning, methodological support and opportunities for revision and preparation. Moreover, it gives teachers a relief as it reduces the heavy load of preparation, saves time and makes teaching and learning easier.

2. RATIONALE

The *Life A1-A2* coursebook has been used for non-English major students at Thai Nguyen University of Economics & Business Administration (hereinafter referred to as TUEBA) since 2016. The foreign language graduation standard for students enrolled from 2016 at TUEBA is at B1 level according to the CEFR. However, no studies evaluating this curriculum at TUEBA have been conducted. Therefore, the assessment of this coursebook is necessary to get an insight look into its effectiveness to adjust the curriculum.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research questions

To get an overview of *Life A1-A2*, the following research questions were issued:

- i. How effective is the format and design of the curriculum?
- ii. How effective is the activity designed?
- iii. How effective are the skills built into the curriculum?
- iv. How effective is the language in the curriculum?
- v. To what extent are the topics and content in the curriculum effective?
- vi. Overall, how effective is the curriculum?

3.2 Research methods

The author conducted a survey using questionnaires based on the Likert scale to collect primary data. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with all lecturers of English at TUEBA's Foreign Language Department. The data is mainly to collect the opinions of the lecturers about the effectiveness of *Life A1-A2* curriculum. Data and information collected were analyzed using SPSS software version 20.0, Microsoft Excel software. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used to perform the analysis combined with descriptive, regression, and equilibrium statistics. Data collection tool based on the textbook evaluation scale "Teacher Textbook Evaluation Scale" (TTES) which was designed by Sung Kyun Kwan University, Korea in 2000.

Participants: 15 English lecturers of BMNN, TUEBA (including 1 Ph.D., 3 Ph.D. students, 2 main lecturers and 9 masters. The average number of teaching years of these lecturers is 12 years (in which the person with the highest seniority is 18 years and the lowest is 8 years The average number of semesters taught is 5.5 semesters.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results obtained from the questions for the first research question: "How effective is the format and design of the curriculum?" are presented in Table 1. The vast majority of teachers (12/15 teachers accounting for 80%) agree that *Life A1-A2* is appropriate to the curriculum with a clear and scientific layout and design. The coursebook is divided into 6 levels from Beginner, A1- A2, A2- B1, B1, B2, and C1. Each level consists of 12 units, each unit is divided into subsections from A to F. Items A, B, C are usually activities that provide input materials for learners such as vocabulary, phonetics, grammar, to the items which aim at applying the input language to produce language in D, E, F such as reading, writing and speaking. Especially, the Review section at the end of each unit makes it easy for the learners to consolidate what they have learned, creating a premise for acquiring knowledge in the next unit. 86.6% of teachers agree that the curriculum includes a teacher's book. In addition to the hard copy, the textbook also provides an online system for teachers and students through the website "www.myELT.heinle.com". In addition, the two software namely "Exam viewer" and "Test generator" can assist teachers in test designing and student performance management. The limitation of the curriculum is that in some units, the mixture of skills in the same subsection makes it sometimes difficult for the teachers to conduct teaching and learning activities in a lesson. This

is reflected in the fact that 11.4% of teachers disagree with the effectiveness of the curriculum in the way of designing activities.

Table -1: Format and design

Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
1. The coursebook has an overview (book map) of the language function, structure, and vocabulary of each lesson.	-	-	-	-	100
2. The layout and design of the coursebook are appropriate and clear.	-	-	20	80	-
3. The coursebook is designed in an efficient sequence.	-	11,4	20	66,6	-
4. The coursebook has a vocabulary appendix (Glossary) at the end of the book.	-	-	-	-	100
5. The coursebook has a review and consolidation section (Unit review).	-	-	-	93,3	6,7
6. The coursebook has a teacher's book, specific instructions on how to use the textbook most effectively.	-	-	-	86,6	13,4
7. The users of the coursebook clearly understand the objectives of the curriculum.	-	-	26,6	73,4	-
8. The coursebook has a system of online supplementary exercises, a rich and effective question bank.	-	-	33,3	66,7	-

Table 2 answers the question: "How effective is the activity designed?". The survey results show that the vast majority of teachers (53.3%) agree on the scientificity of the activities built into the curriculum, including language practice activities with and without teacher's control (in terms of controlled practice and free practice). In some lessons, activities are shown through the steps of teaching foreign languages, going from PPP (Presentation - Practice - Production) method to Task-based learning. The variety of activities such as role-play, or real-life skills in Lessons D and F help boost students' ability to communicate in the language during class. The activities designed, however, have not yet met the needs of the learners, and have not really promoted effective communication. In addition, communication-promoting activities such as role-play, information gaps, jigsaw activities, and interviews also need to be supplemented. It is noteworthy that the activities of grammar and vocabulary are not really attractive and lively. The included grammar content is still quite rigid and not learner-friendly. Although most of the grammar activities are introduced step by step of form - meaning - and use, they are still in the context of the previous reading, the practice content is somewhat monotonous according to the same pattern in different sections of different units.

Table -2: Activities

Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
9. The coursebook has enough activities designed according to the teachings of the Dharma, focusing on the fluency and accuracy of language production.	-	26,6	20,1	53,3	-
10. Teaching activities/exercises promote effective communication practice.	-	-	46,7	53,3	-
11. The coursebook includes individual, pair	-	-	-	33,3	66,7

and group activities.					
12. Grammar and vocabulary are introduced in a realistic and engaging context.	-	-	46,6	40	13,4
13. Activities that stimulate creative and independent response/feedback.	-	6,6	20	73,4	-
14. Teachers can adjust and modify activities designed in the coursebook.	-	-	13,4	66,6	20

Table 3 answers the question: “How effective are the skills built into the curriculum?”. The data obtained from the survey results show that the goal of skill development is quite high; 86.6% of teachers agree that the coursebook provides a full range of listening - speaking - reading - writing skills to help learners comprehensively develop their language ability. Besides the main skills mentioned above, micro-skills such as listening for gist, note-taking, skimming contribute to the advantages of this foreign language course. It can be seen that *Life A1-A2* has a greater distribution of activities and content for speaking skills that are often twice that of other skills, and less for writing skills.

Table -3: Skills

Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
15. The coursebook includes and focuses on the skills learners need to practice.	-	-	13,4	86,6	-
16. The coursebook has a balance between the four skills.	-	-	6,7	93,3	-
17. The coursebook has activities to develop sub-skills such as listening for gist, note-taking, skimming, etc.	-	-	6,7	53,3	40
18. The coursebook has activities and exercises to help with natural pronunciation (such as stress and intonation).	-	-	-	6,7	93,3

In terms of language, 93.3% of teachers think that the language used in *Life A1-A2* is close to real life. However, in some lessons, vocabulary and grammar are judged to be too sketchy compared with the student's current level of language ability.

Table -4: Language

Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
19. The language used in the coursebook is the same standard language as in real life.	-	-	6,4	93,3	-
20. The language in the coursebook is suitable for the current language ability of the students.	-	-	13,4	60	26,6
21. Grammatical and lexical features are introduced in a consistent progression.	-	13,4	26,6	60	-
22. Grammatical features are explained simply.	-	6,6	40	46,6	13,4

The content of the book is evaluated to be lively and relatable because the book is based on real-life stories from all over the world. *Life A1-A2* - Vietnam edition is an example: the cover image, the cultures and the illustrations are all

Vietnamese. 73.3% of teachers agree on the practicality of the subjects and content of the coursebook. In particular, all teachers acknowledge that the content of it is highly educational and does not cause any cultural misunderstandings for the teachers and learners (this content accounts for 100%). However, it is the various topics that make some readings or discussions not really friendly to Vietnamese students, thereby reducing its attractiveness to the learners (accounting for 13.4%).

Table -5: Topics and content

Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
23. The subject and content of the coursebook are suitable for the needs of English learners.	-	20	53,3	20	6,7
24. The subject and content of the coursebook are practical.	-	-	26,7	73,3	-
25. The subject and content of the coursebook is attractive and engaging rich and varied	-	13,4	73,3	13,3	-
26. The topics and contents of the coursebook are various.	-	-	-	86,6	13,4
27. The coursebook has no negative stereotypes about culture	-	-	-	100	-

Table 6 answers the survey question of the overall assessment of *Life A1-A2* levels, the results show that the orthodoxy, the diversity of content and skills, the accompanying supporting tools have generally been improved to arouse students' interest in the subject through teacher assessment. 46.6% of teachers assessed that the coursebook was not really suitable for the training goals because the requirement of the graduation standards for students has been changed.

Table -6: General evaluation

Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
28. The coursebook is consistent with the university's training goals.	-	13,4	46,6	40	-
29. The coursebook stimulates students' interest in learning English.	-	-	46,7	53,3	-
30. The university will continue to use this coursebook.	-	26,7	40	33,3	-

5. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The survey results obtained from the research showed that in general, the *Life* curriculum at the A1-A2 level met the criteria of a good textbook in terms of content, form, skills and teaching methods. That is suitable for inclusion in language teaching in professional educational institutions. However, the choice of book level needs to match the needs of the language as well as the current level of the student. In addition, the factor of graduation standards also needs to be considered. Besides the advantages indicated, the current *Life A1-A2* curriculum still has some shortcomings that need to be overcome such as errors in spelling, grammar. Sometimes there is no consistency between the itool and the hard copy such as the character names and the evaluation data on the Test generator software is not rich. The curriculum will be more complete if the above errors are corrected.

Here are some general suggestions addressed by the author:

First of all, teachers should critically examine the coursebook. Also, the study of the table of contents, speculation of the topics and structures in order to understand how these are constructed and why is of great importance. Secondly, teachers should distinguish between those units that seem relevant and interesting to their students and decide which should be used, unchanged or adapted. Accordingly, teachers should find materials that are considered boring, irrelevant or do not suit the age or cultural background of their students to leave out.

Principles of adaptation provided by McGrath (2002:74) [7] are useful to the ELT teachers:

- a) Localisation: adapting the material to confine within our country.
- b) Personalisation: changing the material to satisfy our students' needs and interests.
- c) Individualisation: adapting the material in a way to address our students' learning styles.
- d) Modernisation: bringing the material up to date.
- e) Simplification: making the texts or the tasks easier to do or understand.

It can be very useful if teachers keep a record of the process of selection, adaptation, and supplementation. They can also make brief notes about what has worked well and what hasn't to adjust.

Finally, teachers should have regular meetings with their colleagues. They may also have classroom visits to see the way their colleagues use the coursebook and how the same materials influence teaching and interaction in their classrooms.

6. REFERENCES

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