

Prospect 1 and Four Corners 1 in the Spotlight: Textbook Evaluation with Some Reference to Critical Discourse Analysis

Mohammad Javadi ^{1*}, Zeinab Azizinejad ²

^{1*} M. A. of TEFL, Yasouj University (corresponding author)

mohammad_javadi1990@yahoo.com

² M. A. of TEFL, Yasouj University; zeinab.azizi1992@gmail.com

Abstract

As an analytical type of approach, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) deals with the emphasis on social practice, identity, power, and ideology built through text and speech in socio-political and educational contexts. Having proposed a theoretical framework, it uncovered all discrepant ways through which power and societal practices are produced in written and spoken texts. Moreover, mingled with text and talk, textbooks play a pivotal role in determining a standard curriculum. To this end, using a mixed-methods design, a questionnaire was applied to compare the perceptions of 103 Iranian EFL teachers of Yasouj, Dehdasht, and Gachsaran English institutes and junior high schools with each other towards the *Prospect 1* and *Four Corners 1* textbooks. Furthermore, a semi-structured interview was also conducted from 9 teachers. Descriptive statistics and content analysis were applied for analyzing the data. The results revealed that the two textbooks differed in terms of 'layout', 'language type', and 'whole aspect' whereas they were similar in light of 'activities', 'content', and 'skills'. Also, findings gained from the interview suggest that the textbooks more or less failed to consistently take the needs of language learners into account. This study might be beneficial to textbook designers and language teachers and learners.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Textbook, Perception, Learners' Needs, Four Corners 1, Prospect 1.

1. Introduction

It goes without saying that Critical Discourse Analysis is deemed the association between discourse and power posed by a large number of its supporters who have always been seeking to offer a convolutedly theoretical framework through which they would be able to analyze discourse and power. This framework sheds a great deal of light on almost the whole ways in which power and domination are to be produced by virtue of text and speech. In so doing, textbooks appear to be one of the marvelous elements of any academic curriculum which mingle text and talk together as one unique ideology.

As the pivotal component of most language programs, Richards (2001) maintained that textbooks provide students with crucial inputs by means of

which they can internalize what has been proposed through a myriad of activities, readings, writings, snapshots and explanations (Tomlinson, 2002). According to Giroux (2005), textbooks are regarded as “neutral conveyors of ideas” from the eyes of educators and lay public. Indeed, when it comes to language learning, textbooks serve as invaluable sources for learners in order to enhance their communicative competence through pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and fluency (Cunningsworth, 1995). Considering the role of textbooks in EFL settings, Hutchinson and Torres (1994) contended that owing to the immense significance of textbooks as a universal element, they have exerted a strong influence on ELT contexts during the past few decades. Besides, it is generally agreed that learners fail to continue learning a course while their textbooks are not to their taste (Hidayet, 2010). That is, if learners like their textbooks they will turn into active participants in the lessons and internalize the very inputs embedded in the very textbook in the target language. Accordingly, teachers have the right to reflect their perceptions of the textbooks through the rigorous process of evaluation so as to be capable of scrutinizing their usefulness and efficaciousness by determining the weak and strong points associated with the very context in which textbooks are to be taught.

In his seminal article, Cunningsworth (1995) argues that one should find the verification to see how “careful selection is made and how the materials selected closely reflect the needs of the learners as well as the aims, methods and values of the teaching program” (p.7). In addition, Ellis (1997) stated that going beyond the impressionistic assessments in tandem with gaining profound, systematic and contextual insights into the all-inclusive nature of textbook instructional materials would become impossible without evaluation. In line with the issue, a vast body of research conducted by Abdollahzadeh and Baniasad (2010), Fairclough (2013), PourhassanMoghaddam, Lotfi and Haghverdi (2013), Tahriri and Moradpour (2014), and Van Dijk (1993, 2003) indicates that CDA and critical textbook evaluation are of utmost importance while investigating the real position of textbooks in Iran’s educational academia.

To put it cogently, by close observation of the textbooks, much proof is required to incarnate dominant ideologies engendered in the textbooks, especially applied in Iranian schools together with English institutes in order to ascertain to what degree those ideologies have been presented for conveying linguistic devices. Therefore, due to a small portion of CDA-directed research done in this area, this study attempts to comparatively identify dominant ideologies and randomly elicit 103 Iranian EFL teachers’ perceptions of two textbooks i.e., *Junior High First Grade English Textbook* (developed by the Iranian Ministry of Education in 2014 and now is being taught at Iranian schools) and *Four Corners 1* (written by Jack C. Richards and David Bohlke in 2012 and being taught at Iranian English institutes) in terms of ‘layout and design’, ‘activities and tasks’, ‘language type’, ‘subject’,

‘content and skills’, and ‘whole aspect’ in Yasouj, Dehdasht, and Gachsaran institutes and junior high schools. The research questions are as follows:

1. To what degree does Prospect 1 differ from Four Corners 1 according to the layout and design?
2. To what degree does Prospect 1 differ from Four Corners 1 according to the activities?
3. To what degree does Prospect 1 differ from Four Corners 1 according to the skills?
4. To what degree does Prospect 1 differ from Four Corners 1 according to the language type?
5. To what degree does Prospect 1 differ from Four Corners 1 according to the subject and content?
6. To what degree does Prospect 1 differ from Four Corners 1 according to the whole Aspect?
7. What ideologies are manifested in the two textbooks using CDA?

2. Method

2.1 Quantitative Phase

2.1.1 Participants

Using a mixed method design, a total of 103 Iranian EFL teachers (66 females [64%] and 37 males [36%]) were chosen to participate in the study. The researchers made use of convenience sampling strategy because the three cities of Yasouj, Dehdasht, and Gachsaran were conveniently accessible to the researcher. All the participants had experience in teaching two textbooks of *Junior High First Grade English Textbook* at schools and *Four Corners 1* at English private institutes. Besides, participants ranged in age from 26 to 42 with a mean age of 34, had B.A. (79 B.A. teachers [77%]) and M.A. (24 M.A. teachers [23%]) degrees in TEFL, and their teaching experience ranged from 3 to 19 years.

2.1.2 Instrument

The quantitative data were collected through a five-point Likert-type Teacher Textbook Evaluation Scale (TTES) whereby "1" indicates "completely disagree", "2" means "disagree", "3" indicates "partly agree", "4" indicates "agree", and "5" means "completely agree". The inventory was developed by Sung Kyun Kwan University in 2000, consisting of 30 items. It covers six components of ‘*layout and design*’ [8 items], ‘*activities*’ [6 items], ‘*skills*’ [4 items], ‘*language type*’ [4 items], ‘*subject and content*’ [5 items], and ‘*whole aspect*’ [3 items]. Additionally, due to being utilized in a newer context, the scale was validated again and its reliability was calculated (Chronbach’s $\alpha=0.94$) to be high through SPSS without any item deletion.

2.1.3 Data collection and analysis

The questionnaire was in English and was sent to the participants through email, whatsapp and telegram, and some were handed out in the institutes to which the researchers had access. Needless to say, the researchers had initially obtained the permission of the respondents before administering the scale to them. In so doing, 103 teachers agreed to participate in the study. They all had experience in teaching the two aforementioned textbooks at schools and English private institutes. Therefore, using SPSS, descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were calculated for analyzing the gathered data.

2.2 Qualitative Phase

2.2.1 Participants

Based upon maximum variation sampling, nine teachers were randomly selected for semi-structured interviews. According to Dörnyei (2007) maximum variation sampling "allows [the researchers] to explore the variation within the respondents" (p.128). Three of the participants were from Yasouj, three from Dehdasht, and finally three from Gachsaran cities.

2.2.2 Data Collection, Instrument, and Analysis

As the second tool for gathering the qualitative data, semi-structured interviews were used for the purpose of the study. The reason why the researchers applied interview in the study was to enrich the investigation and glean illuminating insights into the teachers' perceptions of the two textbooks. Some interviews were conducted face to face and some were carried out through Skype, Imo and phone. Interview was conducive to the study in that it helped the researchers to analyze the data more accurately and reach a better conclusion. In sync with the questionnaire, teachers' interview was composed of seven questions involving 7 themes that were on content, objectives, appearance, language type (authenticity), activities and exercises, skills, and teachers' general attitudes such as cultural values towards Four Corners 1 and Prospect 1 textbooks. According to both appropriateness and intelligibility of the topic and questions, content validity of the questions was rated by two experts beforehand. They confirmed the questions. All nine teachers were asked to sign the consent form before being exposed to the interview. Finally, the gathered data was analyzed through content analysis.

3. Results

3.1 Quantitative Analysis

Since this study sought to compare the Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of two different English textbooks of Four Corners 1 and Prospect 1, the questionnaire was disseminated to the respondents to be filled in twice. First it should have been filled in for Four Corners 1 and then for Prospect 1. To do so, descriptive statistics were used respectively.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Prospect 1

Components	Number	Items	Mean	SD
Layout and design	103	8	2.97	0.69
Activities	103	6	3.21	0.67
Skills	103	4	3.23	0.63
Language type	103	4	2.18	0.88
Subject and contents	103	5	3.48	0.65
Whole aspect	103	3	2.68	0.94
Total	103	30	17.75	4.46

As regards the first six research questions, descriptive statistics were used for the textbook of Prospect 1, shown in Table 1. At a glance, it can be seen from the table that 'language type' component in Prospect 1 received the lowest mean score ($M=2.18$, $SD=0.88$). This implies that the language used in Prospect 1 would not seem to be authentic like real-life English and it is not at the right level for students' current English ability. Moreover, progression of grammar and vocabulary fails to appear appropriate. Notwithstanding these particular inconsistencies, 'subject and content' component was computed to gain the highest mean score ($M=3.48$, $SD=0.65$) in Prospect 1. In this connection, the subject and contents of the textbook is generally realistic, interesting, challenging and motivating. Besides, it refused to have negative stereotypes, albeit being a little bit culturally biased. One also should not overlook the fact that mean scores of the other components are above the standard mean i.e., $M=2.95$. By the same token, except 'whole aspect' component, all the teachers held positive perceptions in respect of 'layout and design', i.e., organization and presentation of language items, 'activities of the textbook' i.e., a balance of proposed activities with sufficient communicative and meaningful practices, 'skills' i.e., presentation of a multi-skill syllabus whether productive or receptive skills, albeit a larger emphasis on communicative aspect of the language. The reason for this gap is owing to its low mean score ($M=2.68$) of 'whole aspect'. That is, teachers would appear not to be understandably in favor of adopting the textbook any longer, if they did not have to do so.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for Four Corners 1

Components	Number	Items	Mean	SD
Layout and design	103	8	2.42	0.87
Activities	103	6	3.01	0.09
Skills	103	4	3.12	0.42
Language type	103	4	3.33	0.79
Subject and contents	103	5	3.14	0.59
Whole aspect	103	3	3.02	0.19
Total	103	30	18.04	2.95

On the basis of the proposed research questions, Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics gleaned so far for Four Corners 1 textbook as perceived by the teachers. Accordingly, the lowest mean score belongs to 'layout and design' component ($M=2.42$, $SD=0.87$). It is reasonable to assume that majority of the teachers thought that the textbook cover is unattractive. Further, more than the half of them agreed upon the unattractiveness of its page layout. Conversely, 'language type' component received the highest mean score ($M=3.33$, $SD=0.79$). This reveals that teachers were satisfied with the sequence of grammar and vocabulary right at the level of the learners and the way the textbook mirrors the authenticity and real-life characteristic features of the English language (Richards, 2001). All the rest of components were higher than the expected mean ($M=3$). However, care should be well exercised that 'activities' (3.01) and 'whole aspect' (3.02) components underlying Four Corners 1 were at a low ebb with a subtle nuance concerning their mean scores a bit over the standard value. By way of analogy, both textbooks serve as some commonalities in the light of activities, skills, subject and contents in that teachers held positive perceptions of the two textbooks in these areas. Whereas, teachers' perceptions of 'layout and design' in Prospect 1 differed from that of Four Corners 1, indicating a negative perception about the cover of Four Corner 1. Then, to take the analogy further, there existed a dramatically significant difference between 'layout and design' of both textbooks. Such was the case of language authenticity, progression unit (Nation & Macalister, 2010) over and above the language being above the current level of the students in Prospect 1. Last but not least, as a result of low motivation underpinning 'whole aspect', teachers perceived their students to have been deteriorating whole-heartedly throughout the whole process of language learning during the course of instruction. Nonetheless, this item was not also that much noticeable in Four Corners 1 whatsoever.

3.2 Qualitative Analysis

To gain more penetrating insights into Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of the above-mentioned textbooks as well as finding ideologies using Critical Discourse Analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted, from which seven dominant themes were extracted. The last research question underpinning the ideologies behind the two textbooks using CDA is answered through the interviews. The first ideology, or theme, was concerned with the physical appearance.

3.2.1 Layout and Physical Appearance

To begin with, one of the teachers named Alihossein claimed that "*the cover of Prospect 1 could become more attractive because it seems a little bit gloomy and not suitable for the age of the students*". He tersely added that "*it definitely has a good size with appropriate choice of colors*". As regards the Four Corners 1 textbook, Somayye said: "*the book is convenient and durable enough to*

be handled. It is also followed by attractive snapshots which can encourage the learners”.

3.2.2 Contents

The second theme was about the content about which Mehran succinctly complained: *“a mixture of socio-political, religious, and linguistic issues can be found in Prospect 1 which lays emphasis on morality together with a CLT-oriented approach but sometimes it isn’t clear what to teach”.* In parallel, he stated that *“in Four Corners 1, content has been put forward according to the needs of the learners, good illustrations of which are found in topics such as ‘new friends’, ‘family’, ‘daily life’, ‘foods’ etc. which are interesting”.*

3.2.3 Objectives

Next theme was concerned with the objectives of the textbooks. Rouhollah argued about the both clarity and ambiguity of the objectives in Prospect 1 by saying that *“each lesson is initiated with certain objectives; however, repetition of some words lesson by lesson has been ignored. Undoubtedly, CLT is the most important objective”.* As regards the Four Corners 1, he added: *“as a unit progresses, we can see the item repetition throughout the book which could purport to be an objective”.*

3.2.4 Language Type

As the fourth theme, language type is reflected in view of Maryam who acknowledged that: *“Prospect 1 didn’t make use of an authentic language. For instance, nouns are not compatible with the target language community, let alone the target culture. That’s why I use the word ‘Penglish’ in lieu of ‘English’ on these occasions”.* She extended her views and cited that *“some items are way beyond the level of the learners”.* Conversely, Mohsen highlighted the authenticity of language in Four Corners 1 by cultivating a positive opinion that: *“Language is quite authentic, using real-life English and different grammatical and lexical items are presented based on a systematically curricular approach”.*

3.2.5 Skills

In connection with this theme, Hadi maintained that *“Prospect 1 focuses on listening and speaking but a scant attention has been paid to reading and writing. Surprisingly enough, the CD has been designed with a fast speed so the students are unable to keep up with it attentively”.* Concomitantly, Rasoul talked about the effectiveness of four skills in Four Corners1 Textbook. Suffice it to mention from his final words: *“although reading passages were a bit too long which made it difficult for the learners to comprehend the gist, the textbook appeared influential in injecting four skills into the minds of the learners simultaneously”.*

3.2.6 Activities

In the light of activities, Mohammad pointed out that *“while it is true that students needed to be spoken in Farsi to do what they were supposed to do, but the fact remains that most of the activities of Prospect 1 met the needs of them because*

they were intelligible enough to be accomplished". In like manner, he elaborately put that *"the activities of Four Corners 1 were to their taste, but mention should also be made of the complexity and ambiguity of the exercises to some extent which even disheartened the students from time to time"*.

3.2.7 Cultural Values

This theme was too stand-out in Alihossein's interview who quoted that *"in Prospect 1, lots of national, religious and socio-political cultures are seen through this textbook and no attention was garnered to the target language culture"*. In contrast, he contended that *"in Four Corners 1 culture of target language is reflected in the words, sentences, passages, and so forth"*.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

As has been mentioned before, the overall purpose of this piece of research was to investigate the Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of two English textbooks, i.e., *Prospect 1* and *Four Corners 1* in terms of 'layout and design', 'activities', 'skills', 'language type', 'subject and content', and 'whole aspect' by virtue of Critical Discourse Analysis. Using CDA was a crucial element in determining the pertained ideologies within the textbooks. The study fell in two phases. First, a questionnaire was given to the participants to express teachers' perceptions of the mentioned components, which was the quantitative phase of the study. Then in order to enrich the results of the study, a semi-structured interview was conducted, purporting to be the qualitative phase of the study. As far as the findings of the study are concerned, the teachers held positive perceptions of *Prospect 1*, except the 'language type' and 'whole aspect' components. What lies at the root of this matter is the computed low mean score below the standard value. All the rest components were perceived positively. On the other hand, considering *Four Corners 1*, only the layout and design of the textbook received the lowest mean score meaning that the teachers did not like it, because they did not find it attractive.

In point of fact, while a learner intends to acquire a foreign language, he will be exposed to some instructional materials by which he could be able to improve his foreign language. Then, the very first thing which catches his attention is the textbook cover. In this connection, Cunningsworth and Tomlinson (1984) highlighted a balance between written text and visual aspect of materials. Moreover, Sheldon (1988) placed a large stress on the importance of text and graphical material once mixed. To Nunan's (1991) way of thinking, students view a textbook through an amalgamation of content and activities as well as the way in which the pertinent materials were organized.

The second component of the inventory prompted the teachers to express themselves about the contents of the textbooks. Majority of the teachers held positive perceptions of the two textbooks, asserting that *"the content provokes students' autonomy"* that is in sync with a study carried out by Cunningsworth

(1995) who believed that textbooks must be followed by motivational materials to propel learners into becoming more independent in language learning. In like a manner, Sheldon (1988) argued that themes, skills, grammatical structures, lexis and situation of the units should be connected and organized purposefully.

Then, activities of the two textbooks were to some degree satisfactory. By and large, Richards (2001) suggested that flexibility of textbooks makes it possible to be considered appropriate with miscellaneous styles. Next component was regarding different skills used in the textbook. Both textbooks reflected a positive perception of the teachers. In addition, integration of skills was of high significance since McDonough and Shaw (2012) believe in a kind of material which could arouse the students to learn collaborative integration of all skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing).

Then language type concerned with the authenticity of language and the level of students' current English ability. In prospect 1, it was below the standard value. This could be owing to the assumption that the writers are not native speakers of English. As for Four Corners 1, language type gained the highest mean score. Lastly, the whole aspect component in Prospect 1 was not satisfactory because teachers might think about the notion that they failed to tend to apply Prospect 1 anymore. But concerning Four Corners1, the mean score had difficulty reaching to the standard value.

On balance, the results of this study are not also incompatible with a large number of other studies conducted by Penny (1996), Sheldon (1988) and Richards (2001) in which teachers believed that textbooks refuse to meet the requirements of the learners. Possible reasons for this gap could be found in the very assumption that teachers assign a lot of irrelevant materials, content and topics associated with the lack of attention to the interests and proficiency level of the learners, all of which are consistent with the results gathered from Aminuddin's research (2009).

Results of the study are in line with a study conducted by Hamidi, Aghamalek, and Bahramian (2015) over and above Hamidi and Asadi (2015) in which the three textbook series of New Interchange, Top Notch and Four Corners were evaluated and compared with each other and the researchers came up with the similar findings. Hence, using CDA, the ideologies gleaned from the interview questions were to a considerable extent congruent with the answers of the research questions. The ideologies can be at the heart of the themes elicited from the interview questions. The results are indicative of the assumption that a proficient language teacher should adopt a critical viewpoint towards the textbook features applied in the classroom. To sum up, it is suggested that educational system pave the way for the teachers to determine the ideologies and shortcomings underlying CDA framework in ELT textbooks. To put it better, Critical Discourse Analysis in this context is what a teacher requires to ascertain the most appropriate way for the

betterment of textbook curriculum design and finally adopt it with the most powerful ideologies.

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