

**Malaysian ESL Teachers' Feedback on the
Lower Primary English Language Textbook: A
Case Study**

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Abstract

Instructional materials are central in the teaching and learning of English Language as they are used to complement the efficiency of a teacher in delivering lessons. Among the instructional materials, the textbook represents “the visible heart of any ELT program” as it forms the basis for much of the language input learners receive in the classroom. Meanwhile, teachers’ feedback is a valuable resource in evaluating a textbook as they are directly involved in using it in the classroom with students. Thus, this study aimed to investigate teachers’ perspectives on the English Language textbook published by a UK firm currently used in the Malaysian ESL Year One and Two classrooms since 2018. The study involved 60 Year 1 and Year 2 English Language teachers from 20 randomly selected public primary schools in Baling, Kedah, a northern state located in Peninsular Malaysia. Data for the study were collected through a questionnaire. The findings revealed a positive level of

satisfaction with regard to the curriculum and syllabus construct of the textbook as it provides an appropriate balance of four language skills. The teachers were also satisfied with the visual contents as they are attractive and colorful. As for the teaching and learning content, the feedback was also positive as the materials are fairly recent and support teaching objectives. Despite the positive feedback, teachers felt that the textbook lacked practice exercises and it was rather highly-priced. The teachers also opined that the western cultural elements and context were an issue of contention as a majority felt it was outside the worldview of the rural and sub-urban Year One and Year Two Malaysian pupils. Generally, the teachers expressed satisfaction and this finding implies that the new textbook has the potential to be a good learning resource in Malaysian ESL classrooms.

Keywords: Teachers' Feedback, English Language textbook, ESL classroom

1. Introduction

Instructional materials such as textbooks are central in the teaching and learning the English language because they are used to complement the efficiency of a teacher, and effectiveness in lesson delivery (Omabe, 2006). It provides the much-needed sensory experiences needed by the learners for an effective and meaningful behavioral change. Ajoke (2017) affirmed that instructional materials facilitate learning of abstract concepts by helping to concretize ideas and stimulate learners' imagination.

In addition, instructional materials help to increase active participation in the learning process while saving teachers' energy, reducing the teacher-centeredness in teaching. Ajoke (2017) also claims that teaching will be more effective with the use of instructional materials as it provides a platform for the learners to participate actively during lessons. Thus, this shows how important materials are in English Language teaching.

In addition to that, for inexperienced teachers, it is often difficult for them to think of ideas on how to conduct an effective language learning class as they have very little experience in the field (Kirkgoz, 2009). So, the textbook serves as a friend or a facilitator which provides ideas to them on how to create and execute a lesson. Furthermore, other than functioning as a teaching tool in the teaching and learning of English, a textbook also plays a big role in the process of innovation. Richards (2001) argues that textbook acts as an agent of change during educational innovation for several number of reasons. First, the textbook acts as a vehicle that drives teacher and learner training. Next, the textbook also depicts the picture of what the change will look like in the future. Besides, it also provides the psychological support that teachers need to improve themselves in planning and conducting lessons as well as providing the best source of knowledge to their students. This shows how important the textbook is in determining and influencing future changes that may bring a great impact not just to education but also on the future of the country.

With today's rapid growth in information and communication technology and the growing importance of the role of English as a tool for information, business, and innovation there has been a call to ensure Malaysian students have the required English Language proficiency to become keen global players in the regional and global market. This, however, left much to be desired due to the dismal performance of Malaysian students in the International Student Assessment (PISA) where Malaysian students scored lower than the OECD average in reading, mathematics and in PISA 2009 and 2012 Malaysia ranked in the bottom third of 74 participating countries despite allocating a large chunk of the national budget for education. This sparked national debate to enhance Malaysian students' English language proficiency. This resulted in the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) launching the English Language Education Reform in Malaysia (The Roadmap 2015-2025). This reform is a part of the implementation of the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013- 2025 which aimed to reform English Language education in the country. Consequently, several initiatives were launched such as the upskilling of close to 40,000 ESL teachers' English language proficiency (Chin & Rajaendram, 2017) and aligning the Malaysian English language school curriculum to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Sidhu & Lee, 2018).

Another initiative was the ensuring of better English language teaching materials such as textbooks. Hence in 2018, all Malaysian public schools' pupils in Year One and Year Two

were introduced to English Language textbooks from the United Kingdom. One such book was the ‘Super Minds Level 1’ textbook which was used for one year for Primary Year One and Year Two ESL pupils. This textbook written by Herbert Puchta, Gunter Gemgross, and Peter Lewis-Jones is published by Cambridge University Press. This move was viewed as a means to expose and raise the standard of English language proficiency among Malaysian pupils.

According to Hammim (2018) and Monihuldin (2018), when this English Language textbook for Year 1 and Year 2 was introduced, a lot of concerns were raised by several stakeholders including ESL teachers who were implementing the textbook in their ESL classrooms.

Therefore, this paper is only a part of a BEd (TESL) Final Year Project which will report the findings of a study aimed at exploring selected Malaysian ESL teachers’ perspectives of the “Super Minds Level 1’ English Language textbook used by Year One and Year Two pupils. More specifically the study will examine the teachers’ feedback based on the framework put forward by Mukundan and Kalajahi (2013) wherein the main constructs involved in evaluating a textbook can be looked at from the following aspects, i.e. curriculum and syllabus, physical and utilitarian attributes, teaching and learning content and supplementary materials.

2. Methodology

This study employed a descriptive research design with a quantitative approach. Such a design allowed the researcher to describe the characteristics of the population (namely the Malaysian ESL teachers) and the phenomenon being studied, namely the teachers' feedback of the implementation of the *Super Minds Level 1*, English Language textbook in Year One and Year Two ESL Classrooms. The data were collected via a survey questionnaire from 60 randomly selected ESL teachers from 20 out of 30 primary schools in the district of Baling, located in the northern state of Kedah in Peninsular Malaysia.

The questionnaire comprised two main sections. Section A explored teachers' feedback on the English Language textbook based on four aspects which are the English Language curriculum and syllabus, physical and utilitarian attributes, teaching and learning content and supplementary materials. Section B of the questionnaire explored the main issues and concerns that the teachers faced in using the textbook in primary ESL classrooms through open-ended questions.

The content validity of the questionnaire was established by a panel of three experts, experienced researchers, and practitioners in the field of English Language and research. Based on their feedback necessary amendments were made followed by a pilot test with another group of teachers from another district. The reliability of the pilot study was established

using the Cronbach's Alpha reliability test which was found to be 0.667 which was considered acceptable (Tavakol, 2011). Once the internal consistency of the question items in the questionnaire was established, the actual study with 60 ESL teachers was conducted over one month.

3. Results

Given below are the main findings obtained from the questionnaires which explored ESL teachers' feedback on the textbook (*Super Minds – Level 1*) currently used in Year One and Year Two ESL classrooms in Malaysian public primary schools.

3.1 Teachers' Overall Feedback on the English Language Textbook

Section A of the questionnaire in this study explored the teachers' feedback on the Year 1 and Year 2 English Language textbook. The items of this section were divided into four aspects. The first aspect focused on the English Language curriculum and syllabus aspect of the textbook, the second on physical and utilitarian attributes, the third on the teaching and learning content and the fourth on supplementary materials that come together with the textbook.

Table 1: Teachers' Overall Feedback on English Language Textbook

N		
o. Item	Mean	SD
1 Overall, of English Language curriculum and syllabus	3.510	0.815
2 Overall, of physical and utilitarian attributes	3.352	0.799
3 Overall, of teaching and learning content	3.262	0.795
4 Overall, of supplementary materials	3.072	1.099
Overall	3.299	0.877

Scale: 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Almost Agree, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly Agree

From the findings in Table 1, it can be seen that the ESL teachers generally held a fair positive (M = 3.299, SD = 0.877) perspective of the textbook on all the four aspects investigated. The highest level of agreement was recorded in terms of the curriculum and syllabus (M=3.51) whilst the lowest mean score was seen in respect to supplementary materials. (M=3.07). Investigating deeper into all the items for each aspect, results indicate that teachers did have some concerns with all aspects with regards to the following

- Curriculum and syllabus – A majority (M= 3.51) felt the content did fulfill the needs of the curriculum and syllabus as the book covered all four main language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing but fell short in terms of local context and learner needs.

- Physical and utilitarian attributes – Overall teachers felt the book was well presented in terms of color, size, and layout ($M = 3.352$, $SD = 0.799$) but a majority were not happy with the cost of the textbook. As it was imported from the UK, the approximate cost of RM40.00 was four (4) times higher than the price of the previous local textbook (RM8.80).
- Teaching and learning – Teachers expressed satisfaction with the content of the textbook ($M = 3.262$, $SD = 0.795$). Their main concern was however on the listening, vocabulary, and practice exercises which they felt were insufficiently addressed.
- Supplementary materials – Teachers articulated the lowest ($M=3.07$) satisfaction here as a majority felt the textbook was not supplemented with sufficient suitable materials which could be a useful guide for teachers. It was probably because previous textbooks published by the Malaysian Ministry of Education came with a variety of supplementary materials such as a Teacher's Guide, Pupils' Workbook and CDs for both teachers and pupils.

3.2 Main Issues and Concerns that the Teachers Face in Using the Textbook in Primary ESL Classroom

Section B of the questionnaire aimed to explore the main issues and concerns faced by the teachers in using the English Language textbook. The results from the survey questionnaire are presented in Table 2 below. This section also comprised a few

open-ended questions which examined challenges faced by teachers in using the textbooks and recommendations they would like to make for more effective implementation of the textbook.

Table 2: Main Issues and Concerns Faced by Teachers

Items	Number	Percentage
What are the difficulties that you encounter in using the textbook in the classroom?		
Lack of facilities and materials	6	12.8
Insufficient worksheets	6	12.8
No guidebook for teachers	7	14.9
No workbook for students	6	12.8
Unfamiliar examples and contents	12	25.5
Activities do not suit mixed ability class	7	14.9
The vocabulary is too difficult for the students	3	6.3
Total	47	100

Next, was the unavailability of a Teacher's Guidebook alongside the assigned textbook as approximately 14.9 percent felt a Teacher's Guide would help them better implement the textbook in their ESL classroom. Another 14.9 percent of the teachers also raised the issue of a lack of sufficient practice exercises and activities. Some claimed that some of the activities are not suitable for the mixed-ability ESL Malaysian classroom. Furthermore, another 12.8 percent of the teachers argued that it was rather difficult for them to conduct some of the tasks and activities recommended in the textbook as the ICT facilities and materials in their respective schools were either limited or unavailable. The remaining 6.3 percent of the teachers claimed that the overall English language standard in terms of vocabulary and sentence structures used in the textbook is rather difficult and does not correspond with the pupils' level. A few teachers highlighted that a majority of their pupils are from a homogeneous (Malay) community where they have little or no exposure to English except in school during the English language lessons. The main recommendations highlighted by teachers was the need for a Teacher's Guide to help them better impel the textbook and supplementary material with a local context that they could use in their ESL Classroom to complement and further consolidate learning units in the assigned textbook.

4. Discussion

The quantitative findings of this study showed that overall, the teachers hold a fair opinion of the textbook. They expressed high levels of satisfaction with regard to the English Language curriculum and syllabus aspect of the textbook but raised concerns regarding the setting of the book within a western context and hence lacked the local context. This was also articulated by Abdul Rahim & Jalalian Daghigh (2019) who highlighted that whilst the Malaysian MOE adopted the CEFR and replaced the local textbooks with imported textbooks, the local books were more in line with intercultural communicative competence (ICC) compared to the imported books. According to Harsono (2017), teaching materials used in ESL / EFL materials should match the local context so that learners can relate to the content as it makes language learning more meaningful.

Next, teachers also have a fairly positive view of the physical and utilitarian attributes of the textbook as they felt that the visual contents of the textbook are attractive and colorful. Meanwhile, the layout and design are also appropriate and clear which further made it appealing to the teachers. According to

Yazdanmehr and Shoghi (2014), the use of attractive graphical and typographical elements enhances the value of textual information. These elements activate reader's cognitive processes when exploring a book for the first time, as they make it easier to recognize which parts are of greater interest to the reader. However, there were some concerns especially on the price of this textbook as it is too expensive. The price of the textbook is approximately RM40.00 which is 4 times higher than the price of the previous textbook which was just RM8.80. This shows that the textbook did not fulfill one of the good qualities of a textbook as elaborated by Deuri (2012) in which the price should be moderate and affordable for the students. Besides, the teachers expressed the lowest satisfaction in terms of the supplementary materials aspect as they were not provided with suitable materials that could assist them in delivering lessons using the textbook. According to Aroo (2012), it is very important for a textbook to be accompanied with good supplementary materials as it would help the teachers in conducting lessons effectively in ESL classrooms.

Meanwhile, the findings from the open-ended question showed that unfamiliar examples and contents that are used in the textbook are teachers' biggest concern in which 25.5 percent of the teachers felt that the unfamiliar contents made it hard for the pupils to relate to what they learn. The teachers stated that the characters, activities, cultures, and examples that are included in the textbook are very unfamiliar to the pupils especially when the pupils are from rural areas. At this early age, they are not exposed

much to the western culture and background so it would be very hard for the students to relate to the contents and examples given in the textbook. According to Chow (2017), the extensive use of foreign cultural references will make the teaching and learning of English to be even more difficult for the students. Local cultural references should always be used to assist the English teaching and learning process in the classroom as it would be easier for the students and teachers to connect and relate to it.

Furthermore, another 14.9 percent of the teachers also raised an issue with the activities that are included in the textbook. They claimed that the activities are not suitable for the mixed-ability classes which are very common in Malaysian primary schools. They felt that only the fast learners would benefit from the activities as the task and language used are too hard for the average and slow learners. Besides, the topics are also too hard to be comprehended by them, especially the slow learners. Gurgendize (2012) stated that this is a common concern faced by teachers as most language textbooks were designed for an ideal classroom environment. Teachers often need to deal with this problem as students react to the textbook differently due to their individual differences. All of these issues and concerns brought up by the teachers showed that the English Language textbook requires modification to fulfill the Malaysian primary pupils' needs as well as providing assistance to teachers in implementing lessons in the ESL classroom setting.

5. Conclusion

This study focused on the teachers' feedback on the English Language textbook (*Super Minds Level 1*) currently used for a duration of two years by ESL pupils in primary Year One and Year Two in Malaysian public schools. It explored the teachers' feedback based on four main aspects, namely English Language curriculum, and syllabus, physical and utilitarian attributes, teaching and learning content, and supplementary materials. The study highlighted a few issues surrounding the lack of local context and limited supplementary materials and Teacher's Guide for more effective implementation of the textbook at Year One and Year Two levels.

Finally it needs to be mentioned that this paper presents the findings of a larger study conducted as undergraduate BEd (TESL) Final Year Project and hence there is no denying that this study has its limitations in terms of sample size and thus the findings may not be applicable to all primary schools in Malaysia as it involved only 60 ESL teachers from the district of Baling in Kedah. Despite the limitations, this study does shed light on the use of the textbook, and it is hoped that this study will provide a platform for teachers to share their feedback, issues and concerns with regard to more effective implementation of the textbook. The findings from this study would be beneficial for the curriculum developers in which they could consider some suggestions and recommendations presented in this study to further enhance the content of the textbook.

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