

# Teachers' Perception toward the Ministry of Religious Affairs' English Textbook: A Case Study

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**Abstract.** This study aimed to explore how teachers perceived the use of English textbooks, including problems teachers raised about using them. The participants consisted of six teachers of English in Madrasah Aliyah Negeri Rengel, Tuban. Through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, it was found that the pro-textbook teachers believed that without textbooks teaching could not be conducted effectively. Some of them revealed that textbooks should go hand in hand with supplementary teaching materials to serve learners' needs. On the contrary, the anti-textbook teachers believed that the use of English textbooks was wasting time. The teachers also reflected on direct and indirect problems which affected the use of English textbooks.

**Keywords:** Teachers' perceptions, English textbooks, English teachers.

## 1. Introduction

This study intended to explore how teachers perceived the use of English textbooks, including problems teachers raised about using them. Teachers' perceptions play a crucial role in educational perspectives. Educators have underlined a position which teachers' perceptions hold in education and agreed that teachers' perceptions influence teachers' practice, judgment and decision making [1]–[3]. Additionally, teachers are a key factor and mostly engaged in learning and teaching; therefore, it is believed that investigating teachers' perceptions will uncover prominent deficiency occurring in educational settings which will be a valuable contribution to teachers' educational development. With this view, there have been plenty of research studies concerning teachers' perceptions in English Language Teaching professionals.

However, it has been noticed that there has been little explicit examination focusing on teachers' perceptions toward the use of English textbooks. Therefore, the researchers were interested in exploring teachers' perceptions toward using English textbooks and identify problems teachers raised about using English textbooks.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 The Role of Textbooks in English as Foreign Language Classrooms**

It has been widely accepted that textbooks play an essential role in language classrooms [4]. However, there has been an amount of debate on the actual role of textbooks in English as Foreign Language settings due to the potential and limitations of using them. Hutchinson and Torres stated that the prominence of textbooks appear so expansive that it is almost a universal element in English Language Teaching classrooms [5]. They further claim that any teaching and learning situation will not be completed unless it has its relevant textbooks. Ur points out that textbooks provide an explicit framework which clues teachers and learners in what they have done and what will be done [6].

Moreover, she reports that textbooks are the cheapest tool compared to other materials such as learning kits, photocopied worksheets or computer software. O'Neil, Sheldon, and Ur agree that textbooks are efficient teaching materials which save both time and money [6]–[8]. They clarify that textbooks can reduce time in material preparations so teachers can devote more time to teaching instead of spending time with creating in-house materials. Also, textbooks are effective sources for teachers and learners because they are the products of experienced researchers and developers [9].

Many researchers, on the other hand, emphasize the limitations of textbooks. Ur mentions that textbooks are inadequate for supplying every learner's needs. Moreover, topics in textbooks are irreverent or uninteresting to actual classes which possibly cause learners boredom and the paucity of motivation [6]. Textbooks may delay a teacher's initiative and creativity because of their set structure and sequence. Besides, Richards states that textbooks may not suit learners' needs because they are often written for global markets [4]. Sheldon adds that textbooks may not be worth money as they are 'seen as poor compromises between what is educationally desirable on the one hand and financially sustainable on the other' [8].

In Malaysia, Chandran (2003) researched with English as Foreign Language teachers to investigate their perceptions of using prescribed textbooks [10]. The results of her study indicated that teachers preferred using commercial materials because the prescribed textbooks could not provide what learners' needs. Similarly, Richards and Mahoney conducted a survey intended to examine teachers' beliefs and practices in using textbooks in secondary schools in Hong Kong [11]. They found that teachers used different textbooks and supplementary work in their daily teaching. The findings also remarked that teachers believed that textbooks could assist them in teaching English effectively. Also, Muhamad investigated how English teachers in Indonesia used and applied textbooks in their classrooms [12]. The finding revealed that teachers concluded that textbooks could not serve teachers' and learners' needs because they lack content appropriateness.

### **2.2 The Significance of Teachers' Perceptions**

In the field of English Language Teaching, significant roles of teachers' perceptions have been noticed. Barcelos notes that language teachers' perceptions influence what language teachers do in the classrooms [1]. Similarly, Yu mentions that teachers' perceptions influence what teachers do both inside and outside the classrooms [3]. Therefore, teachers must be aware of what they perceive and believe when conducting their daily teaching. This means that teachers' perceptions are the basis for teacher to form judgment or make decisions. In addition, teachers' perceptions result in how teachers deal with shortcomings in their teaching

situations [13]. Jia states in her study that some researchers believed that as behavior is led by thought, exploring teachers' perceptions and beliefs help gain deeper understanding of teachers' behaviors in classrooms and provide guidance for enhancing teachers' practices [14]. In consequence, teachers' perceptions have played a crucial role in teaching and learning processes due to the fact that not only do they influence teachers' actions and teachers' decision making but also provide significant insight into aspects of education.

### **3. Method**

The main purpose of this study was to explore teachers' perceptions toward using English textbooks and the problems raised by teachers about using them. To achieve this purpose, mixed method research with greater emphasis on qualitative approach was employed.

This research study was conducted with six teachers of English of Madrasah Aliyah Negeri Rengel, Tuban. It is a state Islamic senior high school ruled by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The six teachers teach grade X to grade XII.

To gain data, the researcher was doing classroom observation and a semi-structured interview. The classroom observation was applied to see how teachers used English textbooks in the actual classrooms. The data gained from observations provided more insight into teachers' perceptions. The researchers used classroom observation protocol as a guide to observing classrooms. This protocol included the aspects derived from the purposes of this study and teachers' responses from the questionnaire.

Meanwhile, the semi-structured interview was employed to seek further information. The data obtained from interviews provided deeper answers and crossed check accuracy of the observational data. All open-ended questions were derived from the aforementioned literature review and the purposes of the study — the developed questions aimed at gaining greater depth data about teachers' perceptions toward English textbooks.

The data was gathered in January 2013. It was the second semester of the 2012/2013 academic year. Firstly, the classroom observation was carried out twice with each of them. The role of researchers was non-participant observers because the researchers did not involve in the teaching and learning processes. The classroom observation protocol was used as a tool to gather data as detailed and concrete as possible. Then, the semi-structured interview was conducted to get more insightful answers. Each teacher was individually interviewed with open-ended questions in a different time. The languages used in the interviews were both Bahasa Indonesia and English. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes depending on the teachers' answers. The whole interview was recorded and transcribed for data interpretation and analysis.

The data gained from classroom observations and interviews were then qualitatively analyzed based on Merriam [15]. The transcripts from interviews and the written data from observation protocols were put into categories. Then each category was given names and interpreted.

#### **3.1 Teachers' perceptions of using English textbooks**

Through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, the findings were presented as follows.

### **3.1.1 The pro-textbook views**

The interview data indicated that the teachers regarded textbooks as an instructional framework because textbooks assisted them when preparing lessons. Additionally, they considered textbooks as a guideline of their courses since textbooks illustrated what they have done and what will be done in each lesson. Textbooks also served as an idea bank for them about how lessons can be delivered. Supported by observational data, the pro-textbook teachers always used textbooks in every phase of teaching and learning. They further stated that textbooks were effective teaching materials which saved both time and money. Textbooks helped save their time in teaching preparation because textbooks provided detailed activities and exercises for them. It indicated that they were assigned to undertake extra duties other than their daily instructions. Consequently, using textbooks was the best way which reduced the teachers' workloads.

Furthermore, the teachers revealed that textbooks were worth their costs when compared to other teaching and learning materials. They pointed out that textbooks were reliable and effective teaching materials because they have been tried, tested and developed by experts and language specialists. In light of this, they felt confident to use textbooks as their source of teaching. It could be seen from observational data that the pro-textbook teachers mainly followed textbooks' descriptions and gave explanations according to what textbooks provided. However, some pro-textbook teachers clarified that what textbooks provided was good, but it was not enough for their learners at some points. Meanwhile, some of them explained that they sometimes used other teaching materials to supplement their teaching. Nevertheless, they said that their teaching would be very difficult without textbooks and they preferred using textbooks to other teaching materials.

### **3.1.2 The anti-textbook views**

The teachers revealed that textbooks were inadequate to suit learners' needs. Since they strongly believed that the educational system in Indonesia was still an exam-oriented system, the goal of Indonesian learners in learning English was to pass the final National Examination and to pass a university entrance exam. However, what textbooks provided was not enough to prepare learners to pass this type of exam. They, further, expressed that textbooks contained little explanation, inadequate language items or examples. It was observed from the classrooms that they used supplementary worksheets which included detailed grammar explanations and plenty of language items and extra exercises to maximize learners' language input. Those worksheets consisted of examples of a university entrance exam paper or that from previous years.

Additionally, those teachers indicated that the subject and content of the textbooks was partially relevant to their learners' needs. As previously stated, learners need what tends to be covered in a university entrance exam paper so what includes in the textbooks must be able to expose learners to university examination-type questions. As observed from their lessons, some of them employed their own styles of presentation and rarely followed textbooks descriptions. They also added additional explanations and language input as much as they could.

Moreover, they said that the topics provided in the textbooks did not match learners' interests. Some of the topics were irrelevant or uninteresting to their classes. Teachers who had anti-textbook views mentioned that some topics were too far beyond learners' proficiency. In addition, due to the different cultural settings, topics dealt with cultural information of

native countries made learners uncomfortable to study. At last, they concluded that they preferred using teacher-made materials to commercial textbooks.

## **3.2 Problems about using English textbooks**

### **3.2.1 Direct problems**

Direct problems refer to problems occurring due to the limitations of textbooks. Stated in the interviews, the teachers mentioned that textbooks failed to serve learners' needs. They noted that textbooks are generally produced according to textbook writers and textbook developers' desire to meet what the Ministry of Religious Affairs prescribed. Nonetheless, what presented in the textbooks tended to lack focused points. This means that while a major need of Indonesian learners of English was to pass the final National Examination and a university entrance exam, textbooks they used could not expose learners to this type of exam. Teachers mentioned that textbooks did not give what learners need at all.

### **3.2.2 Indirect problems**

Indirect problems refer to problems occurring due to factors other than textbooks themselves. The teachers revealed that most of their learners had poor English language proficiency. This was a serious difficulty in utilizing textbooks effectively. Furthermore, they stressed that having large classes affected the use of English textbooks. They expressed that activities focusing on speaking practice which assigned learners to have pair work and group work was not suitable for large classes because every learner could not be monitored. It was found from classroom observations that some teachers rarely assigned learners to do pair work or group work during the lessons even though these were parts of the activities in the textbooks they used. Instead, teachers randomly asked learners to share answers or worked together as a whole class. Teachers also addressed that the change of the latest curriculum caused the problem to them about using textbooks. As time allotment for English subject was reduced, teachers had to cover learning objectives in a short period. The observational data shows that teachers often merged or rearranged the sequences of the textbooks so that they could wrap up faster.

## **4. Result and discussion**

### **4.1 Teachers' perceptions of using English textbooks**

It has been noticed that many researchers proposed the pro-textbook and anti-textbook views in English Language Teaching settings. The pro-textbook views argue for the potential and necessity of textbooks while the anti-textbook views present the limitations of textbooks. Hutchinson and Torres note that textbooks are seen as universal element in language classroom [5]. They further clarify that without textbooks teaching and learning situation will be incomplete. Ur reports that textbooks provide explicit framework which lets teacher and learners know what they have already done and what is coming next [6]. She further mentions that textbooks are the cheapest teaching materials compared to other types of instructional materials and require less preparation time.

In addition, Harmer believes that textbooks are products of research which have been developed through years so textbooks can be effective sources for teachers and learners [9]. In these aspects, the finding which reveals that the pro-textbook teachers regarded textbooks as

instructional frameworks, guidelines and sources of direction are consistent with the notions proposed by researchers mentioned above. The fact revealed by teachers that textbooks are effective teaching materials which save teachers' time and money corresponds to what O'Neil, Sheldon, and Ur mentioned [6]–[8]. Moreover, as indicated by the findings, teachers believed that textbooks are approved learning materials so they felt assured that goal and learning standards would be covered. In this sense, it concurs to Harmer's discussion [9]. To this point, it can be inferred that the pro-textbook teacher believes that without textbooks teaching cannot be conducted effectively.

Even though researchers agree that textbooks have extensive advantages, disadvantages and limitations of textbooks are noted. Ur points out that textbooks are not adequate to suite every learner [6]. She further states that topics provided in textbooks are not relevant or interesting to learners' interests. Similarly, Sheldon and Richards added that textbooks are generally written and developed based on textbook writers and developer for worldwide markets [4], [8]. As a result, there has been a mismatch between what textbooks writers provide and what is needed in actual settings.

Richards explains that those involved in textbook preparation are not involved in conduction research in language learning and teaching [4]. The finding which reveals that teachers complained that textbooks failed to serve what learners' needs is consistent with what Ur, Sheldon and Richard state [4], [6], [8]. Furthermore, what teachers mentioned about the irrelevance of subject, content and topics and students' interests and proficiency is in line with what Ur, Richards, and Sheldon reveal [4], [6], [8]. Also, this finding is similar to the result of a research study conducted by Muhamad which concluded that teachers found textbooks are not able to serve learners' needs as they lack content appropriateness [12]. In this study, the anti-textbooks teachers concluded that using textbooks was wasting time.

Interestingly, a more critical finding shows that some pro-textbook teachers stated that supplementary materials were needed to cater to language input which their learners needed. Teachers deemed that textbooks should go hand in hand with supplementary teaching materials to serve learners' needs. In this sense, this study shares finding with that of Richards and Mahoney's on investigating how English as the Second Language teachers used textbooks in Hong Kong [11]. Their finding presented that teachers used different textbooks in their teaching and learning processes. However, these teachers insisted that they preferred using textbooks to other teaching materials and they rarely used supplementary materials.

## **4.2 Problems about using English textbooks**

By anti-textbook views, using English textbooks potentially cause some problems. In this study, the teachers raised an issue about the inadequacy of language input for a university entrance exam. This result is consistent with what Chandran found in her study evaluating English textbooks used in Malaysia context [4], [10]. Her study showed that teachers did not use the prescribed textbooks because the textbooks did not expose their learners to examination-type questions.

The finding of this study also revealed problems which obstruct teachers from utilizing textbooks effectively. Teachers pointed out that the level of learners' language proficiency did not match with the level of language input in the textbooks. Moreover, having large classes was another possible problem in using textbooks. These findings are supported by Richards, Ur and Sheldon's views [4]. They assert that textbooks cannot meet the varied needs of learners and language classes around the world.

## 5. Conclusion

The present study intended to explore teachers' perceptions toward using English textbooks and seek problems raised by teachers. The findings of this study indicated that the perceptions of teachers about using English textbooks could be seen as follows. The former believed that textbooks were essential and teaching cannot be conducted effectively without the use of textbooks. Some of them also revealed that textbooks should go hand in hand with supplementary teaching materials to serve learners' needs.

The latter, on the other hand, believed that the use of English textbooks was wasting time. They preferred teacher-made materials to commercial textbooks. The results of this study further revealed that problems about using English textbooks were from textbooks themselves, learners' language proficiency, large classes, and time restriction.

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