

An Evaluation of Sociolinguistic Features of the Vision Series Based on Teachers' and Students' Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

Teachers' and students' perceptions play a crucial role in textbook evaluation. This paper examines English teachers' and students' perceptions of sociolinguistic features of Vision textbooks at senior high schools in Iran. To do so 5 male English teachers from various provinces of Iran, namely Ilam, Lorestan, Kermanshah and Khuzestan, with an age range between 25 and 44, with 4 to 20 years of experience and with a variety of academic degrees (1 PhD, 2 masters, 2 bachelors) were chosen to participate in the study, along with 5 high school students (1 grade 10, 2 grade 11 and 2 grade 12). The semi-structured interview consisted of 7 items, used to obtain participants' perceptions regarding textbook sociolinguistic features. An inductive and deductive thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The target culture, gender and religion were represented in the deductive phase of analysis, and new themes emerged from the data in the inductive phase, including representation of races and ethnicities, dress codes, and traditions and customs. According to the findings, the majority of teachers and students believe that newly published EFL textbooks do not provide opportunities for students to improve their communicative competence and cultural awareness in the target language. Furthermore, they believed that male characters dominated the Vision series' texts and illustrations and Islamic ideology was dominant in the Vision series. Teachers, students, and ELT administrators, as well as textbook designers and materials creators, may benefit from the results of this study.

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1. Introduction

EFL coursebooks, as well as other textbooks used in Iranian schools, were all developed by the Ministry of Education. Former high school EFL textbooks have been the subject of several criticisms (Farhady, 2000; Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006; Yarmohammadi, 2000).

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In accordance with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principles, the Ministry of Education has written Vision 1, 2, and 3 for use as English textbooks in high schools (Alavi-Moghaddam et al., 2016, 2017, 2018). Considering that all Iranian high school students study this series, the extensive use of these textbooks inevitably shapes Iranian students' worldviews. In addition, biased perspectives in high school textbooks may lead students in the wrong direction. This may encourage them to discriminate on the basis of gender and to favor one culture or race over another, rather than respecting the differences among cultures and races. This project will analyze the Vision series sociolinguistically.

Perception refers to how someone thinks about something or expresses their views on it. Merriam-Webster (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) describes perception as "a way of thinking or feeling about something that represents someone's behavior." Another way to define perception is as an evaluation of feelings or emotions about social objects (Greenwald, 1989). Additionally, Fazio (1986) defines perception as the expression of people's reactions to objects.

Textbook evaluation relies heavily on teachers' perceptions and feedback. Many studies have been conducted on the evaluation of textbooks in Iran (Barzan & Sayyadi, 2023), teachers' attitudes towards new textbooks, and the role of culture or gender in the Vision series. However, teachers' perceptions of the sociolinguistic features of the Vision series have not been analyzed so far. Based on teachers' and students' perceptions and feedback, this study examines the sociolinguistic features of the "Vision series" of English textbooks for Iranian senior high schools.

Teachers' perceptions and attitudes are a crucial component in understanding their actions (Williams & Burden, 1997); therefore, it is imperative to discover what their perceptions are. The teaching process isn't one-way; as a result, studying only one party involved, the teacher, isn't sufficient to draw conclusions about it. It is also necessary to analyze the beliefs and expectations of the other party, which, in this case, would be the learners.

The learner's attitude impacts their proficiency level. Thus, motivated learners will do well because positive attitudes (motivated learners) will influence their success. Similarly, learners with negative attitudes (unmotivated learners) will fail rather than succeed (Ellis, 1994). As Ginns and Ellis (2009) state, one of the most critical components of learning and teaching is students' perceptions of their own experiences. Language learners' attitudes determine how they perceive language and impact their behavior. Learner attitudes influence language acquisition (Gardner & Lambert, 1972).

The attitudes of students towards language can either facilitate or hinder their ability to learn it (Bayyurt, 2013). It is impossible to achieve that goal if learners maintain negative attitudes towards the language or the teaching context. According to De Bot and Verspoor (2005), learners' positive attitudes promote their learning, while negative attitudes decrease their motivation to master a language. Language teaching should also take into account learners' attitudes, as they impact performance in learning the language (De Bot & Verspoor, 2005).

As sociolinguistic factors and learners' perceptions play a major role in textbook evaluation, these concepts deserve attention since assessing teachers and students' attitudes towards textbooks is crucial to achieving textbook objectives (Sewbihan Getie & Popescu, 2020). As a result of literature reviews, no study has evaluated the sociolinguistic features of the Vision series from the point of view of English teachers and students. This is despite the fact that textbook evaluation has gained attention in

recent years. This study was conducted to fill this gap by assessing teachers' and learners' perceptions of Vision textbooks' sociolinguistic features.

2. Review of Literature

In ELT classrooms, textbooks are a fundamental part of teaching and learning (Aliakbari & Jamalvandi, 2005). They help teachers plan what to teach and direct students on what to focus on. A textbook saves teachers' and students' time and money because it is a reliable guide. Teachers use textbooks to spend less time preparing their own materials and can devote more time to teaching. This reduces the time spent creating in-house materials for teachers. Ahour & Ahmadi (2012) believe textbooks are the most effective materials for teaching the English language to students because their linguistic features are deemed "easy and organized" (p. 176). Besides assisting teachers with their responsibilities, textbooks and other classroom materials play a significant role in all learning environments (Azizfar, 2009; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). Despite the importance of textbooks in language teaching and learning, their role and usage differ across countries and education systems (Ahmadi & Derakhshan, 2016).

Zourabi et al., (2014) claimed that textbooks are an element that could encourage or discourage learning depending on their material (p. 95). Several materials are considered helpful as they facilitate learners' language learning. However, problems seen in all teaching materials can be found in textbooks. All textbooks have some limitations. Textbooks can be insufficient to fulfill all students' educational needs to some extent.

Iran's first English language textbooks date back to 1938. This is when American and Iranian educators and professors formed a committee to create a series of books suitable for Iranian students. Before this period, Iran's schools used different English as a Foreign Language (EFL) materials produced in English-speaking nations. Materials from 1939-1979 belong to the pre-revolutionary period. An Iranian and an English-speaking English language teaching (ELT) specialist team developed the first official English textbooks for the Iranian context in 1939 based on the Direct Method (DM) and Reading Method (RM), which were trends of that time. Later on, when the concept of situational language learning emerged, material developers revised their textbooks according to its principles (Foroozandeh, 2011). In the post-revolutionary English textbook era, there were three distinct phases: 1982-90, 1991-2010, and the latest English for School Series from 2013 to the present. After the Islamic Revolution, English textbooks underwent a first revision in 1982 that lasted until 1990. The Pre-University level was introduced in 1991 to replace Grade 4 for students planning to attend university. The Pre-University English textbook in a single volume consists of two separate books based on the RM and SLT methods. Prospect and Vision in the English for Schools Series rely on CLT principles and include a student's book and a workbook. In junior high schools, Prospect 1, 2, and 3 have been used since 2013, 2014, and 2015, respectively, and the Vision series has been used in senior high schools since 2016 (Tavakoli, 2021).

One study conducted by Ajideh & Panahi (2016) evaluated the newly published "Prospect" and "Vision" series (only the first volume of Vision was analyzed). Researchers examined how much consideration was given to culture in the development of these textbooks. They argued that both textbook chains are stuck in their source cultures and have not considered target cultures. This prevents learners from gaining intercultural communication skills. Similar results were achieved when Yousefi et al.

(2017) examined the English textbook "Vision 1" of the series of English textbooks for high school students using Tomlinson's (2003) model. Thirty English teachers from high schools in Isfahan participated in a survey conducted by Pouranshirvani (2017) to evaluate "Vision 1" from the teachers' perspective. Khodabandeh & Mobini (2018) studied "Vision 1" from teacher and student perspectives. They interviewed 30 male and female teachers and 70 male and female students. They concluded that several adjustments must be made to its cultural content to provide a better understanding of the target language and culture. "Vision 2" from Teachers' Perspectives was examined by Masoumi Sooreh & Ahour (2020). Participants, 45 English teachers (22 males and 23 females), took part in the study. The results showed that Vision2, with a few changes, can be used as a textbook for 11th-grade students and considered acceptable.

Gheitasi et al. (2020) studied the cultural content of Vision textbooks used in Iranian high schools. Identifying the most frequent cultural references and cultural aspects was the goal. It was found that the Vision ELT textbooks contained the most cultural content derived from Persian as the source culture. Similarly, the emphasis was primarily on the aesthetic aspect of culture, followed by a sociological, sociolinguistic (pragmatic), or semantic aspect.

Literature reviews show that very few studies have evaluated the sociolinguistic features of the Vision series from the perspective of English teachers and students. This study tries to fill this gap in the literature, since the attitude of teachers and students towards textbooks plays a key role in achieving the goals of the textbook (Sewbihan Getie & Popescu, 2020).

As a result of the discussed points, the following research question is posed:

How are the sociolinguistic features of the Vision series evaluated according to the perceptions of teachers and students?

3. Methods

This study used a qualitative research design to explore students' and teachers' perceptions regarding the sociolinguistic characteristics of Vision textbooks. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of students.

3.1 Participants

One of the researchers selected 5 Iranian male high school seniors in Andimeshk, a city located in Khuzestan Province, Iran (1 grade 10, 2 grade 11, and 2 grade 12). These students were aged 16-18 and studied the Vision Series at school as part of their English requirement. Also, 5 male English teachers from different provinces of Iran, namely Ilam, Khuzestan, Kermanshah, and Lorestan were selected. Their age range was between 25 and 44, with 4 to 20 years of teaching experience, and with different academic degrees (1 PhD, 2 master and 2 bachelor's) through convenience sampling, a method of sampling commonly used in qualitative research. Qualitative researchers often choose convenience sampling to capitalize on the iterative nature of qualitative inquiry, which responds to the evolving understanding of the research topic as data collection progresses (Alqaderi et al., 2019). Nasir et al. note that convenience sampling allows for a focus on the immediate availability of participants to gather qualitative insights, particularly in exploratory phases where understanding the lived experiences of subjects can lead to the identification of key themes relevant to the research query (Nasir et al., 2022). Following a briefing of the participants on the purpose and scope of

the study, a semi-structured interview was conducted to gather their perceptions of the sociolinguistic features of English textbooks.

3.2 Data collection

To collect data about participants' perceptions of the sociolinguistic features of Vision textbooks, a semi-structured interview was employed. The interview questions and concepts were developed in consultation with an applied linguistics university professor. In developing the items, gender bias, dress code, religion and ideology, traditions and customs, foods, and music were considered. This resulted in seven questions designed to assess participants' views on Vision textbooks' sociolinguistic characteristics. During the research period, the researchers were unable to conduct face-to-face interviews, so they collected data using WhatsApp and Shad (the official Iranian educational application), which allows voice and text communication. In addition, online data collection procedures are less stressful for participants than face-to-face data collection techniques (Poynter, 2010). Data collection was conducted by explaining the study purpose to all participants. This was done by reassuring them that the interviews would serve only research purposes and not their course grades. Therefore, they could freely answer interview questions. It is also significant to note that the interviews were conducted in a manner that allowed the teacher-researcher to ask follow-up questions as necessary. A typical interview lasted approximately 10 minutes, and the participants were interviewed in their native language, Persian, to ensure they understood the interview. Data collection took place in April 2022.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data collected from the interviews was transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. This involved identifying common themes and patterns in the data and categorizing them accordingly. The data was also coded and organized in a manner that allowed for easy retrieval and analysis. First, the interviews were transcribed in order to conduct a hybrid deductive and inductive analysis. Researchers used Umar and Ameen's (2022) model with some modifications to evaluate a textbook from the perspectives of teachers and students in the deductive phase of analysis; in other words, we extracted recurrent themes taking into account the target culture, gender, and religion. The researchers turned to the data to find new themes during the inductive phase of the analysis. In light of this, the transcription data was coded to find new subthemes. Accordingly, they coded the data individually, consulting with an Applied Linguistics professor, and then compared their coding to highlight differences and recognize similar themes.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the high school principal, and all participants provided informed consent before participating in the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study to protect participants' rights and privacy.

4. Results

This research aimed to examine the information acquired through interviewing 5 students of a senior high school in Andimeshk. It also interviewed 5 English language teachers in Ilam, Lorestan, Kermanshah, and Khuzestan. Using Umar and Ameen's (2022) model for evaluating a textbook from teachers' and students' viewpoints, the

deductive phase of data analysis focused on three main themes: representation of the target culture, gender, and religion. The inductive analysis has also revealed three subthemes that pertain to how teachers and students evaluate the sociolinguistic features of textbooks. In addition to the representation of races and ethnicities, dress codes, traditions, and customs are also included. In the following section, we will provide themes and subthemes, along with interview excerpts related to each theme.

4.1 Deductive Phase

4.1.1 Representation of target culture

Regarding Vision textbooks' representation of the target culture, the participants believed that the series fails to familiarize students with the target culture and boost cultural competence. Examples include:

T1: As language and culture are interrelated, language cannot be taught without culture. There are six books in our formal education called English for Schools, including the Prospect and Vision series. These coursebooks are based on the National Curriculum Guide and Islamic-Iranian identity. But English learning has nothing in common with Islamic identity. Vision book authors have deliberately or unintentionally neglected their target audience: In this way, when a student graduates, he or she will realize that he knows nothing about language and culture. Students of language are also students of culture. Culture plays a crucial role in language education as it motivates students and helps them communicate. Culture is interwoven with language. Unfortunately, Vision books caused many troubles for teachers in this case due to the lack of cultural coverage. In order to teach and learn a language effectively, culture must be integrated into the process. Language teaching materials, including coursebooks (Vision books), should therefore include a wide range of cultural references. It would be very beneficial for students studying a language if cultural information was presented in language classrooms. The role of culture in language, as well as the role of language in cultural expression, must be taken into consideration by teachers when teaching a foreign language such as English.

T2: In the field of culture, it seems that proper (extreme) attention has been paid to our beloved country's culture. (In Lesson 4 of Vision 1 entitled Traveling the world and the third lesson of Vision 2 entitled Art and culture). There is an excellent opportunity for the student to get acquainted with the cultures of different countries. However, with the exception of a few minor issues, all of topics are limited to culture; Tourist places and tourism industries in Iran. Vision Collection teaches culture through Muslim celebrities' biographies, and promotes Iranian-Islamic culture. There is not much emphasis on the practical application of the English language; some courses mention generalized and sometimes irrelevant scientific content.

T3: The language, culture, and lifestyle of English-speaking countries are not explored in depth. This makes it difficult to understand the country and its people. Native dialects and international dialects of English are not shown, nor are any examples of non-native-native interaction. The book lacks adequate cultural content; Islamic-Iranian culture dominates foreign culture, and students cannot learn about English-speaking culture.

T4: Comparing the books taught in high schools and language institutes, we see that the Vision Collection tries to transmit English to students without teaching the culture of English-speaking countries.

S1: In this book, instead of learning the culture and lifestyle of English-speaking countries, it focuses more on our country (Iran). In general, this book is mostly about Iranian culture, but we are learning them in English, and this book is definitely not suitable for those who want to travel or immigrate to other English speaking countries, and it does not teach them anything special, and in general, it provides a kind of brief introduction to the English language isolated from the sociocultural statuses of English speaking countries.

4.1.2 Gender

As far as gender representation in Vision textbooks is concerned, most participants believed there was a male gender dominance in Vision series. One participant, however, believed there was equality between women and men when discussing the Vision series. Here are some examples from the interviews:

T2: Gender superiority is obvious in the Vision books. Most conversations are between males; Most of the scientists, poets, doctors mentioned in the book are male and there is a bias regarding Iranian famous women like Parvin Etesami, Forough Farrokhzad, or Maryam Mirzakhani.

T3: There is a systematic depiction in textbooks of men and women having different occupations. Women are shown in conventional occupations, whereas men occupy a greater variety of occupations.

T4: From my examination of the textbooks, white and male characters dominate. Greater emphasis is placed on men's roles in this series than on women's.

T5: I think the Vision series has done well in terms of gender equality among the characters. We see men and women portrayed equally in pictures and in conversations.

S1: As for gender superiority, it is obvious that, throughout the book, we see male sexual superiority.

S4: The book's characters are mostly male.

4.1.3 Religion

It was pointed out by participants that the textbook series failed to introduce students to the religions of English-speaking countries, instead trying to present Islam in English. The following extracts from participants' interviews address religion representation in Vision textbooks:

T2: Religious and sectarian minorities have been completely ignored. Regarding religion, Islam and the Shiite religion are the main focus of the book and other religions and sects are ignored.

T5: Since the official religion of the country and the majority of Iran's people is Islam, the Vision series naturally takes on an Islamic theme. However, it would have been better if the book mentioned other religions and minorities.

S2: In this book, only Islam's religion is emphasized and English-speaking countries' religions are not addressed.

S3: This book does not teach us the religions and cultures of English-speaking countries and focuses more on Iran's culture.

S4: The book mainly focuses on Islamic events because Islam is the official religion of our country and Iranians have adapted to it.

S5: Regarding the religion, only Islam is mentioned and the appearances of the characters in the book are also formal, veiled and influenced by Islamic beliefs.

4.2 Inductive Phase

As a result of participant interviews, a number of subthemes, including representation of races and ethnic groups, dress code, and traditions and customs, have been identified. Each subtheme is discussed in detail.

4.2.1 Representation of races and ethnic groups

The interviews revealed that the Vision series did not pay enough attention to racial and ethnic diversity, indigenous minorities, and language differences, and didn't make a concerted effort to introduce them to students. Examples include:

T2: There are severe restrictions regarding races and ethnic groups in the Vision series. There has been deliberate neglect of Europeans and Americans. Not a single image of people of different races can be found in the book. Also, there is no representation of different Iranian races like Kurds, Arabs, Balochis, Turks or Lors in the series.

T4: Throughout the series, there is no mention of English differences in different countries or English-speaking linguistic diversity. Additionally, most examples of intercultural interactions include superficial cultural interactions among Iranians.

S3: There is no talk of different races or linguistic differences in English-speaking countries.

4.2.2 Dress code

According to the interview with the participants, Vision books do not provide students with any images that help them become familiar with the style and trend of clothing in English-speaking countries. They only emphasize Islamic clothing. Examples are:

T3: The textbooks do not consider cultural differences in clothing and dress codes in other countries besides Iran. Most men and women are illustrated dressed according to Islamic styles and cultures, with women wearing hijabs.

S3: Most of the characters are dressed in formal clothes according to Iranian culture, and there is no mention of English clothing etiquette.

4.2.3 Traditions and customs

During the interview process, the majority of the participants expressed their opinion that the Vision series neglected the traditions and customs common to English-speaking countries such as:

T3: Neither English-speaking countries' customs nor their traditions, music, food, or festivities are mentioned. This means that the language, culture, and lifestyle of the country are not explored in depth. This makes it difficult to understand the country and its people.

T5: In conditions where English-speaking countries are the target community, the Vision series is incapable of providing students with an understanding of the culture, customs, music style, dance, special festivals, clothing, and beliefs of those people.

S2: Food customs are not seen in this book and there is no mention of the food of English-speaking countries. Most of the events and ceremonies mentioned in this book are Iranian or religious ceremonies, and English-speaking customs and festivals are not mentioned.

S4: English-speaking countries' lifestyle and eating habits are not discussed in this book. This book does not mention minorities, customs and religions of other countries and does not give students the opportunity to get to know the people of other countries.

S5: Vision 2 does not mention the ceremonies of English-speaking countries such as Halloween, Valentine's Day and Christmas, and does not mention the customs, traditions, culture and food of English-speaking countries.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to examine teachers' and students' perceptions of the sociolinguistic aspects of Vision English textbooks by taking into account the representation of target culture, gender, religion, representation of races and ethnic groups, dress code, and traditions and customs in textbooks. As a result of the research, based on interviews with teachers and students, it was found that the Vision series does not provide information about English sociolinguistic features. The majority of participants in the study believed that vision textbooks focused primarily on using English to express Islamic-Iranian values and culture, and less attention was given to making students aware of foreign cultures. In line with teachers' and students' views of sociolinguistic aspects of vision series, Bahman (2017) analyzed two volumes of English textbooks for Iranian high schools to examine the stereotypical roles assigned to men and women in terms of occupational and gender roles. These results showed that women and men were unfairly represented in textbooks for occupational roles. Therefore, the female portrayed occupations are more stereotypical than the male ones, and the male occupations are more diverse than the female ones. Moreover, textbook developers were preoccupied with only thinking about home culture, which is insufficient for developing intercultural competence. There is no noticeable difference among textbooks as regards their cultural treatments: They all take the same position. Most textbooks used 'pictures' with references from home cultures and sentences in conversations with references from home cultures as primary sources, while a few parts discussed the target culture (Aliakbari, 2005; Ajideh & Panahi, 2016). A study conducted by Rahimi and Sharifian (2020) examined visual illustrations in Iranian high school textbooks to analyze Persian Cultural Conceptualizations (CCs). Their findings indicated that EFL textbooks failed to improve students' communication skills and didn't meet Iranian students' communicative needs. From a semiotic approach perspective, Derakhshan (2021) examined cultural representations of the newly published Iranian localized EFL textbook and concluded that the discourse of this new textbook leaves no space for readers to become conscious of cultural representations.

6. Conclusion and Implications

Based on teachers' and learners' perspectives, the present study investigated the sociolinguistic features of English textbooks used in Iranian Senior High Schools. Most teachers and students interviewed for this study believed that the newly published EFL textbooks (Vision series) do not provide opportunities for students to develop their communicative competence and cultural awareness of the target language. In other words, the vision collection was created to teach students English while ignoring the culture of English-speaking countries and instead use English as a tool to propagate Iranian-Islamic ideologies. The depiction of Iranian-Islamic culture and values through English is the series' dominant ideology. In terms of gender representation in textbooks, most teachers and students agree that male characters dominate the texts and illustrations in the Vision series. One implication of the present study is that since the vision textbooks do not familiarize students with English culture, teachers are suggested to introduce their students to different aspects of English culture (foods, dress codes,

events, beliefs, religions, language variations, etc.) in their classrooms and raise students' sociolinguistic awareness. There are several limitations to this study, some of which could lead to novel suggestions for future research. Considering that only a small number of public high school students participated in this study, the findings should not be generalized, so future studies in this field can use more participants in their research. Additionally, to ensure generalizability, it is also recommended that data triangulation be used, as well as the collection of data from other sources such as questionnaires. Furthermore, this sociolinguistic analysis was based on self-reporting. As a result, other methods can be used to find more credible findings, such as a critical discourse analysis. As a final point, the current study only examined male high school learners and teachers, so future studies may include females or both genders. The conclusions of this study may be useful to teachers and students, as well as ELT administrators, experts, textbook designers, and materials creators.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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