

TEACHER EVALUATION OF THE TEXTBOOK SOLUTIONS PRE-INTERMEDIATE USED IN ENGLISH PROGRAMS FOR NON-ENGLISH MAJORS

Nguyen Thi Bich Hanh

Ha Tinh University

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 04/3/2022	Textbook evaluation is an essential part in the process of teaching and learning. Solutions Pre-intermediate has been used as the official textbook of the English courses for non-English majored students at Ha Tinh University-Vietnam for nearly five academic years. However, there have been no studies examining the effectiveness of this textbook in the Vietnamese context. This study therefore investigated the suitability and appropriateness of this textbook from teacher perspective. Ten teachers of English at Ha Tinh University participated in the study and completed an online 30-item survey which examined their perception of the organization, activities, skills, language type, subject and content, and overall evaluation of the textbook. The results showed that overall, the teachers had a favourable evaluation of the textbook, except for some concern over lacking pronunciation teaching focus and inadequate glossary. These suggested that Solutions Pre-intermediate appears to be suitable materials of English courses for non-English majors, if students are supplied with supplementary materials and activities to improve their vocabulary retention and pronunciation skills.
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KEYWORDS

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ĐÁNH GIÁ CỦA GIÁNG VIÊN ĐỐI VỚI GIÁO TRÌNH SOLUTIONS PRE-INTERMEDIATE TRONG CÁC KHÓA HỌC TIẾNG ANH KHÔNG CHUYÊN

Nguyễn Thị Bích Hạnh

Trường Đại học Hà Tĩnh

THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài: 04/3/2022	Đánh giá giáo trình đóng vai trò quan trọng trong quá trình dạy học. Solutions Pre-intermediate đã được sử dụng làm giáo trình của chương trình Tiếng Anh không chuyên ngữ tại Trường Đại học Hà Tĩnh gần 5 năm, tuy nhiên chưa có nghiên cứu nào xem xét tính hiệu quả của giáo trình này tại Việt Nam. Nghiên cứu này đánh giá giáo trình Solutions Pre-intermediate từ góc nhìn của giảng viên. 10 giảng viên tiếng Anh tại Trường Đại học Hà Tĩnh tham gia trả lời một bảng khảo sát gồm 30 câu đánh giá thiết kế, hoạt động, kỹ năng, ngôn ngữ, chủ đề và nội dung, và tổng quan của giáo trình. Kết quả cho thấy nhìn chung giảng viên có đánh giá tích cực đối với giáo trình, ngoại trừ một số quan ngại về việc thiếu các hoạt động luyện tập phát âm và danh mục từ vựng. Điều này cho thấy giáo trình Solutions khá phù hợp cho khóa học tiếng Anh của sinh viên không chuyên ngữ, nếu sinh viên được cung cấp thêm các hoạt động hỗ trợ để phát triển khả năng phát âm và từ vựng.
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Email: hanh.nguyenthibich@htu.edu.vn

<http://jst.tnu.edu.vn>

91

Email: jst@tnu.edu.vn

1. Introduction

Textbooks are a key component in most language programs [1], [2], and much of the English language teaching (ELT) throughout the world nowadays often takes place with the extensive use of commercial textbooks. Textbooks contribute to developing a systematic and well-structured syllabus for a language course and provide the basis for much of the language input learners receive and the language practice that occurs in the classroom. For learners in the English as foreign language (EFL) contexts, textbooks are probably the major source of contact they have with the target language apart from input provided by the teacher. Given its importance, a textbook used for a particular language course should closely reflect the aims, methods, and values of the teaching program as well as learners' interests and needs [1]. Then, the selection and use of language textbooks must adhere to careful evaluation.

With the growing demand of English proficiency in the job market, Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training requires undergraduate students who do not major in English-specialized degrees (i.e., non-English majors) to achieve their English proficiency at least at the B1 level under the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as part of their degree completion. Since non-English major students generally have a relatively lower level of English at the time of enrollment and far less exposure to the target language as compared to English-major ones, developing English communicative competence of non-English major students is of great concern at all higher education institutions in Vietnam, including Ha Tinh University, a public university in the central region of Vietnam. At Ha Tinh University, non-English major students are required to complete two English courses over two semesters in their freshman year. Since the academic year 2017-2018, *Solutions Pre-intermediate* [3] has been used as the official textbook of the English courses for non-English majors at Ha Tinh University. The textbook belongs to a five-level English coursebook series designed for teenagers and young adults and is accompanied by CDs, a student workbook and a teacher manual. It has 10 units which cover different aspects of language learning, including vocabulary and grammar, four language skills, and language use in real-life and culturally specific situations. The textbook has been used for nearly five academic years, however, there have been no studies to examine its effectiveness in teaching and learning English at Ha Tinh University or elsewhere in the Vietnamese context. Therefore, this study aimed to shed some light on whether the use of *Solutions Pre-intermediate* is suitable for English courses for students of non-English majors. Specifically, the study answered the following research question: What is English teachers' perception of the effectiveness of the textbook *Solutions Pre-intermediate* used in English courses for non-English major students?

1.1. Language textbooks and textbook evaluation

Textbook evaluation is an integral part of the teaching and learning process. It involves measuring the value or potential value, the suitability and appropriateness of a set of teaching and learning materials in a given language course and assessing the effect of the materials on the people using them [4]. Textbook evaluation usually follows established evaluation checklists that concern various aspects of textbooks, ranging from their physical appearance to their content [5]. Some of the criteria evaluate the physical characteristics of textbooks such as layout, organizational, and logistical characteristics. Some assess a textbook's aims, methodology, and approaches and the degree to which they fit the goals of the institutions' overall curriculum. Other criteria concern the authenticity of language, the effectiveness of activities for language practice, the balance of language skills, the appropriateness and diversity of subject and content as well as the representation of cultural and gender components.

Textbook evaluation can take place before using, while using, and after using the textbook [1]. A pre-use or predictive evaluation is needed to assess the potential value of available textbooks and to select an appropriate one for students to best achieve a set of learning objectives of a particular

course. The in-use evaluation allows teachers and educators to observe strengths and weaknesses of the textbook being used and take immediate actions if needed. The post-use evaluation, also referred to as retrospective evaluation [6], focuses on assessing how textbooks affect teaching and learning in a given context after having been used throughout the course. According to Tomlinson [7], post-use evaluation can be the most valuable, as it can measure the actual effect of the textbooks on the people using them. Based on post-use evaluation, teachers and educators can make reliable decisions about the use, adaptation, or replacement of the textbooks.

1.2. ELT textbook evaluation

With surging demand for learning English worldwide, more and more commercial textbooks have become available for English teachers and educators as well as learners to choose. At the same time, there also has been a growing interest in ELT textbook evaluation. For example, Mohammadi and Abdi [8] examined the pedagogical value and suitability of the textbook *Top Notch* [9] used in some of the Iranian English language institutions. 32 teachers and 105 students responded to a 40-item questionnaire and a 25-item questionnaire, respectively. The results showed that both teachers and students felt that the textbook was a useful teaching and learning tool that met students' needs, but the textbook did have shortcomings such as lack of vocabulary glossary and ineffective grammar presentation. Alemi and Sadehvandi [10] carried out a similar study to evaluate the *Pacesetter Series* [11] and determine the appropriateness of the series in Iranian EFL contexts, based on the ratings of 64 EFL teachers on different aspects of the textbooks. They found that, although the participants agreed that Pacesetter could be suitable ELT textbooks in the Iranian context, the series does not provide adequate speaking practice and the incorporation of European culture in every activity may cause frustration in many Iranian adolescent learners since they are unfamiliar with certain aspects of the target language culture. Similar findings regarding unfamiliar cultural content of textbooks used in English courses have been replicated in some other studies [12]–[14].

In recent years, the series *Life* [15] has become among popular choices of English textbooks for communicative courses. The series is aimed at promoting authentic language use and preparing learners to use language in the real world by providing learners with real-life models and practice of everyday functions. Tran Minh Thanh, Nguyen Thuy Linh, and Nguyen Thi Bich Ngoc [16] examined teacher evaluation of the textbook *Life Elementary* used for teaching non-English major students at Thai Nguyen University in Vietnam. Fourteen English teachers responded to a survey evaluating different aspects of the textbook, including general attributes, linguistic aspects, language skills, and exercises. The results reveal that, although the textbook *Life Elementary* is considered to be relevant to the course objectives and the university's teaching-learning context, there are some weaknesses such as uninteresting writing activities, inadequate pronunciation practice, and unfamiliar cultural contents. In a similar study by Nguyen Pham Thanh Van and Huynh Thi Thanh Ha [17] to examine teacher and student evaluation of the textbook *Life Pre-intermediate* used for teaching non-English majors at Hue University, the results also showed that the majority of the teachers and students thought that the textbook is suitable for the teaching and learning requirements of the English programs and meets the expectation of the students. However, in this study, students appeared to have lower ratings for the textbook as compared to the teachers, especially on aspects such as cultural contents and grammar presentation. This suggested that there is still some mismatch between teachers' and students' perception of the suitability of a given textbook.

In summary, the aforementioned studies may take place in different EFL contexts and with different textbooks, they tend to follow similar evaluation criteria concerning the design and organization, language, activities, skills, subject and content of the textbooks. Their findings also show that all the textbooks being evaluated have both strength and weakness and culturally unfamiliar and biased content appears to be the issue that exists among most commercial

textbooks. Noticeably, although the series *Solutions* has been used as textbooks in ELT programs such as English courses at Ha Tinh University, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, there is lacking evidence of its suitability and effectiveness in the Vietnamese context and elsewhere in the world. Our study therefore examined English teachers' perception of different aspects of the textbook *Solutions Pre-intermediate* as well as their overall evaluation of the textbook .

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

10 (1 male and 9 females aged 32 to 46) teachers of English at Ha Tinh University participated in the study. All participants had obtained a master's degree in either ELT or applied linguistics. Their teaching experience ranged from 9 to 24 years ($M= 15.4$, $SD=5.21$). On average, the participants had taught English using the *Solutions* textbook for 5 semesters ($SD=3.4$; range: 1-9 semesters).

2.2. Materials

The questionnaire was adapted from the "Teacher Textbook Evaluation Scale" originally developed by Litz [18] to evaluate a textbook of the EFL programs at a South Korean university. The questionnaire included 30 items evaluating the following dimensions of the textbook: design and layout (8 items, see Table 1), activities (6 items, see Table 2), language skills (4 items, see Table 3), language type (4 items, see Table 4), subject and content (5 items, see Table 5), and overall evaluation (3 items, see Table 6). The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale: "Strongly Agree (5)", "Agree (4)", "Partly Agree (3)", "Disagree (2)", "Strongly Disagree (1)". The questionnaire was deemed to have high reliability as previous studies which also adapted the questionnaire reported Cronbach Alpha Coefficients above 0.9 [12].

2.3. Data collection and analysis

The questionnaire was delivered via an online survey platform. The completion of the questionnaire took approximately 30 minutes, and participants responded to the questionnaire at their own time and pace. Before completing the questionnaire about the effectiveness of the textbook, participants had to answer a few demographic background questions asking about their age, gender, educational qualifications, and years of teaching experience and the number of semesters that they had taught non-English majors using the textbook *Solutions Pre-intermediate*.

Data was analyzed using the Microsoft Excel program. Descriptive statistics, including mean ratings and standard deviation for individual evaluation items and percentage of rating distribution were calculated.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Design and layout

One aspect of the textbook being evaluated was design and layout, which refers to the organization and presentation of language items and activities in the textbook [12]. As shown in Table 1, overall, the majority of the teachers either agreed or strongly agreed that the design and layout of the textbook *Solutions Pre-intermediate* were appropriate. Six out of the 8 items evaluating the design and layout of the textbook had an average score above 4, suggesting that the textbook is designed and organized effectively, with detailed overview for each unit, adequate review sections and exercises, beneficial guidance, and apparent objectives to both teachers and students. With mean scores of 3.6 and 3.8 for Items 4 and 6 respectively along with the rating distribution of 60% agreeing/strongly agreeing with the items, it appears that there were still some concern among the teachers over the inadequacy of the glossary, evaluation quizzes and teaching suggestions included in the textbook.

Table 1. Teacher evaluation of design and layout of the textbook Solutions Pre-intermediate

Textbook evaluation items	N	strongly disagree	disagree	partly agree	agree	strongly agree	M	SD
		1	2	3	4	5		
1. The textbook includes a detailed overview of the functions, structures and vocabulary that will be taught in each unit.	10		10%		30%	60%	4.4	.97
2. The layout and design are appropriate and clear.	10				50%	50%	4.5	.53
3. The textbook is organized effectively.	10			20%	40%	40%	4.2	.79
4. An adequate vocabulary list or glossary is included.	10		20%	20%	40%	20%	3.6	1.07
5. Adequate review sections and exercises are included.	10		10%		50%	40%	4.2	.92
6. An adequate set of evaluation quizzes or testing suggestions is included.	10		10%	30%	30%	30%	3.8	1.03
7. The teacher's book contains guidance about how the textbook can be used to the utmost advantage.	10			20%	30%	50%	4.3	.82
8. The materials objectives are apparent to both the teacher and student.	10			20%	40%	40%	4.2	.79

N: number of participants, *M*: mean; *SD*: standard deviation

3.2. Activities of the textbook

Table 2. Teacher evaluation of activities of the textbook Solutions Pre-intermediate

Textbook evaluation items	N	Strongly disagree	disagree	partly agree	agree	strongly agree	M	SD
		1	2	3	4	5		
9. The textbook provides a balance of activities (e.g., There is an even distribution of free vs. controlled exercises and tasks that focus on both fluent and accurate production).	10			40%	30%	30%	3.9	.88
10. The activities encourage sufficient communicative and meaningful practice.	10			10%	60%	30%	4.2	.63
11. The activities incorporate individual pair and group work.	10			20%	30%	50%	4.3	.82
12. The grammar points and vocabulary items are introduced in motivating and realistic contexts.	10			50%	40%	10%	3.6	.7
13. The activities promote creative, original and independent responses.	10		10%	40%	40%	10%	3.5	.85
14. The textbook's activities can be modified or supplemented easily.	10		10%	40%	20%	30%	3.7	1.06

N: number of participants, *M*: mean; *SD*: standard deviation

Similar to their evaluation of design and layout, overall, the teachers responded relatively favorably to the 6 items concerning activities and tasks of the textbook, as summarized in Table 2. 60% of the teachers agreed and 40% somewhat agreed that the textbook provides a balance of free versus controlled exercises and tasks focusing on both fluent and accurate production. Nearly all the teachers thought that the activities in the textbook encourage communicative and meaningful practice (60% agreed and 30% strongly agreed) and incorporate individual and pair/group work (30% agreed and 50% strongly agreed). Half of the teachers felt that grammar points and vocabulary items are introduced in motivating and realistic contexts and the activities can promote creative, original and independent responses, while the other half somewhat agreed. Similarly, half of the teachers thought that the activities in the textbook can be modified or supplemented easily, while 40% somewhat agreed and 10% disagreed with this.

3.3. Skills

As summarized in Table 3, among the four items evaluating language skill inclusion and focus in the textbook, the first two items had a mean score of 4.1 and 4 and a very high distribution of the teachers choosing agree or strongly agree rating options. These indicated that nearly all the teachers thought that the textbook includes and focuses on the skills that students need to practice and provides an appropriate balance of the four language skills. More than half of the teachers thought that the textbook also emphasizes the teaching of sub-skills of four language skills such as note-taking and listening for gist in listening and skimming and scanning in reading.

The lowest rating was for Item 18 which concerns teaching pronunciation of the textbook. The average rating score and distribution for this item showed that the textbook appears to lack a focus on teaching pronunciation, including stress and intonation. This weakness of the textbook replicated findings with other textbooks such as *Life* [16]. Effective oral communication in the target language requires intelligible pronunciation and appropriate intonation, and these pronunciation skills are often one of the biggest weaknesses among language learners, especially students who do not study English-specialized degrees. However, intonation problems are typical of both traditional and modern ELT textbooks [12], and the textbook *Solutions Pre-intermediate* does not seem to be an exception. Therefore, if the textbook continues to be used, teachers should provide supplementary materials and activities to help improve students' pronunciation skills.

Table 3. Teacher evaluation of skills in the textbook *Solutions Pre-intermediate*

Textbook evaluation items	N	strongly disagree	disagree	partly agree	agree	strongly agree	M	SD
		1	2	3	4	5		
15. The materials include and focus on the skills that I/my students need to practice.	10			10%	70%	20%	4.1	.57
16. The materials provide an appropriate balance of the four language skills.	10			20%	60%	20%	4	.67
17. The textbook pays attention to sub-skills, that is, listening for gist, note-taking, skimming for information, etc.	10		10%	30%	50%	10%	3.6	.84
18. The textbook highlights and practices natural pronunciation (that is, stress and intonation).	10	10%		50%	30%	10%	3.3	1.06

N: number of participants, *M*: mean; *SD*: standard deviation

3.4. Language type

As can be seen in Table 4, all teachers thought that the language used in the textbook is authentic. As one major objective of most ELT programs is to prepare students with the ability to

communicate effectively in real-life situations, using a textbook which includes authentic language input is important. This type of materials provides students with more genuine language practice and thus, to help them feel more confident when they have to use the target language in real life. Moreover, original materials can bring a greater sense of realism and may make the language learning lessons more engaging and motivating [12].

Table 4. Teacher evaluation of language type in the textbook *Solutions Pre-intermediate*

Textbook evaluation items	N	Strongly disagree	disagree	partly agree	agree	strongly agree	M	SD
		1	2	3	4	5		
19. The language used in the textbook is authentic, that is, like real-life English.	10				80%	20%	4.2	.42
20. The language used is at the right level for students' current English ability.	10			50%	40%	10%	3.6	.7
21. The progression of grammar points and vocabulary items is appropriate.	10			10%	50%	40%	4.3	.67
22. The grammar points are presented with brief and easy examples and explanations.	10			30%	50%	20%	3.9	.74

N: number of participants, *M*: mean; *SD*: standard deviation

Half of the teachers thought that the language used in the textbook is suitable for their students' current English ability, whereas half of them partly agreed. 90% of the teachers thought that the progression of grammar points and vocabulary items is appropriate and 10% had a neutral opinion. 70% of the teachers thought that the grammar points are presented with brief and easy examples and explanations, while 30% somewhat agreed. These suggested that the teachers had a comparatively favorable evaluation on language type used in the textbook.

3.5. Subject and content

Table 5. Teacher evaluation of subject and content of the textbook *Solutions Pre-intermediate*

Textbook evaluation items	N	strongly disagree	disagree	partly agree	agree	strongly agree	M	SD
		1	2	3	4	5		
23. The subject and content of the textbook is relevant to students' needs as an English language learner(s).	10			40%	50%	10%	3.7	.67
24. The subject and content of the textbook is generally realistic.	10			20%	60%	20%	4	.67
25. The subject and content of the textbook is interesting, challenging, and motivating.	10			50%	40%	10%	3.6	.7
26. There is sufficient variety in the subject and content of the textbook.	10			30%	60%	10%	3.8	.63
27. The materials are not culturally biased, and they do not portray any negative stereotypes.	10			20%	40%	40%	4.2	.79

N: number of participants, *M*: mean; *SD*: standard deviation

As presented in Table 5, the 6 items evaluating the subject and content of the textbook had mean rating scores of above 3.5, indicating that most teachers had a rather positive evaluation of this aspect of *Solutions Pre-intermediate*. A total of 60% of the teachers either agreed or strongly

agreed that the subject and content of the textbook is relevant to students' English learning needs, and the rest somewhat agreed. A total of 80% of the teachers either agreed or strongly agreed that the subject and content of the textbook is generally realistic and 20% partly agreed. Half of the participants thought that the subject and content of the textbook is interesting, challenging, and motivating, while the other half had neutral opinions. These findings seem to be encouraging to the extent that the subject and content covered in this textbook potentially enables students to communicate effectively in real-life situations.

Cultural portrayal in many commercial textbooks evaluated in previous studies has been shown to be problematic as textbooks often contain unfamiliar content or biased stereotypes [12]–[14], [16]. However, it does not seem to be the case with the textbook *Solutions*, as 80% of the teachers thought that the materials are not culturally biased and do not portray any negative stereotypes and the rest somewhat agreed.

3.6. Overall evaluation

Table 6. Teachers' overall evaluation of the textbook *Solutions Pre-intermediate*

Textbook evaluation items	N	strongly disagree	disagree	partly agree	agree	strongly agree	M	SD
		1	2	3	4	5		
28. The textbook is appropriate for the language-learning aims of my institution.	10			10%	70%	20%	4.1	.57
29. The textbook raises my students' interest in further English language study.	10			40%	60%		3.6	.52
30. I would choose to study/teach this textbook again.	10		10%	20%	70%		3.6	.7

N: number of participants, *M*: mean; *SD*: standard deviation

As summarized in Table 6, all three items for teachers' overall evaluation of the textbook had a mean rating score of 3.6 or above, indicating that the teachers generally had a positive consensus of the textbook. Nearly all the teachers thought that the textbook is appropriate for the language-learning aims of their institution. More than half (60%) of the teachers thought that the textbook raises their students' interest in further English language study, while the rest somewhat agreed. 70% of the teachers indicated that they would choose to use the textbook in their teaching again and 20% somewhat agreed, while only 10% disagreed. Given that non-English majors have quite limited class hours for English and opportunities to practice using the target language in real life, particularly students at universities located in rural areas like Ha Tinh University, developing a high level of English communicative competence might be of great challenge. The results above seemed to suggest that the textbook *Solutions Pre-intermediate* can assist them to achieve adequate English proficiency and meet the graduation requirements.

4. Conclusion

This study examined English teachers' evaluation of the textbook *Solution Pre-intermediate* used in English courses for non-English major students. The results showed that the teachers generally had a positive evaluation of the textbook used to teach non-English majors. Overall, the aspects of the textbook, including design and layout, activities, skills, language type, and subject and content appear to meet the requirements of the English language courses for undergraduate students who do not major in English-specialized degrees. A few aspects of the textbook, including glossary, evaluation quizzes, teaching suggestions, and pronunciation practice could be improved. The results suggest that the textbook can continue to be used in teaching English to non-English major students, however, students should be provided with more supplementary pronunciation practice and adequate glossary for vocabulary retention.

This study has provided some encouraging evidence for the use of the series *Solutions* as the textbooks for ELT programs. The study, however, was conducted with a rather small sample of participants (10 English teachers) which included quite experienced teachers (9 years of teaching experience and above). While novice teachers may rely solely on the textbooks to make their major instructional decisions, experienced teachers are often less dependent on pre-selected teaching materials. Further research is needed to examine the difference between experienced and inexperienced English teachers in their evaluation and use of the textbook *Solutions*. In addition, as shown in previous studies, there might be a mismatch in their evaluation of a given textbook between teachers and students. Future research therefore could also explore students' perception of the effectiveness of the textbook *Solutions* as well as how they use the textbook to assist them in learning and achieving their language proficiency.

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