

A Critical Analysis of the English Textbook of Class Eight in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This critical analysis evaluates the English for Today (Class Eight) textbook used in Bangladesh, focusing on its effectiveness in enhancing language skills for eighth-grade students. The textbook, designed to improve reading, writing, listening, and speaking abilities, combines language study with practical use. While it emphasises collaborative learning and integrates historical insights, offering a comprehensive approach, the analysis identifies areas for improvement. The text praises the book's innovative tasks, such as dialogues and recipes, promoting conversational skills and real-life applications. However, it highlights the need for more advanced vocabulary and challenging exercises to enhance analytical and critical thinking skills. The review recommends enriching vocabulary, diversifying exercises, and upgrading content with the exam patterns to better prepare students for higher grades. The analysis anticipates the challenges of the upcoming textbook revision, emphasising the importance of addressing current shortcomings to enhance English language education in Bangladesh and aligning it with international standards. The study concludes by recognising students' eagerness to learn English, underscoring the vital role of curriculum improvements in preparing them for a globally competitive future.

Keywords: *English for today, Bangladeshi education system, language, learning strategies, collaborative learning, textbook evaluation.*

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Introduction

The *English for Today (Class Eight)* textbook (Roy et al., 2022) is pivotal in English language education, catering to the eighth-grade students in Bangladesh. The main goal of this book is to improve students' abilities in four language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) to strengthen their capability for effective communication. This review aims to

offer a thoughtful assessment of the book's usefulness for eighth-grade students in the context of Bangladesh. However, it has also discussed some of the book's possible flaws, such as the need for more advanced lexical resources and challenging exercises to enhance analytical ability and critical thinking skills effectively along with language skills, as well as its benefits in giving accessible language learning resources along with cultural and historical knowledge.

It adheres to National Curriculum and Textbook Board [NCTB] guidelines and aims to provide a comprehensive language education beyond basic skills. Structured into ten thematic units, it combines written passages, vocabulary explanations, grammar clarifications, and practical exercises to bolster students' English proficiency.

Background

In the first edition (2012) of the textbook, the authors, M S Haque, Yesmin Banu, Surajit Roy Majumdar, Md Abdur Razzaque, Naima Shahzadi, and Nargis Akhter Banu, along with Adbus Subhan for editorial matters, bring a wealth of expertise to this educational endeavour. For the revised edition (2014), writers including Goutam Roy, Md. Ali Rezwana Talukder, SM Jakaria Bulbul, and Samiul Bashir, with ANM Hamidur Rahman and Goutam Roy overseeing editorial aspects, contribute excellence to this academic project. Additionally, the evaluation process is conducted diligently by reviewers like Samiul Basir, Md. Ali Rezwana Talukder, Nafisa Begum, Sakina Akter, and Nasrin Anjuman Runi. The book has been organised into ten units: *A Glimpse of Our Culture, Food and Nutrition, Health and Hygiene, Check Your Reference, Bangabandhu and Bangladesh, Going on a Foreign Trip, Different People, Different Occupations, News! News! News!, Things That Changed Our Life, and The Truthful Dove*. These thematic units consecutively based on culture, healthy diet, hygiene, how to use a dictionary, history, foreign trip experience, ancient and nomadic jobs, traditional media, history of wheels, and noble story, are thoughtfully structured to harmoniously incorporate written passages, glossaries of vocabulary, elucidations of grammatical constructs, and practical exercises. The components synergistically contribute to refining the target students' linguistic aptitude and cognitive level. At the end, two sample English questions are introduced to the learners to become familiar with the Junior School Certificate exams.

Summary

The *English for Today (Class Eight)* textbook stands out for its innovative approach to teaching English in Bangladesh. The authors strongly emphasise collaborative learning, enhancing students' reading, writing, and presentation skills. Unit 1, "A Glimpse of Our Culture" explores Bengali culture, traditions, and folk songs, showcasing crafts and delving into cuisine. Unit 2 focuses on nutritious food, Unit 3 promotes hygiene, and Unit 4 introduces unique content on effective dictionary usage. On the other hand, Unit 5 highlights Bangabandhu's (The Father of the Nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman) life, Unit 6 covers airport activities, and Unit 7 identifies employment types. Unit 8 demonstrates the earliest newspaper and Polan Sarkar's (Social activist and Ekushey Padak Winner 2011) life. Unit 9 covers the history of wheels, trains, and aeroplanes, and includes a poem. Unit 10 covers a traditional moral story with demonstration questions for analysis and grammar application. The book uniquely integrates historical insights, broadening the learning experience beyond linguistic skills. For example, Unit 1 lessons centre around offering historical perspectives on Bangladesh and its cultural heritage. These lessons cover a wide range of topics, such as folk music, traditional embroidered quilts called Nakshi Kantha, ethnic communities in Bangladesh, and the historical and cultural significance of Bangladeshi food. It follows the traditional exam pattern, incorporating practical tasks like dialogues and recipes, promoting

conversational skills. The textbook is tailored for eighth-grade students, providing accessible vocabulary and explicit language which perfectly balances English learning materials and captivating historical content. With its ten units, the book predominantly comprises textual content, with only five poems gracing its pages. Its strengths lie in informative texts, combining English learning with real-life activities, making it a comprehensive and engaging resource for students.

Critique

The textbook prominently emphasises the importance of collaborative learning, promoting an environment of teamwork where students work together to tackle assignments and share their viewpoints. Collaborative learning in teaching and learning English at the secondary level helps to improve reading skills, writing proficiency, and presentation performance (Galappaththy & Karunarathne, 2022; Bhandari, 2021; Normawati et al., 2023). For instance, in lesson three of unit three, there is an activity called: "Make a list of five things you do daily to maintain personal hygiene. Share with other groups, make a poster, and display it to the class." What sets this book apart is its exceptional inclusion of captivating historical insights, turning the pages into a voyage through time and knowledge. Remarkably, on page 87, Lesson 2, the book embarks on a fascinating exploration of the earliest instance of a newspaper in human history. This historical tangent, usually beyond the scope of a standard English textbook, diversifies the learning experience, breaking free from the conventional focus on linguistic skills. On page 102, Lesson 1, the book unravels the intricate history of the wheel, underscoring its seminal role as the catalyst for numerous groundbreaking innovations, e.g., there are two pictures of a suitcase, one a rolling suitcase and the other a briefcase. The task is 'Look at the pictures and say which is easier to move and why.' To facilitate examination preparation, the text concludes with two sets of illustrative queries, including questions tailored for another textbook, "*English Grammar and Composition*, offering students a distinct advantage.

This strategic choice aligns perfectly with the language learning and assessment system. However, the traditional exam pattern of Bangladesh, which heavily emphasises text-based questions, ignores poems. The content within the book is structured for simplicity, aligning with the capabilities of eighth-grade students. Tasks are typically presented as multiple-choice questions, fill-in-the-blanks, short questions, and tables. However, the book introduces innovative tasks, such as the paired task in Unit 1, Lesson 4, Page 7. This task prompts students to dialogue between two characters, a departure in 1996 (Mazumder, 2011) from the traditional question format in the Bangladesh education system. Here, the passages connect with class eight's exam comprehension-based question pattern. Moreover, the National Curriculum and Textbook Board [NCTB] has also been selective and appropriate with the font. The correct text font for a book can complement the author's message, and font choice is just another aspect of typesetting that can improve readability (Wilson & Read, 2016). Some unique tasks, such as pair tasks, such as task-D from unit-1, lesson-4, and page-7, have also made it unique. In this task, students are asked to converse between two of them.

On the other hand, the poems are here, introducing students to the different forms of literature. This flexible mixture of different forms will allow students to explore the diversified genres of literature. These activities are vital (Greving & Richter, 2022) in enhancing students' conversational skills, an invaluable asset in language learning.

In addition to the *English for Today (Class Eight)* textbook's focus on English language instruction, the book seamlessly integrates practical life skills, an approach to teaching English in schools that has been shown to influence students' interest in learning the language and recommended curriculum elements (Said & Yusof, 2015). For instance, it

features a custard recipe on pages 17 and 18 of Unit 2, Lesson 4. Furthermore, Unit 3 and Unit 4 delve into hygiene-related content, while Unit 6 provides travel-related instructions. These demonstrate the book's remarkable versatility in catering to the needs of eighth-grade learners. *English for Today (Class Eight)* is a crucial component of the educational system in Bangladesh. This collaborative learning approach accelerates language acquisition and nurtures an appreciation for literature, exposing students to an array of literary genres, including narratives, verses, cultural insights, and historical perspectives.

One of the strengths of this textbook is that it has informative texts which provide more than the purpose of academic learning. For example, students will know how to complete formalities at the airport while attending the first flight by reading Unit 6. Furthermore, Unit 8 has information about the first newspaper, types of newspaper articles, and how to respond to a job advertisement. The textbook has unique texts that do not hold students only in English learning but also allow them to learn the history and real-life activities such as learning about Bangabandhu and Bangladesh (from pages 47 and 48, lesson 1, Unit-5), knowing about hygiene from Unit-3 and searching for words in a dictionary from Unit 4, and getting acquainted with travel-related instructions from Unit 6. On page 85, passage B, the text starts by describing some regular tasks: make students read the text and answer the given questions, and ask students if those tasks are worthy of being printed in the newspaper.

Besides that, the accurate use of punctuation marks in every text emphasises its necessity. While areas for improvement exist, the textbook's unique qualities set it apart from conventional English textbooks, equipping students with knowledge and skills far beyond the classroom's four walls. A "language-supportive" textbook comprises two essential components: firstly, the written language suits the learner. Secondly, they include features – activities, visuals, clear signposting and vocabulary support – that enable learners to practice and develop their language proficiency after learning the key elements of the curriculum (Mardiyana et al., 2023).

Although there are no oral questions or viva exams in the exam pattern, these tasks are included here to develop students' speaking skills. The given exercises and vocabulary used in the textbook are accessible for English-language students compared to their level but are inconvenient for Bengali medium students. On the other hand, thinking about their further grade, this book has less advanced vocabulary and exercises. While it aligns with Bangladesh's examination format, there is room for enhancing advanced vocabulary and complex tasks. Hence, further exploration of the textbook's capacity to prepare students for advanced vocabulary (Sheng, 2022) and complex tasks in their future studies is required. *English for Today (Class Eight)* is easily written and has a pretty basic vocabulary that any non-English medium student will easily understand.

Recommendation

English for Today (Class Eight) is written to improve four essential skills by utilising various informative and authentic texts where students can acquire language skills and actively participate in discussions, thereby making valuable contributions to their development of communicative competence. Nevertheless, some revisions are needed to address the shortcomings in parallel with understanding the exam question patterns. The book's vocabulary should be enriched, consisting of word lists and flashcards, vocabulary games, and regular vocabulary quizzes. The exercises should be more creative and varied, such as role-playing, simulation, and interactive multimedia. Students are frequently immersed in the realms of literary analysis, imaginative writing, and delivering presentations. Educators need to employ diverse materials, ranging from captivating novels to thought-

provoking poems and insightful essays. Collaborative discussions and engaging projects are often the norm in this vibrant collaborative learning environment.

Conclusion

According to the Bangladeshi Ministry of Education, a new English textbook for class eight will be published which may cover the shortcomings. However, the critics have already pointed out some irrelevancy in contextualization, for example, less multimedia content and irrelevancy in content planning. It is to be noted that class eight will also be in the system next academic year of 2024, and it will be different from rote education, aiming to introduce students to the international education system. Realising the flaws and gaps, I can effectively improve the English textbook for class eight so that it can be implemented better in Bangladeshi education. Undoubtedly, Bangladeshi students are inquisitive to learn English as English is an international language, and language education has a long-lasting legacy in this country.

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