

Received on (04-06-2023) Accepted on (07-08-2023)

<https://doi.org/10.33976/IUGJEPS.32.6/2024/17>

Teacher-based evaluation and modification of *English for Palestine* used in UNRWA's Schools: Empirical procedures

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Abstract:

This empirical study analytically reports and documents a methodological evaluation of the textbooks of *English for Palestine* used in Palestinian lower and upper primary schools run by the UNRWA. It also provides practical modifications for overcoming problematic areas in these textbooks. Using comprehensive textbook evaluation criteria and adopting a descriptive analytical method, the study illustrates how teacher-based evaluation can effectively lead to identifying salient sources of language difficulties in textbooks taught for 1- 9 graders. It also shows how this assessment of these textbooks could lead to two key pedagogical improvements in what and how English is taught in Palestine. These improvements were achieved through involving 220 UNRWA ELT practitioners of varied experiences. These participants were grouped in nine teams and were engaged in 5-focus group workshops on evaluation and modification of *English for Palestine* – Grade 1 -9. The qualitative data collected included practical simplification, replacement and deletion of problematic areas identified. The study added insights to the growing expertise on textbook evaluation and development and also pointed to insights and implications for teacher education and training programmes.

Keywords: English textbook evaluation, language difficulties, UNRWA schools, training English language teachers

التقييم والتعديل المبني على المعلم لمنهاج اللغة الانجليزية لفلسطين المستخدم في مدارس الأونروا:
إجراءات تجريبية

المخلص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة التجريبية لتقديم تقرير تحليلي موثقاً لتقييم منهجي لكتب اللغة الإنجليزية المستخدمة في المدارس الابتدائية الفلسطينية التابعة لوكالة الأمم المتحدة لإغاثة وتشغيل اللاجئين الفلسطينيين (الأونروا)، كما تقدم تعديلات عملية للتغلب على الصعوبات اللغوية الموجودة في هذه الكتب من خلال استخدام معايير شاملة لتقييم الكتب المدرسية. وتوضح الدراسة كيف يمكن لمعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية أن يساهموا بخبراتهم التعليمية في تحديد مصادر الصعوبات اللغوية البارزة في هذه الكتب المدرسية التي تُدرّس للصفوف من الأول إلى التاسع. كما توضح الدراسة كيف يمكن أن يؤدي هذا التقييم المنهجي وطريقة الوصف التحليلي لمحتويات وأنشطة هذه الكتب إلى تحسينين تربويين رئيسيين فيما يتعلق بما يتم تدريسه وكيفية تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية في فلسطين. وقد تم تحقيق هذين التحسينين من خلال مشاركة 220 ممارساً من معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية التابعين للأونروا، والذين يتمتعون بخبرات متنوعة حيث تم تقسيمهم إلى تسع مجموعات للمشاركة في خمس ورشات عمل تركز على تقييم وتعديل هذه الكتب المستخدمة في الصف الأول إلى التاسع. وقد تضمنت البيانات النوعية التي تم جمعها من المعلمين خلال هذه المجموعات البؤرية التعديلات العملية التي تم تحديدها من خلال تبسيط المحتوى واستبدال وحذف الصعوبات التي تم تحديده مسبقاً. كما وأضافت هذه الدراسة رؤى جديدة إلى الخبرة المتزايدة في كيفية تقييم وتطوير الكتب المدرسية ووقدمت مقترحات لتطوير برامج تعليم وتدريب معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية.

كلمات مفتاحية: تقييم منهاج اللغة الإنجليزية، صعوبات لغوية، مدارس الأونروا، تدريب معلمي اللغة الانجليزية

Introduction:

Developing or selecting appropriate and effective English language teaching materials is vital for the success of any English language teaching programme. These materials could be commercial or non-commercial (institutionally prepared materials). Developed by a pair or small group of professional and experienced materials writers, commercial textbooks are primarily prepared for a changing global context and motivated by financial success to maximise profits (Richards, 2010). On the other hand, institutionally prepared materials are primarily developed by a large team of English Language practitioners who may not have the competence and experience in building quality learning materials that meet the actual varied and changing needs and wants of the learners of English for general purposes learning in a specific context. *English for Palestine* 12-level course is an example of institutionally developed materials which was prepared by a large Palestinian team, composed of school practitioners and university language educators who all worked for the Palestinian Ministry of Education in full collaboration with British course design experts at Macmillan publishers.

Evaluating these language learning materials is a “controversial” (Sheldon, 1988) and complex process (Chambers, 1997) due to the different variables to be considered in this process, especially when 12-textbook course is to be empirically evaluated as in the case of this study. First, several pedagogical factors should be thoroughly and accurately considered including “suitability for the age group, cultural appropriateness, methodology, level quality, number and type of exercises, skills, teacher’s book, variety, pace, personal involvement, and problem solving”(Chambers, 1997, pp. 29–30).

Another variable is related to the fact that evaluating recently developed materials have become more complex and more learner-oriented compared to traditional ones which included mainly artificial reading texts or short dialogues followed by WH comprehension questions and a few grammar and vocabulary exercises in isolated sentences. In this context, Littlejohn (2011) affirmed that contemporary teaching materials often present comprehensive language learning ‘packages’ that encompass workbooks, teachers’ guides, audios and videos, and may even incorporate computer-assisted language learning (CALL) programmes. These packages come with clear instructions for teachers and learners, providing a well-organized framework for conducting productive classroom sessions.

This complex process of evaluation is one of the vital phases of effective teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL). This vitality stems from the need for systematic empirical evaluation and ongoing improvement of English language textbooks, especially in terms of their language content and learning activities.

In this context, Dündar & Merc (2017) conducted a critical review of research on curriculum development and evaluation in English language teaching, compiled and analysed the content of 86 studies and found that most of these studies were more related to curriculum evaluation than to curriculum development.

In light of these findings, the current study aims to discuss how textbooks can be evaluated and also aims to provide a documented methodological modifications and improvement of textbooks. This dual process would lead to better teaching and learning English as a foreign language in Palestine, namely in refugee schools run by the UNRWA (The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) in the Gaza Strip.

To achieve this general purpose, the current study adopted Weir’s and Roberts’ (1994, p42) broad view of evaluation characterised by:

- a need for both insider and outsider commitment and involvement to ensure adequate evaluation;

- a central interest in improvement [of *English for Palestine* as intended by the Department of Education at UNRWA]
- an associated commitment to a deeper professional understanding of the processes of educational change, as well as the results of that change
- systematic documentation for evaluation purposes . . .
- a willingness to embrace both qualitative and quantitative methodology appropriate to the purpose of the evaluation and the context under review (in Richards, 2010, p. 294).

This study also adopted “retrospective” not “predictive” evaluation that were distinguished by Ellis (1997). It focusses on “retrospective evaluation” which is concerned with empirical examination of language learning materials that have actually been used as “predictive evaluation” is concerned with making decisions regarding what learning materials to use.

In light of adopting empirical evaluation for effective improvement of teaching *English in Palestine*, nine textbooks taught for Palestinian school children enrolled in grade 1- 9 were thoroughly, systematically and methodologically evaluated. Four main components for each grade were evaluated. They were described on the back cover of almost every level as follows:

1. Student’s Book (SB) - presents the new language and provides classroom activities for practice.
2. Workbook (WB) - provides additional practice material for class and home use.
3. Teacher’s Book (TB) - offers detailed, step-by-step lesson notes and model tests.
4. Teacher’s audio Cassette - presents all the listening activities.

These components were developed as part of the Palestinian Ministry of Education’s commitment “to producing a national curriculum that meets the needs and aspirations of Palestinian society” (Preface - *English for Palestine- Student’s Book*: p3). They were intended to “develop competence in the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and encourage students to become confident users of English” (Back cover of *English for Palestine - Student’s Book*).

It useful to clarify, especially for those who may not be familiar with the Palestinian education system, that there are that *English for Palestine* was specially written for all primary and secondary schools in Palestine which has three school types: public schools run by the government, refugee schools run by the UNRWA and private schools. All these three school types teach English as a main subject and use the same textbooks. All children who successfully complete grade nine at UNRWA schools join public schools for three more years because UNRWA does not run any schools offering education beyond grade 9. For these reasons, this study evaluated and provided modifications to the textbooks of grades 1-9 only which the English Department at UNRWA has been teaching for thousands of Palestinian refugee children for decades.

Study problem and questions

This “retrospective” study of the trial editions of *English for Palestine* originated from frequent common concerns and complaints expressed in several meetings and discussions held in the five educational areas that the UNRWA Department of Education held in Gaza. In these discussions, serious common language weaknesses were expressed by parents, teachers, academics, educators and advisors about the content and activities included in *English for Palestine* series. Some of these impressionistic problems claimed about English for Palestine were: it has difficult topics for children to understand, difficult exercises to do, too many activities per lesson and too much learning materials compared to the number of teaching periods allocated. It was also claimed that these problems lower language learning achievement among learners and hence not developing their

communicative competence and confidence to be English language users as stated at back cover of all *English for Palestine* - Student's Books.

These varied problems are also confirmed by the researcher's experience in developing *English for Palestine*, teaching pre-service and training in-service teachers for more than 25 years. Also several studies (Abdul-Qader & Aqel, 2009; Abu Jarad, 2017; Al Harbi, 2017; Al-Masri & Ali, 2012; Awad, 2013; Awad & Raba', 2017; Hammad, 2014; Karaki, 2016) discussed a variety of similar problems related to perspective and attitudes of teachers and students toward *English for Palestine*.

These general problems needed systematic empirical and evidence-based evaluation of *English for Palestine*. In full consultation with the researcher of this study, the Education Department at UNRWA - Gaza Strip made a constructive methodological response of intervention to identify, classify and remedy these problems in *English for Palestine*, grades 1- 9. To do so, this study attempted to answer these questions:

- 1) What are the salient problematic areas in the textbooks of *English for Palestine* taught for Palestinian school children enrolled in grade 1- 9 as revealed by experienced teachers?
- 2) What linguistic, pedagogical and context-based improvements can be proposed to remedy the problems identified in these textbooks?

Objectives

This study aimed at

1. Identifying the salient problematic areas in nine textbooks taught for Palestinian school children enrolled in grade 1- 9 as revealed by experienced teachers.
2. Identifying teacher and context-based suggestions to remedy these weaknesses identified.

Significance of the study

1. Providing a documented model to follow for conducting collaborative, systematic and empirical examination and verification of problematic areas in English language textbooks that involve school teachers, advisors and university curriculum and foreign language education experts. This methodological evaluation can be insightful and useful for teacher education programmes to produce teachers capable of conducting retrospective and predictive evaluation of *English for Palestine*.
2. Providing a variety of practical solutions to the problematic areas verified cooperatively by experienced team of English language teaching that can be adopted by concerned TEFL departments and experts to improve the process of teaching English language in Palestine.

Limitations of the study

Although this study involved 220 English language practitioners representing schools in the five directorates of Gaza Strip, it has two limitations. First, it involved only UNRWA school teachers for grades 1- 9 and did not involve any teachers working at public (government) and private schools. Second, it evaluated only nine out of 12 textbooks taught in Palestinian schools.

Literature Review

English for Palestine, the new English language curriculum delivered in Palestinian government, UNRWA and private schools, has been the subject of extensive study for more than two decades. Surveying about 20 related studies (research articles and dissertations – exemplified below) has shown that most of the studies have focused on evaluating *English for Palestine* from different perspectives focussing mainly on Palestinian national identity and values and culture, the four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking), the four language subskills

(pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and spelling) and other language teaching and learning issues to be all exemplified briefly below.

Some of these studies undertaken focused on the affirmation of Palestinian national identity, history and geography of Palestine and the claimed prejudice in the materials, in particular the potential of the Palestinian curriculum to promote incitement to hatred against the Israeli occupation of Palestine (BROWN, 2001; Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information, 2004, 2006; Mohammed & Abukhayran, 2011; Pina, 2005; The Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace, 2004). Other studies explored the embedded values within the English for Palestine – grades 8 – 10 (Masud, 2017) and the values and social orientation included in the text passages and literature in grade 11 (Raba & Dweikat, 2019).

Several studies explored the perception, attitudes and viewpoints of EFL teachers towards the new Palestinian English textbooks for one grade (the 8th grade) (Raba', 2017), for first three grades of elementary school (Hammad, 2014) and for secondary stage EFL Textbook (Al Harbi, 2017). Similarly, Abu Jarad (2017) studied teachers' and students' viewpoints towards fluency activities for grade 8. Awad (2013) evaluated English for Palestine Grade 12 in terms of the EFL/ ESL textbook evaluation checklist from the teachers' perspectives in Nablus Directorate schools.

Addressing one or more of the language skills and subskills, Itmeizeh & Khalil (2017) evaluated the communicative activities included for developing the oral skills of 7th graders and Al-Masri & Ali (2012) evaluated only the reading texts and exercises in Grade 9. Both Abu Tailakh (2015) and Al-Qader et al. (2012) evaluated creative thinking skills and higher order thinking skills in reading exercises in Grade 8. Qumsiyeh (2012) explored the writing skill in English for Palestine – Grade 1-12.

One key conclusion about these studies is their focus on curriculum evaluation than to curriculum development or modification as also found by Dündar & Merc (2017) who compiled and analysed the content of 86 related studies. In light of these findings, the current study attempted to discuss how *English for Palestine* textbooks can be evaluated systematically and modified professionally to facilitate teaching and learning English in Palestine.

Method

Participants

The participants of this evaluation study or what Richards called “audience for evaluation” involved both “insider and outsider participants” (Weir and Roberts 1994: 42 in Richards, 2010, p. 294). These participants included 220 ELT practitioners and professionals of varied teaching and curriculum development experiences: 200 UNRWA lower and upper primary school teachers, 9 UNRWA school assistant head teachers, 9 UNRWA school English supervisors, one ELT curriculum development consultant from the Islamic University of Gaza, namely the researcher and a project coordinator (former English language supervisor at UNRWA schools). Here are the details of the participant teachers.

Two hundred (200) English language teachers participated in conducting this empirical evaluation. They represented a sample of 23% of the total population of English language teachers working at UNRWA schools in Gaza. They were also gender balanced, including 46 males and 154 females representing reality as the most primary school teachers at UNRWA were females. These participant teachers were selected according to three specific criteria that they should meet. First, they should have taught *English for Palestine* for at least three years. Second, they should have come from all

five educational areas representing all Gaza Strip governorates. Finally, they should have proved to be successful teachers as shown in their school written records and teaching performance reports by English language advisors.

These participants were divided into nine groups ranging between 20 - 25 teachers, representing a coherent group that taught one level of *English for Palestine* (i. e. grade 1- 9), and geographically covering each of the five education areas run by UNRWA in Gaza Strip. Additionally, each of the nine groups of teachers included one UNRWA school assistant head teacher specialised in English and one school English language supervisor.

The participants also included a project coordinator who was an experienced English language supervisor responsible for co-planning, communication, logistics and participated actively and positively in all evaluation workshops held for the nine focus groups.

Finally, upon taking the decision to evaluate English for Palestine – Grades 1-9, the UNRWA Education Department consulted and involved the researcher of this study in the whole process of planning, evaluation, modification and implementation. The researcher was selected for being a university ELT curriculum development expert, was a member of the authorship supervisory committee for developing *English for Palestine* and was a member of the Palestinian and British curriculum development experts working for Macmillan Publisher to develop a 12-level course for all Palestinian school grades 1-12.

Procedures of the study

1. An UNRWA coordinator was selected by the UNRWA Education Department.
2. A curriculum evaluation and development consultant (teacher trainer) was selected.
3. A consultant team of English language school supervisors and head teachers was formed.
4. An advisory committee was formed of all the above selected participants (coordinator, consultant, supervisors and head teachers)
5. Nine focus groups of 200 experienced teachers of grade 1-9 were nominated from all five governorates of Gaza Strip.
6. five training workshops were held to collect data (identify weaknesses and propose modifications / improvements)
7. Weaknesses in the main components of *English for Palestine* (trial edition) were identified and systematically documented.
8. Relevant modifications were proposed and systematically documented and compiled in a supplementary handbook for every grade.
9. A teacher guide was prepared and distributed to all school teachers of every grade.
10. Follow-up field visits to schools were conducted to make sure that the guide is self-clear and practical.
11. All UNRWA school teachers were trained on how to teach pronunciation, especially stress and intonation.
12. A document analysis tracing the impact of this evaluation on the development of the new editions of *English for Palestine* was conducted.

Data collection

This study followed the collaborative teaching/ training strategy “Think-pair-share” (Lyman, 1981) to promote teacher participants competence in systematic and evidence-based identification of weakness and sharing their individual and then collective reflection. Using this strategy helped

them to work together to identify and share their common problems and offer more practical and experience-based modifications.

Mainly qualitative data were collected through five 5-hour weekly workshops held for every focus group of teachers for grades 1- 9 where participant teachers were trained to reflect on their teaching experiences and use report reflection sheets to provide systematic collection of data (weaknesses and suggestions).

To facilitate effective discussion and accurate reflection on their experience, every focus group was divided into 5 subgroups representing the 5 educational areas in Gaza Strip. Every 5-teacher team was given 3 - 5 textbook units to focus on as every textbook for every grade has specific number of units ranging from 16 -24.

To collect valid and reliable data based on teaching experience and analytic observation, five data collection focus group workshops were organised as described below.

1. **The first workshop** familiarised every focus group with why, what and how to accurately and systematically identify specific sources of difficulties in the three components of the trial edition of *English for Palestine* (Student Book (SB), Work Book (WB) and Teacher Book (TB), for grades 1-9. However, more focus was given on evaluating SB and WB. The teachers were also familiarised with a long list of 81 evaluation criteria in the form of questions. These questions were grouped under 10 categories covering language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking), language components or subskills (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and spelling), specific criteria for identifying sources of weaknesses in the teacher Book (TB) and practical considerations. All of these categorised evaluation questions are shown in Appendix I, titled "10-category list of 81 evaluation criteria /questions" which includes specific evaluation criteria /questions for identifying sources of weaknesses in SB, WB and TB. Again, the focus was mainly on the SB and WB.

To use these comprehensive and contextually relevant criteria in a way that moves beyond impressionistic judgment, the teachers were trained on how to complete an evidence-based Evaluation Form (Appendix II) to specify problematic areas in light of the 10-category list of evaluation questions. The teachers were also asked to pedagogically and professionally justify and exemplify their choice of the shortcomings identified. Due to lack of space, this study will focus on top 8 categories related to language skills and subskills.

At the end of this workshop, every focus group was trained and then asked to complete the evidence-based Evaluation Form (Appendix II) and email it to the consultant (researcher) who classified and arranged all the identified weaknesses so they could be discussed in the next workshop (2).

2. **In the second workshop**, the problematic areas identified were discussed in full depth among all sub-groups and among all participants to led to consensus and thus agreed on a specific list of the sources/ causes of difficulties or unlearnability. This list was also reviewed and approved by the advisory committee and then was emailed to the teachers to work on in subgroups to propose practical solutions based on their experiences and understanding of their learners' abilities and interests. At the end of this workshop, the participants were asked to complete Suggestions Form to remedy problematic areas in SB and WB (Appendix III) and email the completed form to the consultant who classified and arranged the suggestions to be discussed and verified in workshop (3). The participant teachers were trained on competently using the

following list of 10 suggestions / solutions to tackle problematic areas identified and tailor the appropriate modifications to problematic content of the textbooks (written and oral texts, activities, etc.):

1. to be simplified
 2. to be replaced by an easier exercise
 3. to be replaced by a relevant exercise
 4. to be deleted completely
 5. to delete parts or items
 6. to be moved to a more suitable place
 7. to be assigned for homework
 8. to be split into 2 exercises
 9. a new exercise to be added for more practice
 10. other suggestion to be added
3. **In the third workshop**, the suggestions offered to tackle the problematic areas were thoroughly examined in full depth among the sub-groups and among all participants to lead to consensus and thus agree on practical modifications. The suggestions were also reviewed and finalised in a list by the advisory committee and then emailed to the teachers to work on in groups to propose practical solutions.
4. **In the fourth workshop**, the approved changes and modifications were jointly prepared by the focus group teachers and the advisory committee to be piloted in schools.
5. A year later, a 5th workshop was held for the same participant teachers to get feedback about the modifications made. Upon this feedback the final modifications were conducted for the following scholastic year.

Findings and discussions

The main findings of the two study questions about common problems and related suggestions as expressed by experienced teachers will be answered and discussed in this section. However, to cite all 15 different types of common serious weaknesses that were identified and their related practical suggestions is beyond the scope and space of this paper. Hence, only the most six frequent problematic areas and their related teacher and context-based suggestions will be presented. It should be noted that by weakness frequency, it is meant that the same problem was identified by more than one sub-group of teachers, more than once and in more than one grade. The common weaknesses identified will be linked to findings of previous studies and will be discussed from a linguistic and pedagogical perspective.

1. Common problematic areas related to reading and listening texts

In line with problems identified in similar studies evaluating reading texts and exercises (Abu Tailakh, 2015; Al-Masri & Ali, 2012; Al-Qader et al., 2012) and also evaluating listening texts (audios) and fluency activities (Abu Jarad, 2017), below is a discussion of 2 common problematic areas identified to reading. They were related to both reading and listening texts (audios) in terms of length, level of difficulty and level of interest to the learners. Both reading and listening materials were combined here as both skills are receptive and have similar problematic areas.

1.1 Too difficult or too long reading and listening material

Participants' teaching experience showed that some reading and listening material/texts were unlearnable because they were higher than the pupils' linguistic and cognitive level as they discuss topics that were too abstract or too much scientific. These difficult texts required more time to teach at the expense of other lessons, exercises and language practice opportunities.

One example that almost all teachers found difficult for learners is a reading text about dinosaurs. It dealt with unclear scientific theories and three explanations (theories) of how dinosaurs disappeared (the climate was cold and killed them, new species of small mammals ate the dinosaur's eggs and a meteor hit the earth (Grade 8 SB: p72). Another similar example was asking students to listen to detailed abstract information about different parts of a space station covering several scientific facts and numbers (Grade 8 SB: p22).

To rectify these problems, below is a list of the main solutions proposed and approved:

- Some long and difficult reading texts should be scanned or skimmed through and not to be read intensively or for specific details.
- Some long and difficult listening texts should be listened for the gist not for specific details.
- Some long and difficult listening texts should be listened to several times as needed.
- Some long and difficult reading and listening texts should be simplified, replaced or deleted.
- Some parts of long and difficult reading and listening texts should be simplified, replaced or deleted.

Both difficult texts about dinosaurs and space station in the trial edition of the textbook of grade 8 were wisely deleted in the New Edition of English for Palestine which supports the teachers' experience-based evaluation of the content of these reading texts and listening audios.

In some cases, long texts or audios were simplified in a way that makes them more comprehensible and relevant to the learners' level and interest. For example, the text entitled *What a wedding* (Unit 15 - Grade 8 SB: p90) in the Trial edition was simplified in the New Edition through reducing its words from 283 to 208 in the New Edition.

Although these difficult texts vary in number and difficulty from grade to grade and from a lesson to another, they may have negative impact on children learning English in terms of motivation, attitude, interest and also language proficiency. For instance, children may develop a negative attitude towards learning English in general and the textbook in particular. More seriously is the transfer of such attitude from one generation of learners to another making English an unlearnable subject. Additionally, teaching such texts required spending more explanation time at the expense of language practice and at the expense of not achieving all stated objectives for every level/grade and hence leading to low achievement.

1.2 Mismatch between the topics of reading and listening of texts in SB and WB

One of the serious weaknesses of *English for Palestine (Trial edition)* is the fact that some reading and listening lessons in specific units discuss one topic in the SB but their WB counterpart lessons in the same unit discuss a completely different topic from the one(s) in the SB. For example, the SB and WB of Grade 4 (Unit 4 Lesson 1: p10) in the Trial Edition present different

topics and contexts. To illustrate, the SB asks students to listen and read a text that presents an accident story about a boy on a bike (Basim) coming back from a market who hits another boy crossing the road but the WB (asks students to listen and complete a social conversation between two school boys with different names (Rami and Hatem), starting to know each other. Such a problem does not achieve the purpose of the WB activities, i. e. recycling and consolidating the language and language skills presented in the SB which prevents practice and leads again to low achievement.

The main suggestion given by school teachers to overcome such mismatch is to replace the reading and listening texts in the WB with ones that thematically relevant to the topics of the SB. The new edition textbooks merged both SB and WB in one book and split it into two parts in all grades: SBA and SBB.

2. Common problematic areas related to reading and listening activities

2.1 Too many activities in some lessons

This finding is in agreement with some studies (Khora, 2021; Mahmoud, 2007) that confirmed the lack of time to use and practice all activities (exercises) included in some lessons. Participant teachers in this study conformed insufficiency of time to cover all of the activities included in the textbook,

1. To read and answer a 5-question and answer quiz presented two pages before
2. To work in groups, make notes and ask and answer a question (*What is a friend for?*) to talk about a friend.
3. To listen and repeat a poem
4. To work in groups to write a similar poem
5. To listen and repeat a sentence four times, focusing on stress located on a different place each time the word is repeated.
6. To match four questions to four answers.
7. To listen and repeat to four questions and answers.
8. To write 10 different numbers in numbers and words (e.g. *twentieth* and *20th*)
9. To write 5 dates in different ways (e.g. *the thirteenth of May* and *13th May*)

Taking into consideration that most Palestinian school classes in Gaza had about 40 students in average, such frequent problem of having too many demanding exercises in one lesson leads teachers to take some of these actions. Teachers may ignore teaching some of these activities in class or glossing over them depriving pupils from practicing opportunities to develop their language performance. They may also spend most of the time just giving explanations, telling and teaching about English but not involving learners in the process of practicing and using English communicatively. Such actions affect students' attitude towards the Palestinian textbooks and learning English which will be reflected negatively on their language performance and achievement.

To overcome these weaknesses, several solutions were proposed:

- Reducing the number of activities to be dealt with in one teaching period. This is done through deleting some of the too many exercises included in some lessons or deleting part of these exercises.
- Simplifications of some problematic exercises through replacing them with easier ones.

- Assigning some exercises as homework for more practice.

In addition to merging some activities of the WB in the SB and cancelling the WB, the new edition reduced the number of activities in each lesson to a specific number in each period according to each grade. For instance, the new edition of all grades 1- 9 offers only three to four activities in each period with varied level of difficulty and number of items in each activity but consistently. Also some of the questions to be delivered to children were given in the TB. This useful modification helps children internalise and practice the language skills presented in each unit and lesson.

2.2 Lack of varied reading and listening comprehension questions

One of the most apparent and frequent weaknesses in almost all grades is the fact that many of the reading/ listening comprehension questions that follow the reading/listening texts are not varied, i. e. they are mainly wh-questions. They do not include multiple-choice questions, completion, true or false etc. Lack of variety of questions leads to boredom among learners and does not prepare them for tests and exams which normally use a variety of questions. Additionally, lack of variety of questions does not develop students' divergent comprehension and thinking skills. Moreover, using wh-question may lead the learners to give full answers which may distract their attention through focusing on form (tense, verb noun order, noun verb correspondence: singular and plural) not meaning (answer).

The participant teachers suggested varying the questions following texts and audios by replacing most of these wh-questions with a variety of multiple-choice and objective questions that develop and assess pure reading and listening skills as done in a standard test such TOEF and IELTS.

The new editions kept using wh-questions but mainly in the TB as illustrated in these five wh-questions (TB 5, Unit 2, p18) commonly given as tips for teaching each activity:

- Who's talking about the Olympic stadium? (Ben)
- Who's talking about London? (Amy and Ben)
- How many children can you see? (four)
- What do you like? (accept any reasonable answer)
- Where's the duck bus? (in the river/water)

2.3 Mismatch between activities in SB and WB

There is frequent mismatch between the linguistic item(s) or skill(s) presented in the SB and the corresponding activities supposed to provide learners with practice opportunities to use these items and skills in relevant contexts. Another form of such mismatch refers to the fact that some exercises in the WB dealt with topics that were completely different from the topic of the texts presented in the same lesson in the SB. Taking three activities in Unit 23, Lesson P69 (SB) as an example, it can be seen that these activities respectively present social language (*birthday, anniversary, and congratulations*); ordinal numbers (*1st -12th and 10th – 50th*) and a song to mother and father. However, the WB presented 2 activities irrelevant to these 3 exercises. The first one in the WB asks students to spell 12 words (*ear, jump, apricot, coat, lemon, ice-cream, biscuit, hand, dress, grape, shoulder, teacher*) that none of them is related to any of the three activities in the corresponding lesson in the SB and the second activity in the WB trains students to spell ordinal numbers without in full (*first – twelfth*).

This problem was solved by replacing the irrelevant exercises in the WB by more relevant ones that recycle and consolidate the linguistic item(s) or skill(s) presented in the SB. Due to

cancelling and merging the work book in both the Sb and the TB, the New Editions of *English for Palestine* did not have such gap between the two books.

3. Common problematic areas related to listening and speaking activities

Every textbook of *English for Palestine* was divided into thematic units which included lessons that were supposed to be related to the same unit theme. One common problem among the lessons intending to develop listening and speaking skills is that some of these lessons had dialogues, conversations and role-plays or written texts irrelevant to the theme of the unit. In other words, the same unit lacks coherence of thematic topic.

For example, the extract below, taken from the Table of Contents in the SB of Grade 7, Unit 7, P4, shows lack of thematic unity / coherence between four lessons included in Unit 7.

Extract: Table of Contents - Grade 7 – English for Palestine – Trail edition

Unit	Reading comprehension	Language	Listening & speaking	Writing
7	Othman the honest	Present perfect continuous (2)	Identify flowers Describe a flower	Developing paragraphs – topics

The first lesson intended to develop learners' reading comprehension skills through using an interesting story about an honest child who becomes a king as a reward for being honest in trying to grow flowers. The objective of the second lesson was to enable learners to use the present perfect continuous. It included 4 activities only the first one is related to the topic of flowers and the story but the other three activities were related to house cleaning and house works.

Such thematic nonconformity (deviance) prevents recycling active words, commonly used expressions and collocations used in the preceding lessons of the same unit. This disconnection between the themes of the lessons in the same unit develops a feeling of frustration among students as they feel unable to talk about a new topic not based on what they have just listened to or read. These feelings would not facilitate fast and effective learning of English.

To overcome such problems as demonstrated on Unit 7 above, thematic conformity of all lessons in each unit was proposed. This modification was adopted in the New Edition textbooks where the whole unit 7 "Othman the Honest" was replaced by another Unit entitled "The Craft Show": "talking about crafts and school crafts show and writing an informal letter".

4. Common problematic areas related to writing: handwriting and early writing

As writing in English was a new skill to learn for young children (6-15), many problematic areas were cited by the participant school teachers which are similar to Qumsiyeh's dissertation (2012) which analysed the writing skill exercises and activities in "English for Palestine" from grade one to twelve. Another study's found that English language curricula focused more on developing the listening skill than the writing skill (Hammad, 2014). Here is a discussion of the most frequent problems related to developing the handwriting and early writing skills found in *English for Palestine – Trial Edition*.

- 1.1 There were several problems related to introducing the English letters in Grade one. A major problem is related to lack of sufficient handwriting practice opportunities for children. The 26 lowercase letters (plus other linguistic items) were presented in the first 4 units and the

uppercase letters were presented in the following seven units (5-11) in Grade 1, WB. Absence of gradual (ascending) practice of lower and upper case letters and presenting 8 alphabets in one lesson (4 lowercase and 4 uppercase in one lesson confused young children who were starting to learn two different handwriting and alphabet writing systems simultaneously: Arabic and English. Moreover, presenting too many alphabets in one lesson (plus other language items) prevented teachers from having enough time to properly supervise the handwriting of about 40 children in a class. Hence, teachers would not be able to take care of several basic hand writing skills such as shape, direction, spacing, size, upper and lower case, ascending and descending letters, etc.

To enable children to master writing alphabets, the alphabets were redistributed in more lessons and all prepared in a booklet, especially prepared for increasing opportunities of practicing alphabets. The New editions gradually introduced all the letters of the alphabet in lower case in Grade one only as illustrated in the TB and the Letter Poster and then all the letters of the alphabet in lower case upper case were included in Grade 2.

1.2 Some writing exercises were too difficult (complex) for students to accomplish for various pedagogical and linguistic reasons: lack of sufficient and clear instructions, and sometime children were asked to write about topics irrelevant to their interests and context. At other times there was absence or lack of sufficient model pieces of writing to observe, imitate and then create their own writing. These reasons make such writing activities complex and higher than learners' linguistic and cognitive skills. For example, Unit 4 of Grade 9, SB (p28-29) asks children to do all these activities and refer them to using both SB and WB:

- a. Add information from a graph to complete a table
- b. Write the explanation of the graph in the WB
- c. Use the explanation to write paragraph 1 of an essay – The healthy heart experiment.
- d. Work with a partner and do the experiment following a list of 6 steps to be done in class
- e. Write about the results to write paragraph 2 of the essay
- f. Answer 3 questions and use their own words to write paragraph 3 of the essay.

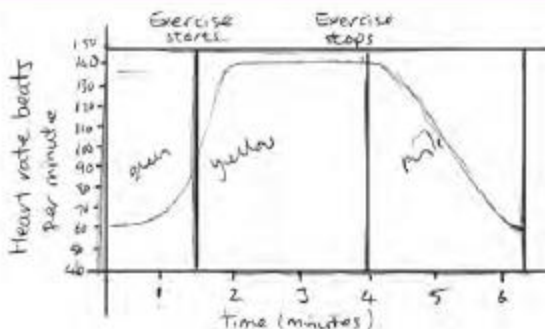
Using an unclear graph and table to practice doing healthy heart experiment and to do all the a-f tasks in a foreign language in few minutes would make writing a lengthy complicated process and would weaken learners' drive to write well and would prevent them from writing enthusiastically and creatively. Children may also feel incompetent linguistically which may result in lack of self-confidence and thus poor achievement.

Depending on the source of difficulty of these exercises, four modifications were offered: replacing difficult exercises with simpler ones, advising teachers to allocate more teaching time and effort to simplify these exercises, replacing irrelevant exercises with more interesting ones, or deleting some parts of these exercises. The new editions of English for Palestine deleted such complex writing tasks and used simpler and clearer instructions for children to follow as the following 2 examples show such difference as exemplified in the 2 graphs used in terms of colour, clarity of numbers and information and questions included.

Writing Task from English for Palestine -Trial edition - Grade 9, SB Unit 3 (p28-29)

Writing

3 Add information from the graph to complete the table.



28

1	Steve's resting heart rate was about ____ beats per minute.	Fran's was around _____.
2	Steve's heart rate rose rapidly to about _____.	Fran's rate rose less, to around _____.
3	His heart rate only fell very slowly to its resting rate after ____ minutes.	Hers fell faster to its resting rate after just _____.

4 Write the explanation of the graph in your Workbook. This is paragraph 1 of an essay – *The healthy heart experiment*. ⇨ WB

Unit task

5 Work with a partner and do the experiment. Follow these steps.

- 1 Find your wrist pulse.
- 2 Work with a partner and a watch (the person with the watch says 'Start' and, after 15 seconds, 'Stop').
- 3 Take turns to count your resting heart rates for 15 seconds. Work out the rates for a minute, and note the figures.
- 4 Take turns to run as fast as you can on the spot for two minutes. Check heart rates again as soon as you stop and note the rates and time. Then check several more times until your heart returns to its resting rate.
- 5 Use all the figures to draw your own line on the graph.
- 6 Discuss your results and compare them with those for Steve and Fran. Remember, the faster your recovery time, the fitter you are.

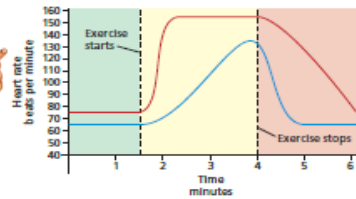
6 Write about your results. This is paragraph 2 of your essay. ⇨ WB

Writing Task from *English for Palestine* – New Edition- Grade 9, SB-A Unit 4 (p37)

Unit 3 Period 10

1 Look at the picture and answer the questions.

- Who is the speaker and where is he?
- What has he been speaking about?



2 Listen to part 1 and complete the notes.

	If you are not fit, ...	If you are very fit, ...
Before exercise	Your normal heart rate is probably about _____ beats a minute.	Your normal heart rate is probably _____.
During exercise	Your heart _____ rises quickly and then you get out of breath fast.	You get out of breath more _____, and your _____ rises less _____.
After exercise	You can only get your _____ back slowly, and your _____ falls very slowly to its _____ rate.	You can get your _____ back more quickly, and your _____ falls _____.

3 Work in pairs. Ask and answer questions.

Student A: Take the part of a student. Ask questions like these.
*If you aren't fit, what's your normal heart rate before exercise?
 Then what happens during exercise?*

Student B: Take the part of Dr Blake. Answer the questions from the table in activity 2.

4 Look at Dr Blake's chart in activity 1. Then listen to part 2 and do the tasks.

1 Write the correct name for each coloured line – Steve or Kate.
 _____ = _____ _____ = _____

- Say who is fit and who is not fit.
- Compare their heart rates before, during and after exercise.

5 Practise your pronunciation: the sounds of *th*.

1 Listen. Tick (✓) the sounds that you hear.

	/ð/ (this)	/θ/ (thin)		/ð/ (this)	/θ/ (thin)
1 a healthy heart	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	4 then you get	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 important thing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	5 out of breath	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 there's something	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	6 the changes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2 Listen and repeat the sentences.

- A healthy heart is a very important thing.
- There's something that's very different.
- Then you get out of breath fast.
- If you're fit, the changes are smaller.

5. Common problematic areas related to grammar

Several grammar-related problems were identified and dealt with pedagogically. One of these problems was presenting grammar points **in isolated sentences** which did not form a real communicative context that reflects the communicative value of this grammar point under discussion, i. e. how it is used to express a particular communicative function/ value. For example, grammar lesson 4 of Grade 5 SB p41 offered only 2 examples of how to use “or” to express a choice in statements and then followed by 3 isolated statements and 2 questions that do not relate to each other to form a communicative text as shown below.

Look

- You can go to Syria by car. You can go by plane.
You can go to Syria by car or plan.
- Ben hasn't been to Jerusalem. He hasn't been to Bethlehem.
Ben hasn't been to Jerusalem or Bethlehem.

Writ sentences. Use *or*

- I go to school by bus. I go to school by car.
- Nadia hasn't been to Egypt. She hasn't ben to Jordan,
- We can go to Bethlehem tomorrow. We can go to Jericho tomorrow.
- Do you want some figs? Do you want some grapes?
- Shall we play football? Shall we play basketball?

The examples do not include joining two questions as requested.

This problem makes grammar an abstract subject composed of a set of complicated rules and not a means to an end. In other words, it is studied for knowledge and not for expressing spoken or written piece of discourse. Such problematic grammar points were replaced with contextualized exercises expressing communicative function. For instance, the above example was modified in one linguistic context or one piece of discourse as follow:

- My sister Nadia can go to school by bus or in a car. She can go in a car with her father or mother. My family will go to Jerusalem or Bethlehem tomorrow.

6. Common problematic areas related to pronunciation: word and sentences stress

One of the most common problems agreed on by almost all participant teachers was the difficulties they faced in teaching children pronunciation activities, especially the ones related to word stress. This is what they said: "Teachers ignore teaching these exercises as they are not trained on teaching stress." Initially, they recommended deleting almost all activities related to stress and intonation in *English for Palestine* Trial Edition, claiming that these activities are too difficult to learn by student. But when the researcher negotiated them and asked them if they need training on how to teach these activities, almost all of them confirmed their need for such training. Consequently, the consultant (researcher) prepared training materials on how to teach pronunciation activities included in *English for Palestine*.

The training materials proposed practical techniques that simplified teaching and facilitated learning stress at words and sentence level. The main effective pedagogical technique recommended for teaching word stress was using "sound image" which refers to teaching word stress as an integral part of how a word is pronounced as a whole and as one pronunciation unit without referring to its syllables, explaining stress, identifying the location of stress, or explaining rules, etc. Every word has a way of pronunciation "sound image" and also a spelling image regardless if it has stress or silent letters. So every word has a pronunciation image to be listened to and **acquired** as a one sound without mentioning or discussing any rules which are too many with too many exceptions. Here are some of the illustrative examples given to trainee teachers (mainly taken from trial edition) without using any observable mark (KNOWledge, **suspect**; O o) to show stress location because stress is a pronunciation skill and should be picked up naturally by listening and imitating as children do in acquiring their mother tongue.

photograph - photographic - photographer
inform - information - informer
decide - energy - respect

So, if a teachers wanted to teach words that were usually mispronounced by children due to not using stress correctly, they did not need to mention anything about stress or syllables; they just need

to say it again and again and ask students to repeat it again and again. Alternatively, teachers and learners could use free online pronunciation dictionaries to pick up the pronunciation of any word with or without stress. They were given a list of some reliable online dictionaries.

Sentence stress was also simplified and exemplified by focusing on the 2 main communicative functions of stress used in English for Palestine: emphatic and corrective, i. e. why stress is used (stress conveys one of these 2 meanings). Here are some the examples given to teachers: the first is emphatic and second is corrective.

Example of emphatic stress

1. I **lent** my brother \$100 last week.
2. I lent my brother \$100 last **week**.
3. I lent my **brother** \$100 last week.
4. I lent my brother **\$100** last week

Example of corrective stress (Grade 6 WB P44)

- Amy: My cousin is fourteen years old.
- Rania: How old? Did you say she's forty years old?
- Amy: No, not **forty**. **Fourteen**.
- Rania: My cousins are fifteen and seventeen years old.

To disseminate these practical techniques, the training material was given in a series of training workshops delivered to about 800 English language teachers working at UNRWA schools in Gaza then, including all the participants of this study. The training workshops took place in UNRWA schools available in the five governorates of Gaza.

Additionally, all the modifications and solutions discussed in this UNRWA curriculum evaluation programme were produced in three supplementary sets of guides which were used in all UNRWA schools then until the new editions began to gradually replace the trial edition.

Conclusions and recommendations

Focusing on documenting procedural evaluation and development of English language textbooks, this empirical study provides the following insights and implications to improve teaching English language as a foreign language, especially for children. First, it points to the importance of reviewing English language teacher education and teacher preparation programmes provided for pre-service teachers. Second, it invites English language education providers in Palestine (Ministry of Education, UNRWA and private sector) and elsewhere to modify the capacity building training programmes offered to in-service language teachers. Both teacher preparation and capacity building programmes should focus on enabling English language teachers to be skillfully, pedagogically and practically competent at both evaluating and modifying existing English language textbooks. Enhancing their competencies in such empirically-grounded method of textbook evaluation and modification could go a long way towards helping English language teachers to recognize their own textbook merits and demerits and how to make use of them collaboratively, methodologically and professionally. They would also be competently able to surgically overcome and modify the problematic areas they had identified based on their teaching experience. Developing pre-service and in-service teachers' professional competencies of evaluation and modification of existing and static English language textbooks (not changed for years and possibly for decades) is vital for meeting learners' varied and changing communication needs, interests and capabilities in a rapidly changing technology based learning styles and also in a rapidly changing life styles of multicultural virtual world.

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