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Authentic Learning in Iranian EAP Textbooks: A Critical Examination of Practice

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Abstract: This study critically examines the concept of authenticity in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) textbooks used in Iranian higher education. The research focuses on how well these textbooks align with the principles of authentic learning, which emphasizes real-world application, meaningful engagement, and the development of critical thinking skills. By analyzing a selection of widely used EAP textbooks, the study explores the extent to which they incorporate authentic materials, tasks, and contexts that prepare students for academic challenges in English-speaking environments. Through a combination of content analysis and expert feedback from Iranian EAP instructors, the study identifies both strengths and weaknesses in the representation of authentic academic practices. The findings suggest that while some textbooks offer valuable real-world examples and tasks, many still rely heavily on contrived or overly simplified content, limiting their practical utility for students. The study concludes by offering recommendations for improving the authenticity of EAP materials to better equip Iranian students for the academic demands of international higher education.

Keywords: Authentic learning, English for Academic Purposes, EAP textbooks, Iranian higher education, content analysis, academic English, real-world tasks, textbook evaluation, authenticity in language teaching, critical thinking.

Introduction: In the context of higher education, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) textbooks play a crucial role in preparing students for the linguistic and academic demands of university life, especially for those pursuing studies in English-speaking environments.

These textbooks are expected to equip learners not only with the language skills necessary for academic success but also with the cognitive and practical skills to engage meaningfully in academic discourse. A key principle underlying the design of effective EAP materials is authenticity—the degree to which the content and tasks reflect real-world academic situations. Authentic learning encourages students to engage with tasks that mirror actual academic practices, fostering critical thinking, problem-solving, and independent learning.

In Iran, where English is taught as a foreign language and increasingly used as a medium of instruction in higher education, the authenticity of EAP textbooks is particularly important. However, there is ongoing debate about the extent to which these textbooks truly reflect the realities of academic life in English-speaking contexts. Despite the growing emphasis on communicative and student-centered approaches in language teaching, many EAP textbooks in Iran still rely on artificial, context-free tasks that may not adequately prepare students for the challenges of academic study in English.

This study aims to critically examine the authenticity of Iranian EAP textbooks, exploring how well they align with the principles of authentic learning. By analyzing a selection of widely used textbooks and gathering feedback from experienced Iranian EAP instructors, this research investigates the content, tasks, and materials used in these textbooks to assess their relevance and practical utility. The study also seeks to understand whether these textbooks promote a learning experience that prepares students for the academic and cultural challenges they will encounter in international academic settings. The findings of this study will provide insights into the strengths and limitations of current EAP materials in Iran and offer recommendations for improving their authenticity to better serve the needs of Iranian students in higher education.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this study is designed to critically examine the authenticity of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) textbooks used in Iranian higher education institutions. The study employs a mixed-methods approach combining both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques to provide a comprehensive analysis of the textbooks' authenticity in reflecting real-world academic contexts. This section outlines the specific steps taken in data collection, the criteria for textbook selection, the tools used for analysis, and the process of gathering feedback from instructors.

1. Textbook Selection

The first step in the methodology was to identify a representative sample of EAP textbooks widely used in Iranian universities. Based on consultations with EAP instructors and curriculum planners, a list of ten textbooks commonly employed in undergraduate and graduate English courses was compiled. These textbooks were selected based on their prevalence in the Iranian academic context and their varying approaches to teaching academic English. The textbooks included in the study were diverse in terms of their scope, focus, and the level of learners they target, ranging from general academic English to more specific content-related texts, such as English for Science and Technology, English for Business Studies, and English for Humanities.

A detailed examination of the textbooks' Table of Contents, prefaces, and introductory chapters was conducted to understand their intended focus and structure. This initial review allowed for a deeper understanding of the areas they covered (e.g., reading comprehension, writing skills, academic vocabulary, listening and speaking tasks), and whether the materials were designed to align with the realities of academic settings in English-speaking countries.

2. Framework for Authenticity

To assess the authenticity of the textbooks, a specific framework for authentic learning was employed. This framework was based on the principles of authenticity proposed by scholars in applied linguistics and language pedagogy. The criteria for authentic learning included:

Real-World Contexts: Whether the tasks and examples provided in the textbooks reflect actual academic situations that students may encounter in English-speaking university environments. For instance, tasks that replicate real academic writing assignments, discussions, or presentations were considered authentic.

Task Relevance: Whether the tasks engage students in meaningful activities that require the use of language in context, rather than isolated drills or exercises. Tasks that promote problem-solving, critical thinking, and collaboration were prioritized.

Cultural Relevance: Whether the textbooks address academic culture and conventions in English-speaking contexts, such as the structure of academic papers, referencing styles, and expectations for student-teacher interactions.

Language Use: The extent to which language use in the textbooks mirrors authentic academic discourse. This includes the types of vocabulary, sentence structures, and academic registers employed in the materials.

Student Engagement: Whether the tasks encourage active student participation and reflection, fostering a deeper connection with the material and promoting autonomous learning.

Each textbook was systematically evaluated using these criteria, with specific focus on the types of exercises, texts, and tasks included in the textbooks. For example, reading passages were assessed for their authenticity by considering the type of texts (e.g., academic articles, essays, reports) and the relevance of the topics to university students. Writing tasks were analyzed to determine if they mirrored the expectations of real academic assignments.

3. Expert Feedback from EAP Instructors

In order to triangulate the analysis of the textbooks, expert feedback was gathered from a group of experienced EAP instructors at Iranian universities. These instructors were selected based on their years of experience teaching EAP courses, their familiarity with a range of EAP textbooks, and their expertise in academic English instruction.

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to guide the feedback process. The interviews focused on instructors' perceptions of the textbooks' authenticity, the challenges they faced when using these materials in the classroom, and their opinions on the alignment of the textbooks with students' needs for academic preparation. The questions addressed various aspects, including:

The perceived effectiveness of the textbooks in preparing students for real academic tasks.

The strengths and weaknesses of the textbooks in providing authentic content.

The suitability of the materials for developing critical thinking, problem-solving, and other academic skills.

Suggestions for improving the authenticity of these textbooks in future editions.

The interviews were conducted in person or via video conferencing, depending on the availability of the instructors. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was audio-recorded for transcription and analysis.

4. Classroom Observations

To further assess how the textbooks were used in

practice, a subset of the textbooks was selected for classroom observation. These observations were aimed at understanding how teachers implemented the content and tasks from the textbooks in real classroom settings. A total of 15 classroom sessions across different universities were observed, with a focus on EAP courses that involved reading, writing, and academic discourse.

During the observations, the researcher took detailed field notes, paying close attention to how the instructors adapted the textbooks' materials and whether they supplemented the tasks with additional authentic resources. The observations also focused on how students engaged with the textbooks and whether the tasks prompted active participation. Particular attention was given to student-teacher interactions and how the instructors facilitated discussions, writing workshops, or group work based on the textbooks' materials.

At the end of each observed session, informal interviews were conducted with the instructors to discuss the challenges and advantages of using the textbooks in their teaching practice. The observations and interviews provided valuable insight into the practical application of the textbooks and the extent to which the materials were seen as relevant and useful by both instructors and students.

5. Data Analysis

The data collected from the textbook analysis, expert feedback, and classroom observations were analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. For the textbook analysis, each of the selected EAP textbooks was rated based on the authenticity criteria outlined in the framework. A scoring system was developed, with textbooks being rated on a scale from 1 to 5 for each criterion (1 = not authentic, 5 = highly authentic). These scores allowed for a comparative analysis of the textbooks' authenticity.

The expert feedback from the instructors was transcribed and analyzed thematically to identify recurring themes, insights, and suggestions regarding the authenticity of the textbooks. These themes were then compared with the textbook analysis to determine whether there was alignment between instructors' perceptions and the actual content of the textbooks.

For the classroom observations, the field notes were coded and categorized to identify patterns in how the textbooks were used and whether they encouraged authentic learning experiences. The data from the observations and interviews were triangulated with the textbook analysis and expert feedback to provide a well-rounded understanding of the authenticity of the

textbooks in practice.

6. Limitations

While the methodology provides a comprehensive analysis, there are some limitations to the study. First, the selection of textbooks, although representative, may not encompass the entire range of materials used in Iranian universities. Additionally, the expert feedback was based on the opinions of a select group of instructors, which may not fully represent the views of all EAP educators in the country. Finally, classroom observations were limited to a small number of sessions, which may not capture the full range of teaching practices across diverse university settings.

Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a thorough and critical examination of the authenticity of Iranian EAP textbooks and offers valuable insights into how these materials can be improved to better meet the needs of students preparing for academic study in English-speaking environments.

RESULTS

The results of this study highlight both strengths and significant gaps in the authenticity of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) textbooks used in Iranian higher education. The textbooks were evaluated across multiple criteria related to authentic learning, such as real-world contexts, task relevance, cultural relevance, language use, and student engagement. Overall, the findings suggest that while some textbooks do attempt to engage students with academic language and contexts, many fall short of providing the type of authentic, real-world learning experiences that are necessary for preparing students for academic challenges in English-speaking environments.

The content analysis revealed that most of the textbooks analyzed (70%) included reading and writing tasks based on authentic academic texts, such as journal articles and research papers, but these tasks often lacked depth and failed to reflect the complexity and diversity of academic discourse. While a few textbooks incorporated tasks that closely mirrored real academic tasks (e.g., writing research proposals, summarizing academic articles), the majority offered simplified versions that did not fully prepare students for the demands of academic writing or critical thinking required in higher education settings.

Feedback from expert EAP instructors further highlighted these findings. While instructors generally agreed that the textbooks provided useful foundational skills in academic English, many expressed concerns over the lack of authenticity in the tasks. Teachers noted that the textbooks often

provided basic vocabulary exercises, grammar drills, and comprehension questions that did not sufficiently challenge students to engage with academic concepts critically or to apply their knowledge in meaningful ways. According to the instructors, the textbooks primarily focused on isolated language skills rather than integrating those skills into authentic academic practices, such as engaging in debates, conducting research, and writing for real-world academic audiences.

Classroom observations revealed that instructors frequently adapted textbook materials to make them more relevant and engaging for students. Many teachers supplemented the textbooks with additional authentic materials, such as academic journal articles, podcasts, and videos, to provide students with exposure to real-world academic language. However, the lack of authentic tasks in the textbooks often led instructors to modify or replace textbook exercises to meet the needs of their students, which was a time-consuming process. This adaptation process suggests that while the textbooks may offer a starting point, they require significant adjustments to be fully effective in promoting authentic learning.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study raise important questions about the authenticity of EAP textbooks used in Iranian universities. While these textbooks are designed to prepare students for academic study in English, the lack of real-world academic tasks and the heavy reliance on simplified language structures limit their effectiveness. The results suggest that, while the textbooks address the basic linguistic needs of students, they often fall short in promoting critical thinking, problem-solving, and the development of academic skills that are necessary for success in higher education.

One key issue identified in the study is the focus on language learning in isolation rather than within the context of academic discourse. Authentic learning emphasizes the integration of language skills with real-world tasks that encourage students to engage actively with academic content. However, the textbooks analyzed in this study frequently presented language tasks that were disconnected from real academic practices. For instance, reading exercises often lacked complex, multi-faceted academic texts that require students to critically analyze and synthesize information, which is a core skill in academic settings.

Additionally, the study revealed that cultural relevance is an area that needs further attention in Iranian EAP textbooks. While the textbooks included content that was useful for students in an Iranian context, they often failed to address academic conventions in English-

speaking countries, such as citation styles, critical academic discourse, and the expectations for academic argumentation. The lack of cultural alignment with real-world academic expectations in English-speaking environments means that students may be unprepared for the specific academic challenges they will face in international higher education settings.

The role of instructors in adapting textbooks to provide more authentic learning experiences was another critical theme that emerged from the study. Instructors frequently felt the need to supplement the textbooks with more relevant materials and tasks to help students engage with the language in a meaningful way. This highlights the importance of teacher agency and expertise in adapting EAP materials to meet students' needs. While teachers' ability to supplement textbooks is valuable, it also suggests that relying solely on textbooks that are not sufficiently authentic may limit the potential for a truly comprehensive academic preparation experience.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that while some Iranian EAP textbooks provide useful foundational knowledge of academic English, many lack the authenticity needed to prepare students for the complexities of academic life in English-speaking environments. The textbooks generally fall short in promoting authentic academic tasks, critical thinking, and the application of language skills in real-world contexts. Despite these limitations, teachers in Iranian universities make efforts to adapt these materials, but this process is time-consuming and indicates a need for textbooks that are better aligned with authentic academic practices.

The findings of this study suggest several important recommendations for improving the authenticity of EAP textbooks in Iran. First, textbooks should include more authentic academic tasks, such as research projects, debates, and critical analyses of academic texts, that challenge students to engage with academic content at a deeper level. This would help students develop the critical thinking and problem-solving skills necessary for success in academic settings. Second, the inclusion of real-world academic texts and examples that reflect diverse academic disciplines and cultural contexts would better prepare students for the variety of academic situations they may encounter. Finally, greater emphasis should be placed on integrating language skills with academic content, enabling students to use language in context rather than in isolated exercises.

By focusing on these areas, Iranian EAP textbooks can better align with the principles of authentic learning, ensuring that students are not only linguistically proficient but also academically prepared for the challenges of higher education in English-speaking environments. Moving forward, educators, curriculum designers, and textbook publishers should collaborate to create EAP materials that provide students with the authentic academic experiences they need to succeed in their academic careers.

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