Let's Judge a Book by its Cover: The Case Study of *Active Skills for Reading*

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Abstract

Textbook is an essential element of teaching and learning materials. After the teacher, textbooks are the most important factor in learning. Since textbooks act as an important material in teaching and learning, they need to be evaluated regularly. In the light of the foregoing, this study aimed to evaluate "*Active Skills for Reading*" using a researcher-made checklist and a structured interview. This book was being taught in six classes of Chabahar Maritime University as a general English coursebook. The goal of this study was to determine the suitability of the book as a general English course from the students' and teachers' perspectives. To this end, 150 students and 4 teachers were selected, and data were collected during two semesters in 2020. The quantitative data of the checklist were analyzed by calculating descriptive statistics using SPSS version 26, and qualitative data was analyzed through deductive content analysis. It was shown that the teachers and students believed that the appearance of the book is attractive, the content of the book is up-to-date and practical, and the goals are well defined. It was also revealed that although the textbook had some shortcomings such as lack of enough grammar sections in each unit, teachers felt the book was still appropriate for general English courses, especially for developing the reading skills. Generally, it was indicated that the textbook had met students' needs for a general English course. The study ends with suggestions for general English teachers and materials designers.

Keywords: Evaluation, General English, Iranian EFL Learners Textbook, University

1. Introduction

Being one of the most important sources of input in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms, textbooks perform an important task in teaching and learning languages (Rashidi & Ghaedsharafi, 2015). They can help teachers while they present, teach, and review different materials in their classes (Khoo & Knight, 2015). Textbooks dominate the language learning materials (Tomlinson, 2012), determine the success or failure of a course (Mukundan, 2012), bring about a sense of progress and relaxation (Razmjoo, 2007).and act "as a guidance for teachers and their students, acting as a memory aid" (Awasthi, 2006, p. 1). Besides et al. (2018) state that textbook is not only a guide to the teachers, but it is also a presenter of essential input through different explanations and activities (Ayu & Indrawati, 2018).

Tok (2010) believes that when a textbook is interesting to learners, they will enjoy their course and will be active in their classes. Moreover, textbooks support the learners by providing knowledge to them, meeting their needs, and fulfilling the teaching requirements (Ahour, et al., 2014). Textbooks give a framework to students and teachers, determine what will happen in the next stage of learning and teaching, and can reduce learner's anxiety (Adioska, 2019). He further argues that in contrast to other materials, textbooks are economic, act as a map, and can speed the teaching development (Adioska, 2019; McGrath, 2002). Furthermore, they are effective for the presentation of the syllabus (McGrath, 2002), because collecting authentic materials for teaching is difficult and time-consuming (McDonough et al., 2013).

Lodhi, et al. (2019) believe that like other materials, applying textbooks might have some disadvantages, though. They may be followed blindly like a religious book by the teachers and stifle the teachers' creativity in teaching. According to Richards (2001) and Renandya (2002), some of the books have non-original language and misrepresent the content. Representing a distorted content, they cannot respond to students' needs and may disappoint teachers. Richards (2001) implies textbooks are expensive, all learners cannot afford to buy them, they may not be sufficient for teachers and students, and they, to top it all, reduce the teachers' needs for developing their skills (Amerian & Pouromid, 2018; Richards, 2001).

As observed, although textbooks act as an important material in teaching and learning, each book surely has its own strengths and weaknesses which need to be identified through systematic evaluation studies (Sarem, et al., 2013). To be more exact, they should be selected carefully for use, and they need to be evaluated regularly for different contexts (Mohammadi & Abdi, 2014). According to Evans and John (2005), "evaluation is a whole process which begins with determining what information to gather and ends

with bringing about change in current activities or influencing future ones" (p. 128). Tomlinson (2003) stated evaluation of materials is "a procedure that measures the value of a set of learning materials like a textbook" (Tomlinson, 2003, p. 15).

Besharati and Mazdayasna (2017) reason that textbooks having an appropriate design and appearance interest the readers and will meet learners' acquisition needs. Besides, textbooks need to be evaluated regarding their adequate coverage of the intended materials (Besharati & Mazdayasna, 2017). Furthermore, textbook evaluation could assist teachers in their professional growth. Likewise, it develops the students' attainment of their learning goals and result in the success of educational programs (Hamidi et al., 2016). Obviously, the characteristics of an evaluation study depend on the objectives that are in the educators' mind (Gholami et al., 2017).

It can be concluded that teaching materials like textbooks are essential in English learning/teaching (Awasthi, 2006; Ayu & Indrawati, 2018; Tok, 2010), but they may have several imperfections that need to be diagnosed through textbook evaluation and resolved for the future (Besharati & Mazdayasna, 2017; Jusuf, 2018). For this purpose, this research aimed to evaluate the *"Active Skills for Reading"* textbook that was used at Chabahar Maritime University for English translation students as a reading book and as a general English textbook for other fields such as Civil Engineering, Mechanics, Economics, Electrical Engineering, and Practical Chemistry. In fact, this research aimed to identify the strengths and weaknesses of this textbook from teachers' and students' perspectives. To do this, the following research questions were posed:

1. To what extent is *"Active Skills for Reading"* textbook effective regarding its general appearance and design?
2. To what extent is *"Active Skills for Reading"* textbook effective regarding its objectives and supplementary materials?
3. To what extent is *"Active Skills for Reading"* textbook effective regarding its subject and content?
4. To what extent is *"Active Skills for Reading"* textbook effective regarding its activities and exercises?
5. To what extent is *"Active Skills for Reading"* textbook effective regarding its presentation of language skills?

2. Review of Literature

There have been several studies conducted on the evaluation of English teaching textbooks. Some of these studies have been conducted abroad. According to Salehi, et al., (2015), course designers, material

developers, and teachers are aware of learners' requirements and learning aims, thus they can conduct useful textbook evaluation studies. Litz (2005) studied the usefulness of *"English Firsthand 2"* textbook. The results of this study indicated the textbook had an attractive appearance, clear aims, and logical order of presentation. Besides, all the four skills were addressed equally in the said book. Evaluating three English textbooks recommended for the students of the state primary schools, Yasemin (2009) concluded that these textbooks were appropriate for young learners, but the design of the textbooks needed to be revised, because it was not appropriate for young learners of English.

The second group of studies have investigated the effectiveness of conversation books. Azizifar and Baghelani (2014) evaluated the Top-Notch textbook series that is widely used at private language institutes in Iran. Using a researcher-made checklist based on Thein (2006) checklist, they gathered data from twenty-five teachers who were teaching this book in the language institutes. Based on the results from teachers' perspectives, Top-Notch series was out of date and the suggested teaching methodology in the teachers' book was ineffective. Although the author of the book claimed that the suggested method allowed various class activities and was based on student-centered teaching, the teachers did not believe the methods could provide such opportunities. Even though it satisfied teachers' expectations regarding its general appearance, design and illustrations, objective, and testing materials, it lacked interesting and challenging topics to stimulate students' critical thinking. Lastly, the textbook's writing materials didn't satisfy the participants' expectations. Khodabakhshi (2014) examined the strengths and weaknesses of "*Skyline*" series that is taught in some Iranian EFL institutes. For this purpose, 75 Iranian EFL teachers were selected from various language institutes. They filled out the checklist that was developed based on Litz (2000) checklist. Attractive appearance, multi-skill nature, and real-life activities made this book quite appropriate for EFL learners. However, lack of a vocabulary list or glossary and not introducing various registers and accents were the main weaknesses.

Still another group of researchers have addressed the English textbooks used in Iranian high schools. For example, Rahimipour and Hashemi (2011) evaluated the three English textbooks taught in Iranian high schools, focusing on the viewpoints of English teachers. Using a checklist of 46 items, they collected data from fifty teachers who taught in high shools more than five years. According to the results, the textbooks were not sufficient from the teachers' perspective because their physical appearance and some practical sections (language functions, grammar, reading, and vocabulary) were not interesting enough for the students. They were limited

to exercises focusing in repetition drills, producing simple sentences, and lacking communicative nature.

As observed, the studies reviewed above were conducted on textbooks used in different Iranian educational contexts such as high school, private language institutes, and university. A large number of Iranian researchers evaluated the Iranian high schools English textbooks (Ahmadi Safa, & Karampour, 2020; Dabbagh & Safaei, 2019; Derakhshan, 2021; Rahim, et al., 2021; Rahimipour & Hashemi, 2011; Sadeghi Hasanabadi, et al., 2021; Saidi, 2021; Saidi & Mokhtarpour, 2020). Still other studies have investigated the widely-used conversation textbooks taught at Iranian private language institutes (Alemi & Mesbah, 2013; Azizifar & Baghelani, 2014; Chegeni, et al., 2016; Hamidi, et al., 2016; Vahdatnia & Salehi, 2020). Besides, several studies such as Amirian and Tavakoli (2009), Baleghizadeh and Rahimi (2011), Dos Santos (2019a, b), Ghalandari and Talebinejad (2012), Gholami et al. (2017), Karimnia and Mohammad Jafari (2017), Istiqomah and Maunah, (2020), and Khalili Sabet, and Jodai (2012) evaluated the ESP textbooks taught in Iranian universities. However, there existed little research on General English books which are used at universities (Dos Santos, 2020; Vahdany, 2015). Hence this study was carried out to fill this gap in the literature and evaluate the book entitled *"Active Skills for Reading"*, offering solutions to a local problem.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design and Participants

The research approach was a mixed-methods approach as it embodied using checklists and interview, and the analysis of the data was conducted both quantitatively and qualitatively. This research is descriptive in nature, in which the researcher aimed to discover the strengths and weaknesses of the *"Active Skills for Reading"* textbook (level 1) via two data collection instruments. The researcher employed a researcher-made checklist and semi-structured interview (see appendix A). The checklist was completed by students, and the teachers were interviewed for more information on the efficacy of *the said* textbook. In this study, the researcher selected six majors at Chabahar Maritime University. Translator Training Program (24 students), Civil Engineering (38 students), Mechanics (18 students), Economics (22 students), Electrical Engineering (36 students), and Practical Chemistry (12 students) were the final participants in this research. All of the 150 participants were first semester students. Another group of participants included four teachers who were teaching the textbook in these classes.

3.2. Instruments

The instruments that were used in this study included a researcher-made checklist and one semi-structured interview. For developing the checklist, the researcher used checklists of Abdel Wahab (2013), Ansary and Babaii (2002), Rahimy (2007), and Tok (2010). These checklists have been used as an evaluation criterion in several projects (Ghorbani, 2011; Yousefi Azarfam & Noordin, 2014; Jusuf, 2018). The number of questions gathered based on these checklists was 120. Almost 40 questions that were repeated and 18 questions that were not related to the objectives of the research were deleted. The researchers asked three experts to read the remaining 62 items and give their comments regarding their wording and their suitability for such project. The experts deleted several items, provided the best wording for questions in the new checklist, and made the wording simpler to understand. The number of questions in the checklist was reduced to 41 items, and one of the questions was related to the writing skill was deleted since the textbook doesn't include writing skills.

In the end, the final version of the checklist was set up with 40 questions. The items of the checklist were presented in five sections: General Appearance and Design (7 items), Objectives and Supplementary Materials (6 items), Subject and Content (8 items), Activities (5 items), and Language Skills (14 items). To make the questionnaire easier to understand for the students, it was translated into Persian before distributing. The translation of the questionnaire was done by a certified translator holding a Ph.D. in translation studies. The reliability of the translated checklist was checked through a pilot study with 84 students in the first round, using Cronbach's Alpha in SPSS version 26. The rate of Cronbach's Alpha was 0.921, which indicated that items of the checklist were reliable.

The second part of data collection was qualitative. The qualitative data was collected by using a structured interview that was conducted with four teachers who were teaching this book to student. It consisted of seven open-ended questions about layout, content, skills, activities, objectives and supplementary materials, strengths and weaknesses of the book, and recommendations for changing or using the textbook. These questions were given to the supervisor and advisor of the thesis, and they were revised and confirmed by them. In addition to this, the questions of the interview were given to interviewees through WhatsApp one week before the due day. The interviewees read the questions and sent their responses using voice messaging in WhatsApp. The interviews usually took 8 to 10 minutes, and were later typed for easier analysis.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

In this study, the researcher administered the checklist for students and designed some open-ended questions for an interview with the teachers. The number of students who answered the checklist reached 150, which took two academic semesters to collect the data. The checklist used a Likert-type scale of equal range with five sections. The statements were followed by: 1-strongly disagree, 2- disagree, 3- average, 4-agree, 5- strongly agree. First, all the answers of the students were coded and transferred to SPSS data editor. The data was analyzed by using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS 26). Then, the mean and percentage were calculated to describe and summarize the responses of students. Obtaining the mean and percentages of items, the researcher could track the items and categories that received the highest and lowest score.

Another section of data collection which is qualitative was an interview that was conducted with four teachers who were teaching. The interview was going to be held face to face, but due to the pandemic situation of coronavirus, it was held online through WhatsApp. The researchers transcribed the responses of the teachers so that they could read them carefully two times and organize them according to the main research questions. After transcribing the answers, the member checking technique was applied for exploring the credibility of the results. In fact, the transcribed file for each teacher was sent to them. They were asked to read the text, and cross out if any of the parts were wrong or against what they said. Later, deductive content analysis was used for finding more information about the main research questions. In this phase, the researcher used deductive approach, because she aimed to find the advantages and shortcomings of the book in the areas mentioned in the research questions. In the end, the researchers categorized the answers according to general appearance and design, objectives and supplementary materials, language content, activities, language skills.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

4.1.1. General Appearance and Design

The first research question addressed the general appearance and design of the book including different factors such as cover, paintings, pictures, font size, table of contents, titles, and review sections and exercises. The results related to this part are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for General Appearance and Design

Statements		1	2	3	4	5	Mean
1. The book cover is informative and attractive.	F	2	9	70	54	15	3.47
	%	1.3	6	46.7	36	10	-----
2. The font size and type are appropriate.	F	2	12	13	81	42	3.99
	%	1.3	8	8.7	54	28	-----
3. The textbook has enough pictures to make it real.	F	7	8	39	71	25	3.66
	%	4.7	5.3	26	47.3	16.7	-----
4. The textbook has a comprehensive table of contents.	F	8	23	48	51	20	3.34
	%	5.3	15.3	32	34	13.3	-----
5. Every unit and lesson starts with an appropriate title.	F	2	8	37	72	31	3.81
	%	1.3	5.3	24.7	48	20.7	-----
6. There are enough review units and exercises.	F	3	19	36	55	37	3.69
	%	2	12.7	24	36.7	24.7	-----
7. The visuals are attractive for the students.	F	8	22	72	34	14	3.16
	%	5.3	14.7	48	22.7	9.3	-----

Concerning the first item, a high percentage of the participants supported the statement, only 7.3% disagreed, while 69 participants (46%) agreed with the attraction of outside cover of the textbooks. Besides, 70 participants (46.7%) responded as average, resulting in a mean score of 3.47. Regarding the font size, 123 participants either agreed or strongly agreed, amounting to 82%. Some 64% of the students agreed that the book contained enough pictures, and the mean score was 3.66, which is again above average. Furthermore, around 47.3% agreed with the statement that the book had a complete table of contents. Regarding the appropriate title of every unit and lesson, only ten participants disagreed with this statement. The last question in this category was "visuals are attractive for the students". Only 32% of participants agreed, and 48% of them chose the average alternative. The mean of this question was 3.16, as a result, it was ranked as the weakest item in this category. In this regard, interview data revealed that the textbook indeed had a good and effective use of pictures and titles that could lead the learners to better performance while skimming different parts of the text. Moreover, two teachers believed that the pictures used in the textbook were related to the subject of each lesson. In other words, students could guess the topic of the lesson through the pictures that were in the pre-reading section.

4.1.2. Objectives and Supplementary Materials

To evaluate the appropriateness of the objectives and supplementary materials, six items were considered in the checklist of the current study, the results of which are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Objectives and Supplementary Materials

Statements		1	2	3	4	5	Mean
8. The textbook fulfills the objectives of a general English course.	F	11	17	41	60	21	3.42
	%	7.3	11.3	27.3	40	14	-----
9. The objectives are based on the learners' wants and interests.	F	5	26	72	37	10	3.14
	%	3.3	17.3	48	24.7	6.7	-----
10. The objectives are specified explicitly in the textbook.	F	3	25	62	45	15	3.29
	%	2.4	11.9	38.1	36.9	10.7	-----
11. The textbook is accompanied by audio materials.	F	27	53	40	17	13	2.57
	%	18	35.3	26.7	11.3	8.7	-----
12. Workbook is available to give extra exercise.	F	40	42	39	20	9	2.44
	%	26.7	28	26	13.3	6	-----
13. The exercises allow various class activities.	F	2	13	60	56	19	3.51
	%	1.3	8.7	40	37.3	12.7	-----

The last items had the highest mean, indicating that the book exercises allowed for various class activities. Exactly 50% of learners agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. It was also indicated that more than half of the participants (54%) believed that the book fulfills the objectives of a general English course at Chabahar Maritime University, thus this item had the second highest mean in this category i.e. 3.42. These are two of the main features of an effective book for general English. More than 47% of the students supported the statement that the objectives were specified explicitly in the textbook, and only 14.3% disagreed with the statement. This item's mean was 3.29, which is more than average, but not very high.

With regard to covering the learners' needs and interests, only one third of the students agreed with the statement, and one fifth of the participants believed that the objectives were irrelevant to the learners' needs and interests, which makes it one of the items with low mean. Moreover, this table illustrated that 53.3% of the participants disagreed with the statement that "the textbook was supported by audio-materials", and the mean score of this item was 2.57. Most of the students did not have a positive opinion about the workbook, which is a real weakness. However, it must be pointed out that the textbook included both workbook and audio-visual materials, but the teachers did not work on these materials in the classes because of lack of time.

The findings of the interviews indicated that the activities allowed various class activities, the textbook contained ideal objectives and included enough materials, and most teachers were pleased with this case. Furthermore, the teachers believed the book covered different parts of the language such as vocabulary learning skills, reading skills, vocabulary

comprehension exercises, etc. The complementary audio CD that was provided with the book would help the learners with the pronunciation of difficult words and improve their listening ability. Three teachers had no idea about using the audio materials because they had not used the supplementary materials in their classrooms. It was also revealed that the textbook clearly outlined and reached its objectives.

4.1.3. Language Content

As another aim of the research, the researchers evaluated the language content of the book, a central point that is needed and widely addressed in evaluating studies. The results of this part are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Language Content

Statements		1	2	3	4	5	Mean
14. The book is up-to-date.	F	2	3	34	66	45	3.99
	%	1.3	2	22.7	44	30	-----
15. It covers different topics from various fields.	F	3	14	45	52	36	3.69
	%	2	9.3	30	34.7	24	-----
16. The textbook contains fun elements.	F	2	38	57	32	21	3.21
	%	1.3	25.3	38	21.3	14	-----
17. The content of the textbook is interesting.	F	1	29	57	37	26	3.38
	%	7	19.3	38	24.7	17.3	-----
18. The reading passages contain several new or difficult words.	F	8	15	30	52	45	3.74
	%	5.3	10	20	34.7	30	-----
19. The book introduces several cultures.	F	9	23	59	34	25	3.28
	%	6	15.3	39.3	22.7	16.7	-----
20. The content discusses famous characters from different countries.	F	8	27	55	31	29	3.30
	%	5.3	18	36.7	20.7	19.3	-----
21. The content displays different traditions and customs.	F	11	32	49	35	23	3.18
	%	7.3	21.3	32.7	23.3	15.3	-----

Results revealed an almost complete agreement with the statement that the book is up to date (74%), and it had the highest mean in this category (3.99). The second highest mean belonged to the item covering enough new vocabulary items in the text, where the majority of the students (64.7%) agreed, with the mean score of 3.74. Almost 59% of the participants believed that the textbook covered a variety of topics from different fields. However, the students were not very much satisfied with the book regarding its materials (42%), since they did not believe that materials were interesting enough. On the downside, the book did not include enough fun materials, did not cover different cultures, famous characters, and customs from various countries. Regarding the presence of fun elements in the textbook, the results implied about one fourth of the participants did not support the statement (25.3% disagree and 1.3% strongly disagree). The mean score for presenting

different cultures, famous characters, and various customs were 3.28, 3.30, and 3.18 respectively, which do not show a high degree of agreement. Opposing these quantitative results, in the interview, teachers believed that the content of the textbook was interesting. Besides, the teachers stated that texts were smartly chosen from a wide variety of subjects that encompassed different types of vocabulary. They believed this could help the learners learn a wide variety of vocabulary items.

4.1.4. Activities and Exercises

The effectiveness of each textbook largely depends on the activities and exercises presented in it. The category of activities and exercises consisted of five items, and the results of which are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for Activities and Exercises

Statements		1	2	3	4	5	Mean
22. The exercises have clear instructions.	F	9	14	42	55	30	3.55
	%	6	9.3	28	36.7	20	-----
23. The exercises are adequate and interesting.	F	10	18	42	66	14	3.37
	%	6.7	12	28	44	9.3	-----
24. The exercises move from simple to complex.	F	11	30	29	64	16	3.29
	%	7.3	20	19.3	42.7	10.7	-----
25. The exercises can be done individually, in pairs, and in groups.	F	13	12	22	61	42	3.71
	%	8.7	8	14.7	40.7	28	-----
26. The textbook provides models for final exams.	F	32	22	55	31	10	2.76
	%	21.3	14.7	36.7	20.7	6.7	-----

When asked about the individual, pair, and group work nature of the exercises, 68.7% of the students were satisfied with this aspect. The mean score of this question was 3.71, being the highest mean in this category. More than half of the participants (56.7%) believed that the exercises had clear instruction, which is the next essential element of an effective exercise. However, a lower number of students (around 53.3%) agreed with the item that the book included adequate and interesting activities, and 80 students agreed that the exercises moved from simple to complex. The lowest mean belonged to the last item, where only a quarter of the students stated that the book provided enough models for final exam questions. Thus, this is the main weakness of this book regarding the exercises and activities category. The teachers believed that the textbook included varied activities such as multiple-choice and open-ended questions, which could be done in pair work, group work, or individually. Furthermore, it was concluded that the textbook had the potential to improve learners' language skills by targeting everyday life situations.

4.1.5. Language Skills

Teaching language consists of teaching the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This section is discussing to what extent the book was successful in developing the language skills. This category included fourteen items, the results of which are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics for Language Skills

Statements		1	2	3	4	5	Mean
27. There is a range of different and attractive reading texts.	F	4	11	62	44	29	3.55
	%	2.7	7.3	41.3	29.3	19.3	-----
28. The content helps students develop all the reading skills.	F	3	6	35	60	46	3.93
	%	2	4	23.3	40	30.7	-----
29. Most of the reading texts are up-to-date.	F	4	11	35	58	42	3.82
	%	2.7	7.3	23.3	38.7	28	-----
30. The length of the reading texts is appropriate.	F	15	16	53	46	20	3.26
	%	10	10.7	35.3	30.7	13.3	-----
31. The difficulty level of the reading passage is appropriate.	F	15	29	41	48	17	3.15
	%	10	19.3	27.3	32	11.3	-----
32. The book uses authentic reading materials.	F	7	10	33	58	42	3.78
	%	4.7	6.7	22	38.7	28	-----
33. The number of new words in each text is appropriate to the students' level.	F	16	30	32	41	31	3.27
	%	10.7	20	21.3	27.3	20.7	-----
34. New words are used in sentences and texts.	F	2	6	17	71	54	4.12
	%	1.3	4	11.3	47.3	36	-----
35. Words are repeated several times in the unit.	F	8	17	63	39	23	3.34
	%	5.3	11.3	42	26	15.3	-----
36. Words are followed by their phonetic transcription.	F	11	33	29	66	11	3.22
	%	7.3	22	19.3	44	7.3	-----
37. The grammar is presented in the text.	F	13	22	53	46	16	3.20
	%	8.7	14.7	35.3	30.7	10.7	-----
38. The grammar is interesting for the students.	F	15	30	48	40	17	3.93
	%	10	20	32	26.7	11.3	-----
39. The grammar difficulty is appropriate to the students' level.	F	11	24	43	58	14	3.26
	%	7.3	16	28.7	38.7	9.3	-----
40. Grammar points are often based on the reading passages.	F	7	21	53	51	18	3.34
	%	4.7	14	35.3	34	12	-----

Looking at the results of this category, it can be seen that the highest means belong to items 34, 38, 28, 29, and 32, with 4.12, 3.93, 3.93, 3.82, and 3.78 respectively. In other words, most students believed that the book contextualized the new vocabulary items, interestingly presented grammar, developed all the reading skills, included up-to-date passages, and employed real-world reading materials. To be more exact, the item on contextualization

of new words was the most successful aspect of this category, with the mean of 4.12 and almost 83.3% of the students approving of the statement. Besides, an overwhelming majority of the participants (over 70%) believed that the content helped the students develop their reading skills. Finally, a high percentage of the respondents (66.7%) supported the statement on the inclusion of up-to-date reading passages.

Ranked a little lower than these items were the three items 27, 35, and 40, with the mean scores of 3.55, 3.34, and 3.34. These items were related to the inclusion of varied and interesting reading texts, repeating the new vocabulary items in different contexts, and choosing the grammar points from the reading passages. The last group of items consists of 7 items, and their mean scores ranged from 3.15 (the lowest) to 3.27 (the highest). However, the means scores of all these items were just above average (3 on this scale). Besides, quite contrary to their opinions regarding the contextualization of vocabulary items, 62 out of 150 students expressed that the grammar was not presented in the text. The worst point was that there existed many new and unknown words in the reading passages, which makes them difficult for the students (47% of the students).

According to the results of the interview, teachers believed that although the textbook focused on reading skills and vocabulary, it covered different parts and various language skills. For instance, the reading comprehension part challenges and improves learners' reading skills by providing several questions related to the text. The critical thinking part targets learners' writing skills, and with the help of vocabulary skills, learners would get familiar with different parts of the words. One of the teachers expressed "all language skills could be improved by this book if teachers knew how to use it creatively in their classes". Generally, teachers and students were satisfied with the coverage of language skills, especially with the reading skills and vocabulary in the textbook.

In Table 6, the overall means and standard deviations of all the categories addressed in the five research questions are presented. The results indicated that, out of the 40 items in the checklist, the students had a positive attitude towards 37 items, with their mean scores higher than 3. This means that positive responses were given for over 92.50% of the items in the checklist. The table also showed that the general appearance and design category had the highest mean, followed by language content, and language skills. The activities and exercises of the book were in the fourth rank and the category of objectives and supplementary materials had the lowest mean.

Table 6

Means and Standard Deviations of the Five Categories of Evaluative Criteria

Main Categories	Mean	Highest mean	Lowest mean	SD
1. General Appearance and Design	3.54	3.99	3.16	0.554
2. Objectives and Supplementary Materials	3.06	3.51	2.44	0.574
3. Language Content	3.47	3.99	3.18	0.622
4. Activities and Exercises	3.34	3.71	2.76	0.724
5. Language Skills	3.45	4.12	3.15	0.601

4.2. Discussion

According to Azizifar and Baghelani (2014), the general appearance and design of a textbook is an essential element of each book, and students make a judgment and select a book by its cover. Moreover, the students' willingness and interest will be increased if the cover of a textbook is attractive. McGrath (2002) believes that layout and presentation are the most important aspects that must be considered in a textbook evaluation. The results of this study showed that the cover of the textbook was attractive, and the font size was appropriate. Besides, students and teachers were happy that every unit had an appropriate title. Furthermore, they asserted that there were enough real pictures in the textbook. The results of this study indicated that the majority of the students and teachers were satisfied with the layout and design of the textbook. In the same vein, Khodabakhshi (2014) evaluated the *Skyline* series, concluding that the teachers were pleased with the layout and design of the book. Furthermore, the textbook had an appropriate vocabulary list, but it was revealed that there were not adequate model quizzes for students' evaluation. These results are in line with the current study, where the students were pleased with the design, but the book did not include enough quizzes and exam questions. Rezaee and Hashemi (2017) also found that students were pleased with the design and cover of the ESP textbook for Civil Engineering.

Every textbook follows several objectives to meet the students' needs, and they must be unambiguous, clear, and measurable. Besides, it is believed that the use of supplementary materials such as visuals, cassettes, video, and computers could make the boring lessons more attractive and useful in the language teaching materials (Gower, et al., 1983). The results of this study indicated the chosen textbook could fulfill the objectives of a general English course. Moreover, the objectives of the book corresponded to the students' needs, and they were specified explicitly in the textbook. Although the textbook contained accessories such as workbook and audio CD, they were not used in class. These results are in stark contrast with those of Ghorbani

(2011), where students and teachers were not much satisfied with "*English book 1*" textbook since it did not reach its objectives.

Based on the results, the majority of the students and teachers were satisfied with the content of the textbook. In fact, the results indicated that the content of the book was up to date, interesting, and relevant to real-life situations. Besides, there were different topics in the textbook that presented different cultures and discussed their traditions, cultures, and food. Rezaee and Hashemi (2017) also found that majority of the students were highly satisfied with their ESP textbook, written for Civil Engineering students. In the same line, Khodabakhshi (2014) also reported that teachers and students were pleased with the subject matter and content of the *Skyline* book.

The fourth category evaluated in this study was the activities and exercises, which are one of the main elements of the book, providing students with varied and challenging opportunities to learn the materials presented in the readings. According to Jacobs and Ball (1996), the best kind of activities are those that promote the discussion of meaning or those that increase positive interdependence and make easy individual responsibility through accommodating learning strategies. The results showed that the exercises had clear instruction, stroke a balance between activities, developed communicative and meaningful practice, and moved from simple to complex. From teachers' perspectives, students could do the activities in pair work or individually. Evaluating the *Skyline* series, Khodabakhshi (2014) also reported a high satisfaction level of teachers with the activities and exercises of the book, which were mostly controlled exercises such as ordering, matching, and categorizing words. On the contrary, Ghorbani (2014) found out that there were not enough exercises for practicing vocabulary such as finding synonyms or antonyms.

As regards the presentation of language skills, the textbook focused on reading and vocabulary the most but did not neglect other skills and components. On the downside, it could be observed that in the book not much attention was paid to listening, speaking, and writing, which is not a weakness since the main aim of this book is developing reading skills as the name suggests. In other words, there was not any balance between four skills (reading, listening, speaking, and writing) in the book, and the book allocated a great number of exercises and pages to only two skills (reading & writing). Opposing these results, Khodabakhshi (2014) argued that there was an appropriate balance of four language skills in *Skyline* book, and teachers and students were satisfied with this appropriate balance of skills. However, Ghorbani (2014) showed that there existed no balance of four skills in the "*English Textbook 1*", as indicated by the learners.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study aimed at identifying the strengths and weaknesses of *"Active Skills for Reading"*, and it was found that positive points of the textbook were much more than negative points. Considering the number of scales used in the evaluation checklist (five scales), it is safe to say that the mean scores of thirty-nine items in the checklist were higher than 2.50, which is the average. The only item receiving a mean score of 2.47 was related to the use of the workbook, which was not the weakness of the book. In fact, the book is accompanied by workbook and audio materials, but the teachers did not use these in their classes. Besides that, the mean scores of all the five main categories addressed in the research question were above 3.00, which is in the middle of the evaluation scale. Therefore, it is concluded that students were satisfied with all the aspects and features of the book to a great extent.

The analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data showed that the book enjoyed an interesting appearance and utilized an effective design. Furthermore, it presented all the language skills and was accompanied by a variety of challenging and interesting exercises which stroke a balance between all the language skills and components. However, it must be pointed out that the main focus of the book was developing the reading and vocabulary learning skills of the students, with limited focus on other skills as the integrative approach of language teaching requires. The content of the book was also satisfying, interesting, varied, and representative of many cultures and customs. These are the materials presented in the book, which act as a hook to interest the readers and involve them in reading. However, the next two categories of exercises i.e. activities and objectives and supplementary materials were a little less effective from the students' perspectives. Obviously, every book tried to reach its goals through the exercises presented in the book and the materials which are designed to complement the weaknesses of the book such as audio materials and workbook. In fact, these resources are developed to help the students deepen their learning and internalize the materials through more exposure in other different contexts and recycling. The main reason for the low level of satisfaction with these two categories was that the teachers did not use these sources in their classes. That is why even the most effective book can be of no use if the teacher does not know how to use it, adapt it, or implement the policies.

The textbook was not ideal though, and had some shortcomings such as lack of grammar sections in each unit, presenting complex grammatical points that had not been introduced before in exercises, and exercises' focus on understanding the text at the cost of neglecting grammatical structures, sentence construction patterns, or collocations that were used in the text are less. Still another weakness of the textbook was a large number of repetitive

activities and focused more on text rather than vocabulary recycling, dictation, or pronunciation. Given the weaknesses of the book, some practical recommendations were provided by teachers. They suggested that it will be better if a section was dedicated to pronunciation, collocations, and grammatical structures in the textbook. Hence, it is highly recommended to have a grammar section in each lesson.

This study suffered from several limitations and delimitations, one of which was that the researcher planned to conduct the interview face to face with the teachers, but due to the Coronavirus pandemic situation, the University was closed, and the researcher could not personally access the teachers. Therefore, the researcher had to interview the teachers via WhatsApp. In addition, the number of teachers who participated in the interview was small since the following term, some of the teachers did not teach this book and students did not attend their classes in the campus. Finally, the participants' fatigue or lack of interest in responding to questions on the checklist could have affected the result to some extent, so the researcher used interview data to compensate for this. This research focused on the evaluation of *"Active Skills for Reading"* textbook, and the researcher gathered data from 150 B.A. students of Chabahar Maritime University who were studying this book. In other words, undergraduate students of Chabahar Maritime University were selected as the only participants of this research, and their gender was not taken into account. Thus, the number of participants and fields of study covered for data collection were limited to only one university, namely Chabahar Maritime University in this case.

The teachers are strongly recommended to use workbooks and audio CDs in their classrooms to improve pronunciation, and to reinforce the learning process. Besides, textbook designers are strongly suggested to provide the models for the final exam at the end of the book. Textbooks sometimes seem to have shortcomings in fulfilling the needs of students, therefore, it is necessary to examine all aspects of the book carefully using an appropriate evaluation tool. Future studies might compare this textbook with other general English reading books or those written by Iranian authors. Furthermore, future researchers are recommended to use focus group interviews or document analysis for their data collection in this regard.

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Appendix A: Interview questions

1. What is your opinion about the layout and design of the textbook?

2. What is your opinion about the content of the textbook?

3. What is your opinion about the objectives and supplementary materials of the textbook?

4. What is your opinion about the activities which are in the textbook?

5. What is your opinion about the presentation of the language skills in the textbook?

6. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the textbook in your perspective, generally?

7. What is your recommendation or suggestion for changing or using this book?

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