

ĐÁNH GIÁ TÀI LIỆU GIẢNG DẠY LIFE PRE-INTERMEDIATE VÀ ENGLISH FILE PRE-INTERMEDIATE DƯỚI GÓC NHÌN VĂN HÓA, CHÍNH TRỊ VÀ NGÔN NGỮ

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Đề án Ngoại ngữ Quốc gia 2020 đã đặt ra yêu cầu đổi mới để nâng cao chất lượng giảng dạy chương trình tiếng Anh tại các cơ sở giáo dục, đào tạo Việt Nam. Trong đó, lựa chọn giáo trình, tài liệu giảng dạy phù hợp được xác định đóng vai trò quan trọng. Do đó, trong nghiên cứu này tác giả tiến hành đánh giá, so sánh hai giáo trình phổ biến trong giảng dạy tiếng Anh hiện nay: *Life* (được đề xuất bởi Dự án 2000) và *English File* (nổi tiếng với cách tiếp cận theo đường hướng giao tiếp trong giảng dạy ngôn ngữ) để lựa chọn một giáo trình phù hợp dùng cho giảng dạy học phần tiếng Anh tổng quát tại Trường Đại học Phòng cháy Chữa cháy – Bộ Công an. Nghiên cứu đã đánh giá hai cuốn giáo trình sử dụng bộ tiêu chí trên các mặt văn hóa, chính trị và các nội dung liên quan đến dạy và học ngôn ngữ. Kết quả nghiên cứu là căn cứ để nhà trường cân nhắc, xem xét khi đưa ra lựa chọn giáo trình giảng dạy, đồng thời đáp ứng yêu cầu của đề án, nhu cầu người học và các yếu tố khác. Ý nghĩa của nghiên cứu sẽ được thảo luận trong bài viết.

Từ khóa: Đánh giá giáo trình, Đánh giá tài liệu, Đề án 2020, *English File*, *Life*.

The National Foreign Languages Project (the Project 2020/the Project) has required Vietnamese universities to implement various changes to improve the delivery of their English programs. Given the importance of textbook in this implementation, this study evaluates the two textbooks: Life (recommended by the Project 2000) and English File (well-known for its communicative approach to language teaching) to determine one suitable for the context of the University of Fire Prevention and Fighting (UFPPF). The study assessed the two books using a framework which allows the evaluator to assess not only cultural and ideological assumptions but also language teaching and learning issues. The findings provide a foundation for the university's choice of a textbook that meet the requirements of the Project, learners and other factors. Implications of the study are also discussed in the article.

Keywords: textbook evaluation, material evaluation, Project 2020, *English File*, *Life*.

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AN EVALUATION OF ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS *LIFE PRE-INTERMEDIATE AND ENGLISH FILE* PRE-INTERMEDIATE IN THE PERSPECTIVES OF CULTURAL, POLITICAL AND LANGUAGE TEACHING ASSUMPTIONS

1. Introduction

Given the significance of English in Vietnam's socio-economic development and international integration, the Vietnamese Government has issued policies to create favourable conditions to enhance the practice of teaching and learning foreign languages in general and the English language in particular. The Prime Minister signed the *Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg* in 2008 approving the National Project "Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System, Period 2008 to 2020" (hereinafter referred to as the Project). This project aims to enable Vietnamese graduates to use foreign languages (especially English) in communication, learning and working in an integrated multilingual and multicultural environment. To pursue this aim, the Project suggests various changes to the teaching and learning English at tertiary level, especially a continuous movement towards the communicative teaching approach, shifting from the traditional teaching methods (e.g. Grammar method and Presentation – Practice -Production) to a more communicative approach (e.g. Task-based Language Teaching – more commonly known as TBLT). This TBLT approach also entails the changes of teaching materials and textbooks and thus universities are placed in a position to

choose a textbook to meet both the Project's outcome requirement and the students' specific needs.

A good textbook is generally believed to play an important role in ensuring the success of a language course and it can be comparable to the central part of an ELT programme (Sheldon, 1988). It serves as a tool for teachers to narrow the gap among the syllabus, teaching materials and the teacher's perception of his/her students' needs. (Wette, 2011a, 2011b) or to determine interaction in a language class to the large extent (Grady, 1997). According to Richards (2005), in the context in which English is learnt as a foreign language a textbook is likely to provide learners with a crucial source of language input, facilitate classroom drilling activities and it also "plays a significant part in the professional lives of teachers" (Richards, 1993, p.45). However, to choose a suitable textbook to meet the demand of a specific context is not an easy task, especially when teachers often have various other factors to consider.

Given the complex nature of textbook evaluation, this study provides an evaluation of the two textbooks: *Life* (published in 2013 by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and *English File* (published in 2012 by Cambridge University Press). These two

books are believed to represent explicitly the present trends in the globalisation of ELT material and a focus on TBLT approach. Through a critical evaluation of selected features of four units chosen from these course books, this article presents a detailed comparison between two books and their underlining assumptions. The comparison was useful for the UFPF's decision on the English textbook they use. The implications of this evaluation are also useful reference for teachers from other universities in Vietnam when they make decision on English textbooks for their own contexts.

2. The research context

The students at the UFPF are 18 years old or above and the vast majority of them have finished seven years of learning English prior to entering university. Despite seven years of learning English continuously, the placement test results indicate that they are mostly at the elementary and pre-intermediate level. This might be attributed to the fact that the two language components which are grammar and vocabulary as well as the language skills of reading and writing are the main focus of English classes. Therefore, the institution's syllabus specifies that the pre-intermediate level is applied as the starting course for students to comply with the guidelines of the Project which stipulates that graduates are required to obtain the B1-level (CEFR) or level 3 (CEFR-VN). Therefore, the two mentioned textbooks in the earlier section seem to fit in the students' background

language proficiency and meet the Project's guidelines.

However, due to students' inadequate communicative skills, these course books are beyond students' level in speaking and listening but are qualified in terms of reading, writing skills. It is specified in the school curriculum that students attend 270 periods of 45 minutes each in the class. English lessons are delivered during their initial two years of university with the number of 25 to 30 students in each class and all students are non-major learners of English. This means that the subject accounts for a great amount of time. However, as students of an armed force university, they have to stay on campus for most of their time; thus, their chances to practice English outside the university, especially with the native speaker is restricted. Apart from the time spent in the classroom, they just spend time doing grammar and vocabulary exercises or being exposed to some English programmes on television. Due to these constraints, teachers often have to struggle to fully exploit class time for students which, in turn, results in teachers' burning interest in selecting suitable teaching materials and adapting them.

3. A framework for textbook evaluation

Evaluating textbooks is an integral part in developing a second language programme. Ellis (1997) states that textbook evaluation enables us to choose materials suiting a course and provides a guideline for teachers to adapt and make

decisions for the forthcoming course. To perform this task, specific criteria need to be determined. First, Pennycook (1994, 1995) states that English language teaching should refrain from cultural and political influences. However, many educators such as Apple (2018), Giroux (1983), and Grady (1997) attach importance to these impacts especially in second language education. Cultural and ideological or social assumptions are generally believed to shape all language textbooks though this is not always explicit and they are often “overlooked or taken for granted” (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). Only with a close look at the features of a textbook, can these underlying elements be uncovered. Furthermore, Wette (2011a, 2011b) argues that language teaching learning assumptions are also significant in choosing a suitable textbook because these assumptions will influence a teacher’s in-class activities and their approach to teaching. Although teaching and learning approaches are often explained in a textbook, language teaching learning assumptions are not always explicitly presented in the textbook. According to Tomlinson (2010) and Waters (2009), all factors such as teaching approaches to macro skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) and English components (grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation) need special attention by evaluators. Furthermore, evaluators also need to assess the authenticity of the textbook as well as the relationship between learners’ characteristics and textbook (Brown, 2007).

This study proposes a framework incorporating the above-mentioned arguments to evaluate the two chosen textbooks in the following diagram:

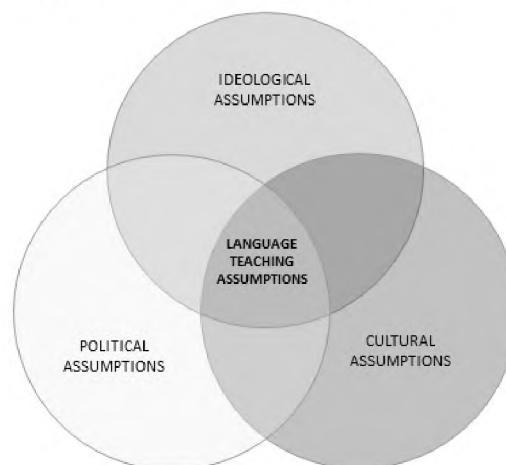


Diagram 1: Framework for evaluating textbook (adapted from Pennycook (1994, 1995), Tomlinson (2010), Waters (2009), and Wette (2011b))

The framework illustrates various considerations when evaluating textbooks. As presented, ideological, political and cultural assumptions, which are more general, normally influence textbooks more implicitly. These assumptions often overlap each other and are not always separated clearly. Language and teaching assumptions are presented in the centre as they are often more specific and influenced by the former assumptions. To present this way does not necessarily mean one more important than others but to show the interactive nature of these assumptions in the process of writing and publishing a textbook. A thorough understanding of these assumptions is believed to enable evaluators and teachers to have an informed choice of textbook for their context.

4. The Choice of Textbooks and the Textbook Evaluation Process

As the Dean of the English Department with 15 years of experience, I was in charge of evaluating and proposing a new set of textbook for teaching when necessary. The coursebook *English File* by Oxford (2012) and *Life* by Cengage Learning (2013) were chosen because of various reasons. *English File* had been used for five years in the university and it was necessary to evaluate the coursebook to decide whether to continue to utilise or replace it with another to fit students' needs and the outcome requirements recommended by the Project. On the other hand, *Life* was selected and provided for a variety of universities in Vietnam to be used for non-major English students by the Project. I have had the opportunity to use them before when teaching in a language centre. From my teaching experience, these two textbooks comply with the demand to change teachers' traditional teaching methodology and even change the students' style of learning English due to their strong focus on meanings and communicative activities. Initially, it was my aim to enhance the learner-centred learning, a teaching approach which has not been conducted in an proper way at my university. The fact that both of these textbooks were published by two prestigious publishers and were widely used in other countries, to a certain extent, gives them more credits regarding their quality.

Another reason was the consideration of current teaching approach. Although

various approaches are adopted in some units, the two main ones are outstanding in them are deductive and inductive. While both deductive and inductive approaches are applied in *English File*, inductive approach is prominent in the majority of *Life's* units. Therefore, evaluate these books allowed me a chance to gain an insight into the two latest approaches, the communicative and task-based ones. In addition, they can be viewed as global coursebooks in language teaching as they fulfill Gray's view: "[the] genre of English language textbook which is produced in English-speaking countries and is designed for use as the core text in language classroom around the world" (Gray, 2002, p. 152).

This evaluation was conducted in the summer before the academic year 2019-2020 started. To improve the validity and reliability of the evaluation, two senior English lecturers with more than ten years of teaching at UFPF were involved in the evaluation process. The Framework in Diagram 1 was used to guide our evaluation. Specifically, we firstly examined the overall design and content of the two textbooks in regard to the four groups of assumptions. Secondly, two units were chosen for a detailed point-to-point comparison. Each teacher noted his or her thought and reflection that were then compared to reach a consensus. The two chosen units explicitly represent the main methods applied in both books and contain issues or factors related to the culture and ideology of the inner-circle countries (Kachru, 1992) to consider when

teachers use the books. These units are also the ones with which the team experienced some problems during their previous teaching. Another point to consider is that the chosen units are somewhat similar in the topics and grammar but be characterised by different ways of presentation.

5. Findings

5.1. Cultural, political, and ideological assumptions of the two textbooks

The general layouts of the two books seem to be quite satisfactory since both were published recently. Both can be considered the ‘modern’ textbooks which are “visually appealing, with full-colour art and sophisticated magazine-like design, printed on high-quality paper and supported by an assortment of supplementary resources, such as workbooks, cassettes, and videos” (Richards, 1993, p.47). Both use a number of genuine colourful pictures which could help increase students’ motivation in learning. In this perspective, *Life* series are more attractive than *English File* series since they benefit from the National Geographic database with authentic and magnificent images available, especially the edition intended for Vietnam market which contains typical images of the country on their covers. The two sets are supplemented by a range of other books. *English File* consists of a Student’s Book, Teacher’s Book, Workbook with key booklet, Student’s iTutor (for revision and review), CDs and videos, pronunciation application (for PC and smartphone), a

website for extra support. In comparison, *Life* has Student’s book, Teacher’s Book, Workbook, Class audio DVDs, Workbook CDs, website resources for students, teaching application and test resources for teachers and especially course keys provided for students’ online practice under teachers’ monitor. These features follow the current trend in designing textbooks: the globalisation. Modern textbooks appear to share certain attributes “not only in terms of glossy design but also in terms of content” (Gray, 2002, p.157) and allow the room for adaptations to different cultures and situations. Nevertheless, Richards (2005) assumes that the commercial textbooks fail to satisfy learners’ particular needs as they aim to appeal to audience. These comments are applicable to these two coursebooks. Moreover, this facet cannot hide the Western point of view and cultural identity in each textbook.

In the very first part of Unit 2B (p.14) in *English File* is about a moment in history when the US presidential election results were released. This event could be interesting to people around the world, especially those in the US and other Western countries. However, in Vietnam, this event is not so appealing to most people and thus my students often show little interest in the event. Moreover, Part 5 – listening (p.15) features a demonstration with the outstanding image of a girl sitting on a boy’s shoulders, carrying a flag. In contrast, my students are motivated and eager to learn about this event as the girl was carrying the flag of

National Liberation Front, an organisation formed to liberate the South and reunify the North and South of Vietnam. They seem to take pride in the country and all expect that this would present how people around the world protested the Vietnam War and supported Vietnamese people. Nevertheless, as they listen they soon become deeply disappointed to find out that the girl accidentally appeared in the crowd, being so tired that a friend had to carry her on his shoulders and helping another man carrying the flag. The title of the photo, ‘the image that cost a fortune’, is also a bitter disappointment as most of the students speculate it means that the image is historically significant before they listen. To their surprise, the girl lost the opportunity to inherit the fortune from her grandfather as he thought that she was a communist. The same problems arise in reading part of unit 6A (P.45) where the story is about the actor Hugh Laurie playing the part of Dr. Gregory House, the main character in the TV series House M.D. However, this TV series has never been a hit in Vietnam. Both the TV series and the actor himself are largely unknown to my students. Although I often spent a lot of time providing students with information about this show and the characters, my students appear to be uninterested and get bored quickly. Another issue to note is that all settings are in Britain and other Western countries, which seems too much to do with Western culture.

Unit 4 of *Life*’s underlying cultural and political point of view still has a lot to do

with the West but it is less prominent as those belonging to other cultures are integrated. For instance, part 4a (p.46-47) provides accounts of adventures by three people among whom two are from Western countries (Spain and the United States of America) and one from Iran. Similarly, Unit 6 provides a balanced depiction of Western and other cultural identities in the content. The Western factors are mentioned in 6a (p.70, 71) as the life of an American couple are narrated to illustrate stages or important events in people’s life. It is nothing out of ordinary when people in some Western countries leave their jobs, their friends and families as well as their comfortable living standard to go travelling, just to gain their freedom. In Vietnam, people would find it difficult to understand this decision. However, a fair share of other cultural values other than the Western ones is given in this unit such as ancient Egypt in the lead-in part, rituals of the Masai tribe in Africa and a wedding in Madagascar. From my personal experience, students are highly motivated in acquiring knowledge about various cultures and the lessons succeed in arousing their curiosity. In addition, no offensive images or views of gender, race, social class, or politics are found in both units of *Life*.

As both of the books are global textbooks, the outline of the content of the books includes “fairly bland” topics “that are not going to annoy many people if at all possible” (Pere 1996 cited in Gray, 2002, p. 163). The commonly-found topics such as parties, sports, and holidays

tend to show trivial consumerist approaches to life (Gray, 2010). These topics seem to be repetitive and boring which discourage students from participating in the lessons (Gray, 2010). The voice, the interest, and way of thinking of the West are also presented clearly through these common topics.

The Western interest and way of thinking implicitly appear in both units of *English File* and this at times results in problems for students. Part 2 of Unit 2A (p.12) is about the two real ‘disaster’ holidays made by Joe and Laura. This is a popular and safe topic to be included. Unfortunately, my students often express little interest as almost all of them have never travelled abroad before and their criteria for disaster holiday seem to be different. In Unit 2C, in the nightclub setting (p.16), characters are portrayed to easily make acquaintance with each other in a club. It is not frequently the case in Vietnam; they are supposed to be introduced to a stranger rather than taking the initiative. In addition, a nightclub is not a popular place for the public as it is often associated with extravagance, drug abuse and prostitution. Thus, it is not expected to be an ideal place for young people to find their life-long partners. Another interesting fact is that in Unit 6C (p.48) the topic ‘the meaning of dreaming’ appears to attract my students’ attention at first as they are eager to interpret the meaning of dreams basing on symbols appearing in them. However, they are confused after they have listened because unlike the context of Western countries,

the symbols are frequently associated with different things in Vietnam. For instance, an owl is commonly believed to bring bad luck in Vietnamese culture rather than representing a wise old man.

Unit 4 of *File* is about topic ‘adventure’ which is more interesting to young learners than the topic ‘holiday’ in Unit 2 of *English File*. Nevertheless, in 4F of *File* students are asked to role-play, telling a friend about a trip to the glacier which causes students great difficulty as it is almost unknown to students in Vietnam. When delivering the lesson, I have to adjust the instructions of the activity to suit the context. Although the general topic of Unit 6 in *File* is about stages in a person life, a very common topic party, which is frequently encountered in English teaching textbooks, is covered in 6B. This rather boring topic is exploited in an interesting way since various special parties around the world are discussed. Likewise, my students are interested in the popular topic ‘wedding’ in 6E, as they are familiar with Western wedding ceremonies to which many weddings in big cities in Vietnam are similar but a wedding in an African country would attract their attention.

The analysis clearly proves that the two books have imposed interest and ways of thinking, albeit at different extent. This may not only hinder student’s understanding but also cause the lack of their motivation in learning, especially in the *English File*.

To sum up, *Life* seems to be more appropriate for Vietnamese students since

the cultural and political factors in *English File* presents Kramsch and Sullivan's argument that "authentic native speaker discourse in London or New York might be quite inappropriate for speakers of English in other parts of the world" (1996, p.199). Both of the books are profoundly influenced by the Western cultures and ideology in incorporating various activities related to social events. This type of distorted or stereotypic view of the target culture (Richards, 2005) may lead to students' lack of interest in the learning process. The excessive exploitation of the target culture may mean a lack of local content or failure to address the students' needs, which is clearly proved in *English File*.

5.2. Language teaching and learning assumptions

To begin with, the two books are at the same level, seeming to be qualified for English non-major students in their first year and follow the guidelines of the MOET and the Project's requirements. As discussed above, all learners are presumed to be at an elementary or low pre-intermediate level. Therefore, they are roughly competent enough for the pre-intermediate course. However, this is only true in the case of grammar, vocabulary, and skills of reading or writing. Students are not ready for listening and speaking at this level. According to Tomlinson (2010) and Waters (2009), learners should be ready to acquire the points being taught in terms of their English development. Therefore, these books can pose some problems for the process of teaching and

learning the language. This requires the books to be analysed and compared basing on their approaches, macro skills, components (grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation), authenticity and the relationship between the learners and textbooks.

5.2.1. Approaches

The two books' tables of contents indicate that they both follow a similar approach: the Communicative Approach. It can easily be seen that though the way in which the content is presented in certain units varies, the approach is obviously from communication to language with situation being set for learners to communicate, followed by provision of a set of necessary components to achieve communicative purposes. This layout and design approach provides my students with many opportunities to involve in meaningful and real communicative activities, ensuring learner-centred teaching and learning practice. According to Tomlinson (2008) and Clarke (1989) if a textbook prioritises deductive approaches, and emphasises language learning over language use, it will provide fewer chances for students to use and revise language. Fortunately, a fair balance between form and meaning, components and skills are provided by the authors of both books. Students are exposed to various settings in which they are engaged in activities involving reading, listening, speaking skills first and then explore the language items to undertake the tasks. Writing and other tasks are added internally, or at the end of each unit,

to provide learners with the opportunities to revise the new language.

5.2.2. Macro skills

Despite all language skills and language components are quite proportionally allocated in these two books, *Life* creates more opportunities for learners to practise all skills. Although in *English File* the four skills have their roughly fair balance, the productive skills (speaking and writing) tend to be more controlled. For instance, in Unit 2A (P.13) students work in pairs to share about their last holiday by asking the given questions. Similarly, the speaking activity of 2B (p.15) is conducted in the same way and in the writing part students are asked to describe their favourite photo by answering questions in a fixed order; for the speaking and listening part students tell the story basing on the given pictures.

On the other hand, *Life* is aimed at developing communicative skills through talking but controlled or limited settings are combined with free practice. The Unit 4a of *Life* (p.47) asks students to make questions to ask their partner about their past with prompts readily provided; the Unit 4b (p.49) has an activity in which students choose to talk about the four events imposed by the instruction but then they can select the real or special events in their life to talk about. Furthermore, students are allowed to tell the story of a bad journey they had in 4d (p.52) or write a true story by answering six suggested questions, yet they can decide themselves five years when something important happened to them for the writing activity

in 4e (p.53). In 4f (p.55), students are required to role-play a trip to the glacier with ideas for question preparation being given; the review of the unit also includes a story-telling activity with a set of pictures and again some of the words and phrases are available. Likewise, most of the communicative activities are organised similarly. In the speaking part in 6a (p.71) students are asked to imagine that they are one of the people described in the unit but they can freely make their plans. While they have to plan a celebration with given clues for what to say, they can select their favourite celebration or event in the country to talk about in 6b (p.72, 73). For speaking part of 6c (p.74), they can decide the event themselves to discuss and choose one in many topics to write in the speaking part of the same unit, but they have role-play task with suggested information or asking and answering questions readily provided in the instruction in 6f (p.79). This proves that *Life* bring students many opportunities to perform free practice or push output (Ellis, 2005,). This view is in favour by Brown (2007) and Nation & Macalister (2010).

Finally, the importance of formulaic expressions is emphasised by the incorporation of useful language item parts in all four units of the two books, which fits with Ellis's idea (2005) that students should be provided with formulaic expressions.

5.2.3. English language components

In term of elements of language system, both books are designed to develop the learners' explicit knowledge of grammar

rules and provide opportunities for learners to generalise features of language (Nation & Macalister, 2010). They both adopt the inductive approach. The past simple is presented in the same sequence in which students are exposed to the tense in the reading text about holidays and adventurous journeys in 2A of *English File* (p.12) and 4a of *Life* (p.46) respectively. Unit 2b of *English File* introduces the past continuous by a relatively authentic reading: *A moment in history* (When people of all races were waiting for the release of the presidential election's results) and then leads them to discover the grammar themselves in grammar bank. In contrast, Unit 4b of *Life* provides a radio interview to introduce the past continuous and explains the tense. In both Unit 6 of *English File* (p.44-47) and Unit 6 of *Life* (73), the future tense is presented similarly. According to Ellis (2005) "learners bootstrap their way to grammar by first internalising and then analysing fixed sequences" (p.211), so both chosen books have been on the right track for helping students acquire language. In my opinion, the way *English File*'s approach to grammar tend to be more demanding. In addition, the grammar part in *English File* encourages students to elicit the language use through listening and reading tasks. Then, after being exposed to the target grammar points for several times in these tasks, the speaking part follows. This is consistent with the idea proposed by Ellis (2005) that the instruction needs to warrant that learners focus on meaning and should allow students to interact in the target

language rather than practising in controlled activities only. The typical way of practice activities after the presentation of the grammar point in *English File* can be illustrated by Unit 2B (p.14, 15). Students have the chance to consolidate the form and use of the tense by completing two exercises in grammar bank followed by listening, speaking and writing tasks which enable them to involve in more challenging free meaningful practice. In contrast, *Life* provides a controlled drilling activities after the grammar presentation in which the language is introduced [giving the correct verb forms (p.47) and choosing the correct option (p.49)] which seems to be far less challenging for students. This task is followed by speaking practice in both past simple and past continuous in 4a and 4b respectively. In this way, it seems that my students are not sufficiently facilitated to participate in real practice in my actual teaching context. Similar patterns can be found in Unit 6 of *English File* in which students are enabled to elicit the rule themselves, then involve in drilling activities while in Unit 6 of *Life* students are provided with necessary language grammar before the controlled practice comes in. Thus, *Life*, as Nation and Macalister (2010) discussed, does not adequately include a balance of meaning-focused input, language-focused learning and meaning-focused output.

Another salient point is that the load of vocabulary introduced in each unit is reasonable for the level of my students. In addition, the way two books present

vocabulary is that they often provide the contexts and purposes of using vocabulary features. For instance, in *English File*, Unit 2A's vocabulary presentation (p.12) is followed by controlled exercises in the Vocabulary Bank and then it is reinforced by speaking task where students interview each other in pairs. The procedure is repeated in 2B (P.14), 2C (p.17), 6A (p.44), 6B (p.47) and 6C (p.49). A quite similar pattern can be found in *File* but it appears to focus on controlled and guided tasks. A typical example is shown in 4b (p.48) in which the vocabulary is presented first, reinforced by a controlled matching exercise and a less controlled speaking task in which students make sentences with language items provided in the matching exercise. Another example is in Unit 6a (p.70), where students are exposed to a reading text containing the words and phrases they have been introduced to in vocabulary. The major difference between the two books in the aspect of vocabulary is that while in *Life* each unit has a specific topic which will be dealt with in the whole unit, in *English File* no specific topic can be defined the majority of the units. In my practice, the former method is preferable as students are given more opportunities to revise the new vocabulary in the subsequent parts of the lessons.

In addition, the pronunciation section in the two books are appropriate to students' needs and deal with both the segmental and suprasegmental features: in *English File* (Unit 2: p.13, p.15, p.17, p.18; Unit 6: p.44, p.46, p.49, p.50) and in *Life*

(Unit 4: p.47, p.49, p.52; Unit 6: p.71, p.73, p.76). However, it seems that in *English File* the pronunciation is more complete with more adequate practice. In *Life*, it takes teachers more time and effort because pronunciation is not sufficiently presented. Furthermore, no variation in pronunciation is included in the two books.

4.2.4. Authenticity

English File regularly uses authentic materials in various parts. Unit 2B starts with an extract 'A moment in history' from an authentic artificial article from *The Times* (p.14); the extract 'the image that cost a fortune' (p.15) is also reproduced from an article in *The Times*, and *Revise and check* (p.19) is an adapted article from *The Guardian*. U6's *Revise and check* (p.51) contains an extract from an article in *The Times*. Besides, most of the communicative tasks *English File* create a less controlled setting for students and a real reason to use the target language. The utilisation of these authentic materials which enables students to expose to genuine language and brings the real-world language to the classroom makes practising process more interesting (Wette, 2011a, 2011b). Additionally, these real materials are subject to adaptation to minimise their drawbacks and optimally suit students' needs. In comparison, the use authentic materials is limited in *Life* apart from authentic photos. The speaking parts are often more controlled. Since a textbook should include or expose students as much as possible to authentic use of English (Tomlinson (2010), Waters (2009)), *English File* seems to be a more

ideal choice than *Life*. Thus, *English File* might serve a better role in developing students' competence of communication in practical.

5.2.5. Relationship between learners and textbooks

The connection between learners and the curriculum should not be undervalued. Students' presumed language background has to be taken into account. This can be achieved with the provision of settings for students to meaningfully connect between their prior knowledge and new materials (Brown, 2007) or assist them make full use of prior knowledge. To some extent, the chosen books have fulfilled this task. This is carried out in various activities in which students have to recall what they have acquired before (*English File*: U2A vocabulary (p.12) and grammar (p.13), U2B vocabulary (p.14), U2C grammar (p.16), U6A vocabulary (p.44), U6B speaking and listening (p.47), U6C grammar (p.49); *Life*: U4b vocabulary and speaking (p.48), U4c reading and vocabulary (p.50), U4f listening task (p.55), U6a vocabulary (p.70), U6b reading and vocabulary, grammar (p.72, 73), U6c reading and word focus (p.74). It can be seen that these two books have used a variety of approaches and activities to enable the textbooks to cater to students' heterogeneity, thus appearing to meet students' varied needs although the connection between learners and textbook in terms of students' differences in learning style, strategy and particular interest is not very explicitly addressed.

6. Discussions

The analysis reflects an overview of how cultural and ideological assumptions and assumptions regarding teaching and learning impact on the two textbooks with the four chosen units consistently highlighting these factors. While the former influences on the way the books present the idea, choose the topic, and use pictures to illustrate the language, the latter influences the way the books are organised, structured, and processed. Both textbooks are affected by Western culture to a different extent, which sometimes need to be sanitised when being put into use in typically Eastern country like Vietnam.

Each textbook has its own strengths and weaknesses but the point is that which one is more suitable to Vietnamese students and in keeping with the context of my university. From the analysis, *English File* is in preponderant position in the way it presents language components, allocating well-balanced shares for both controlled and free activities as well as effectively exploiting authentic material sources. Meanwhile, it poses some difficulties for teachers in many other aspects especially regarding cultural and political adaptations. It seems that *English File* proves to be a better choice as it can roughly meet the requirements set by the Project. Apart from complying with the current methodology in language teaching, it possesses outstanding features such as enabling students to be exposed to various cultures, facilitating students' self-study outside the classrooms, motivating

students to be involved in the lessons with a wide range of language use settings, appealing authentic photos, videos and refraining from cultural and political bias. However, when students' productive skills cannot meet the demand of the book and activities for students' drill of the language components are still limited, adaptation is unavoidable (Ellis, 1997; Gray, 2002). Teachers need also be ready to supplement with additional materials, design activities, especially free drills and create opportunities to push the output.

On a wider scope, the article proposes various considerations when choosing a textbook. First, evaluators should be aware of the implicit agenda presented in each textbook, which is unfortunately not always an easy task. Although the over-presentation of inner countries' cultures and ideology is unavoidable since most commonly-used English textbooks are published by Western publishers (Kachru, 1992; Wette, 2011b), this is not a necessary detrimental factor as long as the evaluators and teachers are well informed. If being used properly, these presentations could become valuable resources for students to learn about the target countries. The study also suggests that evaluators should be experienced teachers who have used the evaluated textbooks so that they could have practical knowledge of the negative influence of textbook-authors' assumptions. By saying this, we argue that teachers should be placed at the centre of the curriculum and should be involved in the process of textbook evaluation and in textbook-training programmes.

7. Conclusion

A thorough evaluation has provided an insight into the two textbooks' components through which their suitability to my university's teaching practice has been determined. The analysis shows that *Life* generally satisfies the student's needs and goals set by the MOET and the University, albeit with some deficiencies. However, as mentioned, my aim is not to suggest readers which textbooks to choose but to provide an in-depth evaluation of the two textbooks so readers can come up with their conclusions and actions when they have to choose a textbook for their contexts. Moreover, I acknowledge that the framework excluded the involvement of relevant stakeholders such as students and the course developer into the evaluation process. This could have adversely influenced the validity and posed a question on the reliability of the evaluation. Therefore, we suggest that future research should figure out ways to involve other stakeholders especially students into the process of evaluation.

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