

Critical Analysis of Cambridge Primary Path Foundation's Evaluation

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Abstract: The Cambridge Primary Path Foundation (CPPF) is published by Cambridge University Press and is designed for students at the English primary level of the EFL test. This course is currently used in foreign language primary schools as a preparation for the Cambridge Young English Learners Test, which is taught in the first year. The textbook is increasingly popular among young English learners in China. Therefore, this paper analyzes the advantages and disadvantages of the textbook in three aspects of meaningful learning, motivation and interaction from the perspective of three principles of language teaching. In addition, the article also analyzes the design ideas of each link of the textbook and its significance for students. Through the analysis and interpretation of the textbook, this paper hopes to help English language learners better understand and use the textbook, so as to learn English more confidently.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background Information

Teaching materials for EFL textbooks are numerous and as large as China itself. Teaching materials help learners become articulate speakers and writers of English, empowering them to make the most of life's opportunities. As noted by Tomlinson (2001), teaching material is "anything which can be used to facilitate the learning of a language" (p.66) [1].

CPPF (*Cambridge Primary Path Foundation*) is edited by Kim Milne, published by Cambridge University Press, and designed for students at the beginning level of English in EFL countries. This course is currently used in Foreign Language Primary Schools as preparation for Cambridge Young learner of English Test, which is taught in Grade 1. In China, elementary school (Grade 1) students generally range between 6-7 years old. The majority of EFL students start their English learning from 4 or 5 years old, whose mother tongue is Chinese. Students are expected to study 4 hours a week. The course creates a literacy-rich environment, creative play and work for students. It can develop student's skills in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, which represents high level of EFL learning in Chinese primary schools. This teaching textbook connects teachers and learners from around the world with the latest research and materials to build brighter futures together. It is a continuous cycle where our insights shape content that drives results.

1.2 Criteria Selected for Analysis

CPPF is selected as teaching material to be evaluated critically in this article from three language teaching principles: meaningful learning, motivation, and interaction. First, definitions of the three principles will be stated. Next, materials in CPPF are employed as evidence to analyze these principles respectively. The final section concludes the main threads together and to suggest for the further improvement in this teaching material.

2. Critical Analysis of Language Teaching and Learning Materials

2.1 Essential Criteria for Effective Language Teaching Material Design

2.1.1 Meaningful Learning

Meaningful learning combines the existing knowledge or experience and the new knowledge

form students by learning materials and practice, as opposed to rote learning (Ausubel, 1963) [2], which is to promote retention and transfer (which, when it occurs, indicates meaningful learning). Retention is the ability to remember material when asked after learning in the similar way. Transfer is the ability to use the new learned knowledge and skills to solve new problems, answer new questions, or facilitate learning new subject matter (Mayer & Wittrock, 1996) [3]. If students can transfer their known knowledge, skills and good emotions to the newly learned materials, meaningful associations could be generated as the result of efficient learning.

There are six cognitive process categories – one is most closely related to retention (remember) and the other five increasingly related to transfer (understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create). Capitalize on the power meaningful learning by appealing to student's interests, academic goals, and career goals. Students can grasp the features of the text more easily when the topics and contexts are related to their existing knowledge. Furthermore, rote learning can also be avoided in this way. Before getting to the text, teachers should know about students' backgrounds, characteristics, jobs, hobbies, and dislikes. Thus, teachers can build relationship between the course and students. Reviewing, brainstorming, mind-maps related to the new course are helpful as well. Don't overstate grammar, sentence patterns, drills, and tasks when students are confused about the learning goals. It is suggested to immerse students in the context, help them identify these items in the content rather than the overstatement and repeated exercises.

2.1.2 Motivation

As its basic level, motivation is internal drive which pushes someone to do things in in order to achieve something that is the need “for the self to be known and to be approved of by others” (Brown, 2007, p.169) [4]. It is the extent to which you make choices about (a) goals to pursue and (b) the effort you will devote to that pursuit. There are two types of motivation: extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic comes from outside factors, such as the goals, the society we live in, the people around us, and curiosity (Harmer, 2007, pp. 98-99) [5]. Intrinsic comes from inside factors that are generated by what happens inside the classroom. These could be the teacher's methods, the activities that students take part in, and their perception of their success or failure.

The internal sources of motivation are (Harmer, 2007, pp.101-103) [5] affect, achievement, activities, and agency. Affect is student's feelings. Feelings and emotions have a lot to do with how motivated or unmotivated a student is (Harmer, 2007) [5]. Achievement can set an appropriate level of challenge for the students. According to the ZPD (the Zone of Proximal Development) (Vygotsky, 1978) [6], students learn best when they are in the zone, ready to learn something new. Activities that students are asked to be involved in should be engaging and interesting. Activities should use the kinds of devices that students are familiar with, and the materials relevant to student's lives and hobbies. Furthermore, activities need to be diverse. Agency is defined as people's ability to make choices, discipline oneself, and achieve success both in personal and social domains (Duff, 2012, p.417) [7]. When students act as an agent, it is beneficial for them to transfer to the new roles in learning activities and social circumstances. Thus, teachers and textbooks should create authentic real-life contexts, such as agreeing on a game play, describing a lost object, borrowing something at school, saying who you are when you are lost, and buying groceries. Therefore, students can use language to communicate and accomplish tasks (Brown & Lee, 2015) [8].

2.1.3 Interaction

Interaction means students communicate with each other as they spend time together in learning English, which is the prominent factor in EFL learning. During interaction, the role of teacher is to establish the communicative environment and guide students to develop their communicative competence. In Walsh's (2011.p.3) [9] words, “Crucially, in a classroom, it is through language in interaction that we access new knowledge, acquire and develop new skills, identify problems of understanding, deal with ‘breakdowns’ in communication, and establish and maintain relationships”. Furthermore, students can collaborate with each other and exchange information, ideas, and emotions in interaction. Storch (2013) [10] noted that to collaborate means to work together in

some tasks. If identity and equality are involved in collaboration, interaction could be more fruitful and productive.

Willingness to communicate (WTC), is “a state of readiness to engage communication with a specific person at a specific time” (MacIntyre et al., 2011, p.82) [11]. When EFL students are ready to adventure learning, WTC takes place. However, risk-taking is discouraged in many textbooks. Correctness and assurance of correctness are emphasized. Nevertheless, the opposite results shown in research is that task-based, project-based, open-ended work, negotiation of meaning, and a learner-centered approach are more effective in long term.

Authenticity promotes interaction. When the text is decontextualized in authenticity, students would not see the teaching material is related to their prior knowledge, which would affect their involvement in EFL learning. Otherwise, enough contextualized coursebooks help students learn and communicate in English learning. For example, newspapers, magazines, diaries, menus, and online forums are highly authentic to show students how to use English in real contexts both socially and culturally. In fact, some popular textbooks are absent in authentic and semi-authentic text content, and fully occupied by grammatical functions. Artificial context cannot improve students’ communicative competence. Otherwise, EFL learning material should contain situational, interactional, personal, and informed authenticity rather than simply authentic information, which can help students to suit the society and culture.

2.2 Evaluation of Cppf

2.2.1 Evaluation on Meaning Learning of Cppf

Every unit in CPPF starts off with a *Big Question* that sets the context for the unit, fosters high-level thinking skills, and promotes a deeper exploration of the theme. A photo collage with exploration questions activates prior knowledge and get students thinking about the topic. The items pictured will be revisited in the unit. Each unit includes a *Unit-Opener Video* that introduces the topic. Thereby, The *Big Question* activates students’ prior knowledge. The *Unit-Opener Video* challenges students to think about the topic from different angles and start to formulate their own questions.

Ready to Read: Nonfiction introduces students to a *reading strategy* before they read the nonfiction text. Each text focuses on a different strategy, from comparing and contrasting to identifying the author’s purpose and predicting, providing students with a variety of techniques to become better readers. Students can apply these reading strategies and techniques in the nonfiction reading.

Before students read the fiction, *Reading Strategy* gives them an opportunity to think about what they have already known about the topic, practice to list the known things and apply them to the text. As students discuss the Big Question Link, an *Oracy Reminder* prompts them to implement the oracy skills they have been learning and their background knowledge related to the readings.

The *Grammar in context* page provides clear and systematic presentation and practice of key grammar structures. Students first reflect on the structure based on examples-at least one of which comes from the reading text – and then they explore the grammar rule. Finally, students practice using the structure through a song or chant or a speaking activity.

On the *Nonfiction Reading Explore the Text* page, students will practice the reading comprehension strategy they learned as well as implement a variety of other strategies to organize information and comprehend the text deeply. On the *Fiction Reading Explore the Text* page, students complete a variety of comprehension tasks. These tasks go beyond literal understanding and encourage children to develop skills such as making connections, predicting, organizing information, summarizing, and inferring. This approach prepares students to become more proficient readers of complex texts. One the *Grammar in Context* page, students see a new grammar structure or a new aspect of the same structure that was introduced in the first part of the unit. The target grammar structure is introduced in the fiction story. Therefore, this step help students to be familiar with sentence structures in the reading.

The *Phonics and Spelling* pages help young readers understand the relationship between

graphemes and phonemes. Initially this helps children decode and read words accurately (Foundation-Level 3), and as they progress, they become better spellers as they practice and acquire English spelling patterns through guided word study (Levels 4-6).

The *Writing* page is part of a structured process-writing program that enables students to produce more effective writing on their own. Each page begins with a model text that familiarizes students with a particular genre, such as a letter/email, brochure, or new report. Students analyze the genre to discover its key features and then practice writing their own texts.

2.2.2 Evaluation on Motivation of Cppf

Nonfiction Texts inspired by children’s magazines provide meaningful content and language input on a wide range of topics. Students are interested in this part, and they can learn about world and acquire language with appropriate scaffolding and support. The pedagogical value of stories for learning is well documented. Illustrated original and adapted fiction stories form the backbone of the second half of the unit. These stories motivate and engage students at an emotional level while providing rich vocabulary input and enabling them to connect to authentic, natural language.

Dialogic reading strategies create memorable, participative reading classes and young readers who think critically and talk about the texts. Dialogic reading prompts come from teacher initially, but, as students become more accustomed to the technique, they start to ask their own questions when they read independently.

Improve Your Writing focuses on elements of written language such as capitalization, conjunctions, or sequencing adjectives modeled in the writing text to guide students in the correct usage.

Ready to Read: Fiction starts with *Key Words 4*. These words are presented through images and then practiced in a meaningful activity before students encounter them in a fiction text. Students must be impressive by these word in this step.

A *Big Question Link* motivates students to think about the Big Question in the context of the nonfiction and fiction next. As with the nonfiction text in the first half of the unit, students are encouraged to explore the text with critical thinking questions in the *Think Prompts*, which promotes deeper engagement with and discussions about the text.

Oracy Reminders encourage students to utilize their oracy skills when they discuss the Big Question link. *Check Your Oracy!* invites students to reflect on and evaluate their oracy skills and recognize their own progress in oracy as they advance through the course. An *Oracy Extension activity* is included at the end of each unit, either on the Listening page or on the Big Challenge page. The Oracy Extension activities offer students further practice to consolidate the oracy skill they learned in the unit. *Time to Talk!* Or a *Big Question link* allows students to extend the Speaking Mission topic further, with a focus on either building fluency (*Time to Talk!*) or strengthening discussion skills (*Big Question link*).

2.2.3 Evaluation on Interaction of Cppf

Oracy is the skill of communicating confidently and effectively in diverse situations, from presentations to participating in group discussions. At the core, oracy is about strengthening communication skills, but it goes well beyond the words we use. It includes physical skills, like projecting your voice and conveying confidence through your posture; social-emotional skills, like understanding group dynamics and helping a group come to a collective decision; and cognitive skills, like structuring your ideas into a coherent argument. Each unit focuses on a different oracy skill. The oracy skills are revisited as students advance through the levels, allowing them to consolidate their skills and build confidence.

Speaking Missions are designed to build the confidence students need to speak English in real-world scenarios, such as buying a souvenir, ordering an ice cream cone, or visiting a museum in a foreign country. The focus here is on high – frequency vocabulary and functional language with a degree of repetition so that children gradually become comfortable speaking English in everyday situations. There are two Speaking Missions for every three units. *During Your Mission* supports students with cues and step-by-step instructions to carry out their mission. *Oracy Performance*

Tasks enable students to apply the oracy skills they learned in the previous three units by collaborating on a communicative quest. In addition to proving students with a valuable review and reinforcement of their oracy skills, the performance task can be used to evaluate students' ongoing progress in oracy. Students first review the oracy skills and language from the previous three units. Then they are presented with the *Oracy Task*. After the task, students reflect on their talk by completing a *Check Your Oracy!* evaluation and discussing how they can improve their oracy skills in the future.

Animated *oracy videos* feature Oracy Morris, Kate, Jack, Emma, and Liam, who present and demonstrate each oracy skill. After watching videos, in *Let's Practice Oracy*, students practice oracy skills and observe each other. Cue cards with key phrases – the same functional language that they saw in the animation – provide additional language support. *Time to Talk* helps students practice fluency by discussing kid-friendly topics. Students are encouraged to work in pairs and then switch partners for additional practice.

Each unit culminates in a *Big Challenge project* that brings together the language and knowledge students have acquired in a hands-on, creative, and often collaborative task, such as presenting how to protect an endangered animal or researching an important historical artifact. Students are motivated and facilitated to demonstrate their understanding of the Big Question and share knowledge with their classmates.

CPPF provides entertainment in the form of chant with the strong beat of the music. *Time to Talk!* and *A Big Question link* use role-play and simulations to make students participate in the activities. All the mentioned above are ways of arousing learner's interest.

Nonfiction readings in this textbook come from authentic sources. The topics cover different people, schools, toys, homes, wild animals, jobs, food, healthy habits, and clothes all around the world. They are essential for students to adapt themselves to different cultures and countries. This material contributes a lot to the authenticity in terms of sign designing, self-portrait, class map, toy making, family and home drawing, animal mask making, routines spinner and poster, recipe drawing, and clothes designing. However, they are not all authentic, complex as native-speaker context, lacking natural features and idiomaticity. Nevertheless, this teaching material is contextualized and challenge students to deal with the context to infer rules for each grammar area and to know more about the people in the world.

3. Conclusion

3.1 Summary

The primary goal of this paper has been to evaluate CPPF based on three teaching principles. With the concrete and explicit definition of meaningful learning, motivation, and interaction, teachers can get deeper understanding of them. The course book is divided into several parts: reading, listening, oracy, grammar, phonics, and writing. On the basis of these parts, evaluation is performed under the different principles respectively. This teaching material focuses on meaningful learning rather than rote learning, encouraging students to combine known knowledge, skills, and emotions with new material. As Vygotsky (1978) [6] said, in this teaching material, children can gain agency as they acquire cognitive and linguistic abilities that enable them eventually to function autonomously. This teaching material can avoid the isolation of student's learning, make them have willingness to communicate (WTC) to engage communicatively in the classroom. Student's natural curiosity can be channeled so they identify, investigate, and find things out for themselves.

3.2 Recommendation

However, there are eight teaching principles. Only three of them are employed to analyze as criteria. The analysis of this teaching material is limited, which needs to be evaluated from other perspectives. Otherwise, this teaching material is a good standard of EFL source, promoting students' skills in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and essential comprehension to literacy development, creating literacy-rich environment for students to help them become

confident and articulate readers, writers, speakers, and listeners. This material supports students do better in EFL learning. Thus, they learn to dig deeper and think more critically about texts, begin to read to learn, or access information about the world in the foreign language.

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