

Evaluating English Language Textbooks through Tomlinson's Theory: A Systematic Review

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the strengths and limitations of English language textbooks as identified in a range of scholarly publications focused on content analysis of instructional materials. Numerous textbooks—whether produced by governmental or independent publishers—have been evaluated through various theoretical lenses, with Brian Tomlinson's comprehensive framework being one of the most frequently employed. Utilizing a systematic literature review, this research critically explores the pedagogical merits and shortcomings embedded within English textbooks or coursebooks as documented across the selected studies. A total of eight peer-reviewed articles published between 2018 and 2025 were analyzed using Tomlinson's evaluative criteria. The objective of this research is to determine whether Tomlinson's Theory is effective to develop a good textbook. The findings indicate that while the majority of textbooks demonstrated strong alignment with Tomlinson's principles. The comprehensive analysis of the findings categorized as "not specified" in the reviewed articles highlights the importance of further investigation and targeted refinement in the development of language education materials. These ambiguous or inconclusive results underscore the need for continued research and systematic evaluation to enhance the clarity, effectiveness, and inclusivity of English language learning resources, ultimately contributing to more equitable and learner-centered educational practices.

Keywords: *evaluating, textbook, Tomlinson's Theory*

INTRODUCTION

In the current era of globalization, English has established itself as a preeminent international language, widely adopted by individuals across diverse sociolinguistic contexts. As noted by Maru et al. (2020, 2021, 2022), English occupies a crucial position as one of the most influential and widely learned languages worldwide. Its prominence is particularly evident within the field of education, where it functions as a principal medium for instruction, knowledge exchange, and intercultural engagement.

The role of English in facilitating global interconnectedness cannot be overstated. As a lingua franca, it bridges communication gaps among speakers of varied linguistic backgrounds and has been instrumental in enabling the flow of information and ideas across borders. The universal appeal and functional utility of English have led to its recognition as the global language—a status that has been reinforced by its pervasive presence in international discourse and transnational exchanges.

The accelerated advancements in science and technology have contributed to a more interconnected global society, often conceptualized as a "global village," wherein individuals must navigate increasingly complex intercultural relationships. Rao (2019) underscores this dynamic, emphasizing the necessity of cultivating harmonious global interactions, a process in which English plays a central role. Echoing this view, Maru et al. (2021) and Gunantar (2016) assert that English serves as a vital means of communication for over one billion individuals who employ it as a second or foreign language, thereby transcending cultural and linguistic boundaries.

Moreover, English has become deeply embedded in multiple domains of daily communication, including literature, digital technologies, and social media platforms. These media facilitate not only the transmission of information but also the construction of social networks and intercultural relationships. Given its instrumental function in both academic and informal contexts, English has become an integral component of educational curricula around the world. Its inclusion in national education policies and institutional frameworks reflects its global utility, cutting across geographical and political boundaries to serve as a unifying medium in an increasingly pluralistic world.

Between 1974 and 2025, despite multiple revisions to the national education curriculum, English has consistently remained a compulsory subject mandated for both instruction and acquisition throughout Indonesia. Each iteration of the curriculum introduced distinct goals and pedagogical approaches related to the teaching and learning of English, reflecting evolving educational priorities and sociolinguistic contexts.

To support contemporary educational goals—particularly those concerning English language instruction—the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology has, since 2021, issued English textbooks for elementary, junior high, senior high, and vocational schools. This initiative aims to provide both teachers and students with pedagogically sound and accessible resources. Furthermore, collaborative partnerships between the government and domestic publishers have contributed to the broader availability of English textbooks for instructional use.

The critical role of textbooks in English language education has been widely acknowledged. As emphasized by Gün (2023), textbooks are fundamental tools for delivering linguistic and cultural content, shaping curricular structures, and guiding pedagogical practice. They enrich the learning experience by supporting students in developing language proficiency while simultaneously assisting teachers in implementing effective instructional strategies and achieving curriculum objectives.

Tomlinson (2012, as cited in Gün, 2023) emphasizes the central role that textbooks play in shaping the instructional process, fostering student motivation, and assisting educators in the selection and organization of learning materials. In the context of English language teaching (ELT), textbooks serve as foundational resources that significantly influence the language learning experience by offering structured guidance and systematically presented content.

Textbooks in ELT are not only instrumental in facilitating learners' engagement with the target language, but they also support instructors in aligning classroom practices with curricular goals and intended learning outcomes. According to Gün (2023), the effective use of textbooks can advance a variety of instructional objectives, including the development of core language skills, the acquisition of grammatical knowledge, and the enhancement of communicative competence. Furthermore, textbooks provide learners with exposure to essential vocabulary and syntactic structures, while offering integrated opportunities to practice reading, writing, listening, and speaking—the fundamental components of language proficiency.

The content presented in textbooks—particularly the selection of materials and topics—plays a critical role in enhancing students' English language proficiency across the four primary skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Sulistyo et al., 2021). The teaching and learning process in classrooms is closely tied to the materials provided to students, with textbooks functioning as one of the primary instructional resources. Their use is often motivated by practical considerations, including time efficiency, structured content delivery, and support for independent learning and homework completion. Textbooks are intended to facilitate more effective, efficient, and accessible learning experiences for students.

Despite their instructional utility, textbook content does not always align with established criteria for high-quality English language materials, particularly those informed by national curriculum standards or expert-developed theoretical frameworks. Numerous studies have analyzed English textbooks used in educational settings, revealing variation in the extent to which these materials meet pedagogical expectations. Some materials are found to be well-aligned with recognized standards, while others exhibit significant deficiencies. In response to this issue, the present article aims to synthesize existing research on English textbook evaluation, with a specific focus on analyses grounded in Brian Tomlinson's criteria for effective language learning materials.

The quality of a textbook can be evaluated based on established criteria proposed by educational experts. As cited in Richards (2001), Rowntree (1997) outlines a set of characteristics that define effective instructional materials. According to these criteria, well-designed English language materials should: (1) stimulate learners' interest, (2) activate prior knowledge, (3) inform learners about upcoming content, (4) clearly explain new concepts, (5) connect new content to previous learning experiences, (6) prompt learners to reflect on new information, (7) provide opportunities for feedback, (8) encourage meaningful practice, (9) clarify instructional expectations, (10) facilitate self-assessment, and (11) support learners in improving their performance. These principles underscore the importance of structured, engaging, and learner-centered materials in promoting effective language acquisition.

Tomlinson (2011) offers a comprehensive set of criteria for evaluating language learning materials, emphasizing that selecting appropriate textbooks is essential for aligning with both curriculum objectives and learner needs. He highlights growing concerns regarding the inclusion of inappropriate or unsuitable content in some educational materials, which may hinder effective language acquisition. According to Tomlinson's framework, high-quality language learning materials should meet sixteen key principles: (1) materials should achieve impact; (2) they should help learners feel at ease; (3) they should foster learner confidence; (4) content should be perceived as relevant and useful; (5) materials should encourage and facilitate learner self-investment; (6) learners must be ready to acquire the intended learning points; (7) materials should expose learners to authentic language use; (8) learners' attention should be drawn to linguistic features of the input; (9) materials should offer opportunities for communicative language use; (10) they should consider that instructional effects are often delayed; (11) materials should accommodate diverse learning styles; (12) they should also address differences in learners' affective attitudes; (13) they should allow for a silent period at the beginning of instruction; (14) materials should promote intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional engagement, stimulating both hemispheres of the brain; (15) they should avoid overreliance on controlled practice; and (16) materials should provide meaningful outcome feedback.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology, which involves systematically identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing existing research relevant to a particular topic (Triandini et al., 2019). The SLR was conducted to investigate the relationship between textbook evaluation and Tomlinson's theory, with journal articles published between 2018 and 2025 serving as the primary data sources. Some databases, such as Scopus or Web of Science require institutional or paid access, which may not be available to all researchers. As a result, the review was limited to open-access and freely available databases such as Google Scholar and ScienceDirect. Relevant articles were retrieved using keyword combinations such as "textbook," "Tomlinson's theory," and related terms. The author

All retrieved articles were screened to ensure alignment with the research objective—specifically, whether they addressed the relationship between textbook evaluation and Tomlinson's theory. Unfortunately, researcher only found a total of 8 relevant articles that were selected for further analysis. These studies were then categorized based on the nature of their findings: articles that reporting Tomlinson's theory met the requirements for developed a good textbook were classified as positive; those suggesting Tomlinson theory hinders a good textbook were categorized as negative; and studies that provided inconclusive evidence or called for further research were labeled as not specified. This classification enabled the researcher to synthesize trends and highlight patterns, whether Tomlinson's theory proves to be a pertinent and adaptable tool for evaluating a textbook.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

Following the analysis, the researcher categorized the articles into three distinct classifications based on their findings: positive, negative, and not specified regarding Tomlinson's theory in the evaluated textbook.

Results	Number of journals
Positive	5
Negative	-
Not Specified	3
Total	8

Table 1. The Evaluated textbook based on Tomlinson's Theory according to the journals

The findings reveal that a significant majority of the reviewed studies—specifically, five out of eight journal articles (62.5%)—support the applicability and effectiveness of Tomlinson's theoretical framework in the evaluation of English language textbooks. Importantly, none of the examined articles characterized Tomlinson's theory as ineffective; thus, no articles were categorized as presenting negative evaluations of the framework. The remaining three articles (37.5%) emphasized the necessity for further inquiry, indicating that while Tomlinson's criteria demonstrate considerable potential, continued empirical validation is essential to substantiate their reliability across diverse educational contexts. Accordingly, the present study aims to explore the extent to which Tomlinson's theory serves as a relevant and reliable tool for evaluating English language textbooks.

Discussion

The present study aims to assess the extent to which Tomlinson's theory serves as an effective framework for textbook evaluation, as reflected in selected research articles that have utilized his criteria. The effectiveness or limitations of the textbooks or coursebooks evaluated in these studies are summarized as follows:

1. Julianto et al. (2024) conducted an evaluative study of the *English for Meetings* textbook, concluding that it demonstrates a substantial alignment with Tomlinson's (2011) criteria for effective language learning materials. The textbook is noted for its responsiveness to the varied needs of learners, particularly in enhancing communicative competence within professional and business-oriented contexts. Through the inclusion of authentic themes, diverse task formats, and up-to-date content, the textbook fosters increased learner engagement, facilitates comfort in language use, and builds communicative confidence. These features are particularly salient in supporting

learners' abilities to navigate contemporary workplace practices, such as digital communication, collaborative interactions, and the articulation of opinions and arguments in English.

Nevertheless, the scope of the study is constrained by its exclusive focus on a single textbook. This limitation potentially restricts the generalizability of the findings. Accordingly, the authors advocate for future research that encompasses a wider selection of instructional materials across different genres and professional domains. Such comparative analyses would enable a more comprehensive understanding of the extent to which English language textbooks fulfill pedagogical standards and respond to evolving communicative demands in globalized professional settings.

2. Sundari et al. (2024) report that the textbook under evaluation exhibits a strong alignment with several fundamental principles outlined in Tomlinson's (2011) framework for effective language teaching materials. Specifically, the textbook is commended for its incorporation of practical and contextually relevant content, which caters to the real-world communicative needs of learners, particularly those preparing for careers in the tourism industry. The material is further noted for its capacity to enhance learners' confidence and fluency in English through the use of varied instructional strategies that promote active engagement and meaningful language use. Although the study identifies a deficiency in visual support—an element often considered beneficial for aiding comprehension and maintaining learner interest—the overall pedagogical design effectively compensates through its emphasis on interaction and communicative competence. As such, the textbook is deemed a valuable instructional resource, particularly in vocational education contexts where functional language skills are paramount.
3. Yuliana et al. (2022) conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the *Bahasa Inggris Kelas XII SMA/MA/SMK/MAK Edisi Revisi 2018* textbook using Tomlinson's (2011) framework for effective language learning materials. Their analysis reveals that the textbook successfully meets 14 out of the 16 established criteria, demonstrating a generally high level of pedagogical adequacy. The fulfilled criteria include the provision of relevant content, learner-centered activities, and a focus on communicative competence, which collectively contribute to the textbook's overall instructional value.

However, the study also highlights specific shortcomings. Notably, the textbook does not sufficiently draw learners' attention to salient linguistic features—a key aspect of promoting language awareness and facilitating internalization of form. Additionally, it falls short in fostering aesthetic and emotional engagement, which, according to Tomlinson, is essential for activating both the left and right hemispheres of the brain and promoting deeper cognitive and affective processing. The absence of tasks that encourage spontaneous speech, linguistic reflection, and post-listening exercises further limits the textbook's capacity to support holistic and integrated language development. These deficiencies suggest the need for supplementary materials or pedagogical interventions to fully realize the goals of comprehensive language instruction as envisioned by Tomlinson's theoretical model.

4. Rambe et al. (2020) affirm that the English textbook designed for second-grade senior high school students demonstrates a deliberate pedagogical orientation, aligning closely with the theoretical principles proposed by Tomlinson (2011). Their evaluation indicates that the development of the textbook was guided primarily by educational objectives—such as fostering communicative competence, promoting learner autonomy, and facilitating meaningful language use—rather than being predominantly influenced by commercial imperatives. The content selection, task design, and overall structure of the textbook reflect a concerted effort to meet learners' cognitive, affective, and linguistic needs, consistent with Tomlinson's emphasis on principled material development. By prioritizing instructional quality and learner engagement, the textbook positions itself as a pedagogically sound resource within the context of senior secondary English language education.
5. Hapsari et al. (2024) conclude that the evaluated textbook demonstrates substantial alignment with Tomlinson's (2011) framework for effective language learning materials. The textbook is recognized for its capacity to engage learners actively, enhance their confidence in using the target language, and deliver authentic, contextually relevant content that accommodates a variety of learning styles and affective factors. These strengths suggest that the textbook effectively addresses key pedagogical dimensions, including learner motivation, emotional engagement, and differentiated instruction.

Nonetheless, the study also identifies notable areas for improvement. In particular, the textbook offers limited support for fostering learner self-investment—an essential component in Tomlinson's model that encourages students to take ownership of their learning process. Specifically, the material lacks sufficient integration of both written and oral literary texts, which could serve as a medium for deeper personal and emotional engagement with the language. The absence of such features may constrain opportunities for learners to connect meaningfully with the content, thereby limiting the development of sustained interest and intrinsic motivation. These findings underscore the importance of incorporating rich, multimodal literary elements to promote deeper cognitive and affective involvement in language learning.

6. Sholah et al. (2021) report that the *Pathway to English* textbook for Grade 11 students fully satisfies all sixteen criteria outlined in Tomlinson's (2011) framework for the development of effective language learning materials. The study provides a comprehensive analysis of the textbook's content, structure, and pedagogical orientation, concluding that it effectively supports various dimensions of second language acquisition. These include promoting learner engagement, offering meaningful and contextually relevant input, encouraging language awareness, and fostering both fluency and accuracy through a balanced integration of receptive and productive skills.

The authors further assert that the textbook's alignment with Tomlinson's principles underscores its appropriateness as a core instructional resource within the Indonesian senior high school curriculum. Its capacity to address both cognitive and affective

learner needs, while incorporating diverse instructional strategies, contributes significantly to the facilitation of an effective and student-centered English language teaching and learning process. Consequently, the textbook is positioned as a pedagogically sound tool capable of enhancing language proficiency among upper-secondary learners in the Indonesian educational context.

7. Rahayu et al. (2024) report that the evaluated English language textbook demonstrates a high degree of congruence with the core principles articulated in Tomlinson's (2011) framework for effective language learning materials. The textbook is commended for its ability to engage learners meaningfully through interactive and learner-centered tasks that foster active participation and sustained motivation. It also plays a significant role in building learner confidence by gradually scaffolding language input and output in a manner that is both accessible and challenging.

Moreover, the textbook presents content that is contextually relevant and culturally appropriate, thereby enhancing its applicability within the learners' real-life communicative environments. It further integrates authentic language use, exposing students to natural and functional English that reflects contemporary discourse practices. Importantly, the material is sensitive to diverse learning preferences and affective variables, offering a range of tasks and modalities that cater to students' cognitive styles, emotional states, and individual learning needs. Taken together, these attributes indicate that the textbook aligns well with Tomlinson's call for principled, learner-responsive, and affectively engaging language instruction, making it a valuable pedagogical resource in secondary-level English education.

8. Sipahutar et al. (2021) conducted a detailed evaluation of the English textbook designed for first-grade senior high school students and found that it fulfills 15 out of the 16 criteria established by Tomlinson (2011) for effective language learning materials. The study highlights the textbook's pedagogical strengths, particularly its integration of vocabulary development with thematically coherent content. This alignment enhances learners' ability to acquire and retain new lexical items within meaningful contexts, thereby supporting more effective vocabulary acquisition and overall language competence.

The textbook is also praised for its adherence to a range of other essential principles, including the provision of engaging and contextually relevant material, the encouragement of learner autonomy, and the use of tasks that promote both fluency and accuracy. Despite a minor shortcoming in one of the evaluative dimensions—details of which were not the central focus of the study—the overall structure and instructional design of the textbook are regarded as pedagogically sound. Consequently, Sipahutar et al. affirm the textbook's suitability for use in the classroom, emphasizing its relevance and effectiveness as a core component of English language instruction at the secondary school level.

In conclusion, the comprehensive analysis of the findings categorized as "not specified" in the reviewed articles highlights the importance of further investigation and targeted refinement in the development of language education materials. These ambiguous or inconclusive results underscore the need for continued research and systematic evaluation to enhance the clarity, effectiveness, and inclusivity of English language learning resources, ultimately contributing to more equitable and learner-centered educational practices.

CONCLUSION

By employing a systematic literature review approach, this study concludes that approximately half of the reviewed articles affirm the effectiveness of Tomlinson's framework in evaluating English language textbooks. The application of Tomlinson's theory across the analyzed studies reveals recurring strengths and limitations present in various instructional materials. A synthesis of findings from eight research articles consistently emphasizes several core criteria outlined by Tomlinson, including the importance of materials achieving learner impact, promoting comfort and confidence, presenting content that is relevant and meaningful, encouraging learner self-investment, and ensuring learner readiness. Moreover, the studies highlight the value of exposing learners to authentic language use, drawing attention to linguistic features, providing opportunities for communicative interaction, acknowledging the delayed effects of instruction, and accommodating diverse cognitive styles and affective dispositions. Further emphasized are the roles of allowing a silent period in early learning stages, promoting intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional engagement that activates both hemispheres of the brain, avoiding excessive reliance on controlled practice, and offering meaningful outcome-based feedback.

In conclusion, the multifaceted nature of English textbooks requires a comprehensive and nuanced evaluative approach. Tomlinson's theoretical framework emerges as a relevant and adaptable tool for textbook evaluation, offering systematic insights into pedagogical quality and learner suitability. Future researchers and English language educators are encouraged to utilize this framework to conduct in-depth analyses and inform instructional material selection. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on textbook evaluation and offers practical implications for enhancing the quality and effectiveness of English language teaching resources.

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