

49. Evaluation of the textbook used in the pandemic: From teachers' and students' perspectives¹

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APA: Aysu, S. (2022). Evaluation of the textbook used in the pandemic: From teachers' and students' perspectives. *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, (29), 833-844. DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.1164894.

Abstract

The textbook has a significant role in language teaching process for both teachers and learners. Therefore, teachers should select it considering the needs of learners, language teaching method or channel. In other words, a textbook might be appropriate for foreign language learners but not for second language learners or a textbook might be very useful for face-to-face teaching but not for online teaching. Therefore, this current study aims to evaluate "Life" textbook series, which was used in an elective preparatory school of a state university in Turkey. It was used through online learning during the pandemic. Since the number of English teachers in the elective preparatory class is less than 20 and the results, in turn, cannot be statistically significant, qualitative analysis was carried out. Furthermore, students' opinions about the book and its activities were revealed through the parallel questionnaire. Open-ended questions were employed in this study. Data gathered by means of the questionnaires were analyzed via thematic analysis. Based on the gathered data, 3 codes were revealed, which are listed as in the following: strengths, weaknesses and suggestions.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, online teaching, students' opinions, teachers' opinions, textbook evaluation

Pandemi sürecinde kullanılan ders kitabının incelenmesi: Öğretmen ve öğrenci gözünden

Öz

Ders kitabı dil öğretme sürecinde hem öğretmenler hem de öğrenciler için önemli bir role sahiptir. Bu yüzden, öğretmenler, öğrenci ihtiyaçlarını, dil öğretme yöntem ve yollarını göz önünde bulundurarak ders kitabı seçimi yapmalıdır. Diğer bir deyişle, bir kitap yabancı dil öğrencileri için uygun olabilir ama ikinci dil öğrencileri için uygun olmayabilir ya da bir kitap yüz yüze eğitimde kullanım için uygun olabilir ama çevrimiçi eğitim için uygun olmayabilir. Bu yüzden, bu çalışma Türkiye'de bir devlet üniversitesinde isteğe bağlı hazırlık sınıflarında kullanılan Life adlı ders kitabını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. İsteğe bağlı hazırlık sınıfında 20 kişiden az öğretim elemanı olduğu için ve sonuçlar istatistiksel açıdan anlamlı olmayacağı için nitel bir analiz yapılmıştır. Dahası, kitap ve aktiviteleri hakkında öğrenci görüşleri de paralel anket aracılığıyla toplanmıştır. Burada açık uçlu sorular kullanılmıştır. Anketlerden elde edilen veriler tematik analiz yöntemiyle incelenmiştir. Elde edilen veriye bağlı olarak, 3 kod ortaya çıkmıştır. Güçlü yönler, zayıf yönler ve öneriler.

1 The abstract of this paper was presented at V. International Conference Research in Applied Linguistics held at Abant University, Bolu, Turkey during 22-24 October, 2021.

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Anahtar kelimeler: COVID-19 pandemisi, çevrimiçi eğitim, ders kitabı inceleme, öğrenci görüşleri, öğretmen görüşleri

Introduction

Teaching materials as printed and non-printed are essential components of language teaching and learning. They guide teachers and help them attain the goals and objectives of the curriculum (Tok, 2010). Textbook as a printed language material is one of the important language materials for both teachers and students in language learning. When the materials for language learning are asked, most people think “the course book” as it is the “main experience of using materials” (Tomlinson, 2011, p.2). Tosun (2013) also puts emphasis on the effectiveness of textbook and she adds that a textbook with a number of weak parts will affect both students and teachers in a negative way. As choosing the suitable book is important, teachers should consider not only the language needs of students but language teaching way and context while deciding the textbook (Azizifar & Baghelani, 2014).

Ur (1996) argues that using course book depends on teachers, situations or countries but she lists the advantages of using course book. She offers a clear framework for both teachers and students, a syllabus with a careful selection, pre-planned text and tasks, a cheapest way to have language materials, convenience, guidance for novice teachers and autonomy for learners. Additionally, according to Richards and Rodgers (1999), course books will specify the topics focusing on different language skills and will provide details about required time for each task.

Besides advantages, Ur (1996) also states some disadvantages of using a course book. It might be inadequate or irrelevant for different types of learners as they are homogeneous in terms of teaching or learning approach, it limits both teachers and learners and teachers find course book very easy, but they sometimes need to be productive and creative to plan their own teaching materials.

As Alemi and Sadehvandi (2012) and McDonough, Shaw and Masuhara (2013) emphasize, there are a great many appealing EFL textbooks produced by different publishers from various countries in the market. Therefore, choosing one course book is difficult. Even if one course book is evaluated and chosen considering students’ needs and the teaching context, there might be some problems while using it. These drawbacks should be revealed in order to supply them with extra adapted materials. These are the reasons of course book evaluation: to adapt new course books (Azizifar & Baghelani, 2014), and to choose the correct and effective course book (McDonough, Shaw & Masuhara, 2013). Therefore, course book should be examined through the following stages: pre-use evaluation, in-use evaluation and post-use evaluation (Rea-Dickins, 1994). However, according to Ellis (1997), a course book as a teaching material can be evaluated in two ways: predictive evaluation and retrospective evaluation. The former one is used before choosing the book as a teaching material while the latter one is conducted in order to reveal whether the course book attains the aims of the course and teachers (Ellis, 1997). That is, teachers can find out the weaknesses and strengths of the material they have used. For the next use, they might adapt new materials or they might eliminate the weak parts or they might decide to use a different teaching material.

According to McDonough, Shaw and Masuhara (2013), evaluation is a dynamic process. Even if a course book is evaluated as a suitable material for a language class in advance, teachers and students’ opinions might change while or after using it. Similarly, as Jamalvandi (2014) emphasizes, “textbooks evaluation is a continuous process, not confined to a time period or research studies” (p. 1069).

Tok (2010) notes that course book evaluation should cover the following criteria: “representation of cultural and gender components in addition to the extent to which the linguistic items, subjects, content, and topics match up to students' personalities, backgrounds, needs, and interests as well as those of the teacher and/or institution” (p. 510). Additionally, Littlejohn (2011) suggests a model which can be used in the process of language teaching materials evaluation. It consists of 2 parts: Publication and design.

Similarly, McDonough, Shaw and Masuhara (2013) put forward a model with two stages for material evaluation, consisting of external evaluation which means overall analysis of the material “in order to gain an overview of the organizational principles involved”, and internal evaluation which means detailed analysis “to see how far the materials in question match up to what the author claims as well as the aims and objectives of a given teaching programme” (p. 50).

Previous studies

A growing body of literature focuses on textbooks evaluation in Turkey and abroad. In the following, some of these studies will be summarized.

In the study of Azizifar and Baghelani (2014), they investigated the appropriateness of Top-Notch textbooks used in language institutes in Iran. A questionnaire with fifty-one items including was administered to twenty-five teachers. The findings demonstrated that teachers are satisfied with most of the criteria whereas writing materials do not meet the expectations of teachers and they also note that there is a shortage of topics which promote critical thinking skills of students.

Also, Alemi and Sadehvandi (2012) evaluated Pacesetter Series, which were used in language institutes in Iran. 64 EFL teachers participated in the study and answered questions. Results showed that teachers were satisfied with books' practical considerations while they criticized the skills in the books and they had to supplement them.

Textbook evaluation in Turkey was also carried out by different researchers. Tok (2010) examined the advantages and disadvantages of English language textbook “Spot On” regarding the opinions of teachers, which is used as a course book in the primary schools in Turkey. A questionnaire with the 5-point Likert scale was employed in this study. The results showed that this textbook has some advantages such as a teacher's book, individual and pair work activities, four language skills while there are many weaknesses such as the layout of the book, insufficient communicative, vocabulary, and group work activities. Also, it does not cover the aims of course and it does not appeal to the students. The researcher suggests that the course book should be reorganized with its wide range of communicative activities and supplementary materials.

Tosun (2013) compared two textbooks in terms of effectiveness: One is “Turkish Elementary Textbook”, for which data were gathered from 35 graduate and undergraduate students, and 23 teachers in the USA and another one is “English Textbook Face to Face”, for which data were gathered from 62 preparatory class students in a university and 22 teachers in Turkey. Results showed that Turkish textbook does not promote students' communicative development but it consists of adequate cultural elements. English textbook provides necessary listening and speaking activities but it is limited in terms of writing activities. Finally, English textbook covers the principles of CEFR while Turkish textbook does not include the key principles.

In the study of Gedik Bal (2020), the New Language Leader Pre-intermediate course book was assessed by both students and teachers through a questionnaire in terms of intercultural perspective. The participants were satisfied with cultural elements in the textbook while it did not cover the source culture, namely learners' own culture.

Yapıcı (2019) examined the first 2 units of the course book "Solutions" via questionnaires and semi-structured interviews through the perspectives of 23 secondary school students and 1 teacher. Results showed that the textbook was satisfactory for both groups of participants. However, they criticized some parts such as design of units and cultural parts in the book.

As summarized above, various course books used in different educational levels have been evaluated and most of these studies employ quantitative design with a textbook evaluation questionnaire or checklist from the perspectives of teachers or students. However, as Littlejohn (2011) argues checklists used as evaluative tools do not provide "the teacher-analyst much assistance in how to ascertain if a particular feature is present or absent" (p.182). Therefore, using open-ended questions, this current study attempts to reveal opinions of teachers and students about the course book used during the pandemic, which is a retrospective evaluation (Ellis, 1997). Firstly, the external evaluation suggested by McDonough, Shaw and Masuhara (2013) was conducted by the researcher before using the course book (See Appendix A) and it was identified that the course book "Life" series were acceptable for adult learners and it consists of competency-based syllabus, which refers to not only developing students' productive and receptive skills but also developing grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation through real-life videos and recordings.

However, one course book might be useful for face-to-face teaching whereas it might not be appropriate for online teaching. Within this perspective, this study aims to examine the course book "Life" series which were used in online classes during the COVID-19 Pandemic while teaching English to the students enrolled in an Optional Preparatory Class in a state university in Turkey. In this study, the strengths and weaknesses of the book used in the online platform will be revealed through the opinions of teachers and students. Suggestions and pedagogical implications will be provided in order to strengthen the weak points.

Regarding this aim, the following research questions will be answered in the present study.

Research Question 1: What are the opinions of teachers about the course book "Life" series used in the pandemic?

Research Question 2: What are the opinions of students about the course book "Life" series used in the pandemic?

Method

Setting and participants

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the academic year 2020-2021, language teaching process was carried out via online classes in School of Foreign Languages at a state university in Turkey. During the pandemic, as the course book "Life" series in three levels (elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate) instructed in Elective Preparatory Class in the online classes were used, opinions of teachers and students were examined about the books. Before the data collection for this study, the ethical approval

from the Ethics Committee in the university was obtained. Considering purposive sampling procedure, participants were chosen and asked to state their consent on "Google Forms". When they were willing, they participated in this study. In total there were 6 teachers and 38 students in this study.

Data collection

In this study, the course book "Life" series from elementary to intermediate level written by Helen Stephenson, John Hughes and Paul Dummett and published by National Geographic Learning were evaluated. Books have 12 units and contents with productive and receptive skills, real life (functions), pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and critical thinking for each unit in the first pages of the books are listed. Each book is accompanied by CDs/DVDs, a teacher's book, interactive whiteboard DVD, ExamView test generator CD, online practice (used as a workbook due to the pandemic), website (various activities for teachers and students), and workbook (not included in the evaluation as it was not bought and used by students).

A questionnaire which includes the open-ended questions about the course book "Life" series including content, activities, accompanying materials, strengths and weaknesses were administered to participants through "Google Forms" (See Appendix B).

Data analysis

The opinions of students and teachers about the course book "Life" series were gathered through the open-ended questions and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017).

Creswell's suggestion for qualitative data analysis starts with "exploring the general sense of data" and coding the data involves the following steps "reading through text data, dividing the text into segments of information, labeling the segments of information with codes, reducing overlap and redundancy of codes and collapsing codes into themes" (Creswell, 2012, p.244). Similarly, Dörnyei (2007) focuses on four steps when analyzing qualitative data " (a) transcribing the data, (b) pre-coding and coding, (c) growing ideas-memos, vignettes, profiles, and other forms of data display, and (d) interpreting the data and drawing conclusions" (p. 246). Additionally, reducing the text and marking the parts that interest the researcher is described as a first step of data analysis (Seidman, 2006). According to him, sharing data with the profiles and themes is the second step and he emphasizes the use of participants' experience with his own words rather than the use of graphs or charts while analyzing and interpreting interview data. The third step is interpretation. Although these two steps are directly related to interpretation of data, in this step "researchers must ask themselves what they have learned from doing the interviews, studying the transcripts, marking and labeling them, crafting profiles, and organizing categories of experts" (Seidman, 2006, p. 128).

Considering all these steps suggested by Dörnyei, Creswell and Seidman, data gathered from open-ended questions were analyzed by the researcher herself. Codes and themes were revealed from the gathered data. For this study, inter-coder reliability was not calculated due to "the ease of coding" (McDonald, Schoenebeck & Forte, 2019, p.15).

Research ethics

In this study from the planning of this research to its implementation, from the collection of data to its analysis, all the regulations specified in the "Ethics Directive of Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research and Publication" were followed. No action contrary to the specifications under the second part of the heading "Actions Contrary to Scientific Research and Publication Ethics" was taken. Scientific, ethical and citation rules were followed in the writing process of this study; the participants officially agreed to participate in the current study, no modifications were made on the collected data and this study was not sent to any other academic publication medium for evaluation.

Results

Table 1. Strengths and weaknesses of textbook according to the views of teachers and students

CoCodes	Teachers' opinions	Students' opinions
Strengths (activities, content)	-Listening, reading, video, and vocabulary activities -Different topics	-Listening, reading, video, writing, grammar, and vocabulary activities - Different reading topics -Learning different cultures
Weaknesses (activities, presentation of grammar, the aim of the book)	-Communicative and speaking activities (pair work and group work activities) -Grammar - Writing and speaking topics -The use of workbook as online practice - Age level	-Speaking activities
Suggestions	-Face-to-face learning - Age level -Online practice &workbook	-Face-to-face learning -Vocabulary -Layout of the book

The thematic analysis of qualitative data obtained from open-ended questions is showed in Table 1 above. Under the theme "Strengths", both teachers and students state that listening, reading, video, and vocabulary activities in the book series are effective for language classes. On the contrary to teachers, grammar, and writing activities are satisfactory for students. There are a few excerpts from students' and teachers' answers about the strengths of the books:

Videos in each unit develop our pronunciation skills and we also learn the body language. (S25)

Listening and video activities are useful for students. (T2)

Reading and listening activities are designed very well considering the students' needs. (T4)

However, one student complains about the length of video activities and notes that Videos were very long and boring. So, when we answer the questions for "the while-watching activities", I could not catch

the answers. They are not useful for me. (S32). Another student criticizes the reading texts and vocabulary "For reading parts, there were many scientific texts, so there were many difficult words. Instead of them, texts based on Daily life could be used." (S25)

As another strong point of the book, not only teachers but also students think that Life book series consists of different interesting topics particularly environmental issues. This book also helps the learners to learn about different cultures and lifestyles. In the following some example sentences can be seen.

Activities in the course book include a wide range of topics, particularly environmental issues draw attention. (T3)

Topics are based on the daily life and they are all up-to- date. Therefore, we both learn English and general knowledge. (S14)

This book gives information about the different cultures and different people in the World via the photos and videos. (S23)

We learn not only English but general knowledge about everything. (S24)

Considering the weak points of this book, students state that some of the speaking activities do not appeal to students as S17 mentions Speaking was difficult for us because speaking topics are difficult and we could say just a few simple sentences. Our teachers had to always guide us or add something else what we said. Also, S1 notes Speaking activities and also topics for speaking are restricted.

Moreover, teachers criticize the lack of communicative and speaking activities (pair work and group work activities), and good grammar presentation. They also add most of the writing and speaking topics do not fit the age level of students and their needs. Therefore, the book series appeals to the adult learners. T2 claims the following reasons: due to the publication date and the target learners (mostly adult students) it does not fit our students. T1 mentions that speaking topics do not address the students' needs and experience. All topics necessitate the life experience. I mean even if we used this book in the classroom, it would be very difficult for students to speak about these topics. But some pair work activities might be done in the real classroom. T3 supports the opinions of T1 with following statement: Most of the speaking activities and some of the writing activities are for the adult learners such as employees and/or graduates). Students fail to generate ideas. This idea can be exemplified from the book series. In the elementary level book, students are asked to talk about their ideas about a new Earth and then write a paragraph about the topic. Similarly, in the intermediate level book, one of the speaking and writing activities requires students to think of the ways to save money. After discussing the topic, they are asked to write a post for a website. When the students' life experience is taken into consideration, probably they have not worked and earned money. Therefore, they do not have any idea about saving. The same teacher also criticizes the grammar part of the book and adds that grammar presentation is insufficient and the book's extra exercises repeat each other. (For example Extra practice and revision). Additionally, T2 states that the grammar exercises in the textbook were inadequate and some were confusing, too.

There are a few suggestions from students in order to make use of the book effectively. First one is the use of book for face-to-face learning. If this book was used in the face-to-face learning rather than the online classes, it would be very effective because communicative activities were not included in the

online classes (S4). S36 also agrees with this idea. He/she utters “it would be very effective for face-to-face class”. Second one is about introduction of new vocabulary. While teaching vocabulary, some example sentences should be presented (S38). Last one is about the layout of the book. On the book, there was not enough space to take some notes. (S23)

Similarly, teachers also put forward some suggestions about the book. T1 argues that this book is not prepared for online education. We had to skip some parts (communicative parts). Therefore, it would be useful for face-to-face classes and add that I think it will appeal more to adult / graduate learners. T4 states that online practice and workbook have similar or same activities and this is a disadvantage. It should be improved by the publisher.

Conclusion and discussion

This study aims to examine teachers’ and students’ opinions about the textbook (Life series) used in the pandemic, which is categorized as retrospective evaluation (Ellis, 1997). While evaluating the textbook, the model of McDonough et al. (2013) was exploited. Thus, after conducting external evaluation by the researcher herself, internal evaluation based on views of students and teachers was carried out by means of a questionnaire. Gathered data were analyzed by the researcher and 3 codes were revealed: strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions.

According to teachers and students, listening, reading, video, and vocabulary activities are the satisfactory and effective parts of this book series. It might be concluded that learners are more motivated and eager to learn as they enjoy the activities based on receptive skills. Tok (2010) also argues about the effectiveness of whole book and he adds if students like the course book, they engage in the class willingly and, in turn, become active learners in the class. This is much common in the language classes in state schools in Turkey.

As the book series includes interesting topics based on different cultural structures and traditions, this makes the language learning enjoyable. This is discussed by Jamalvandi (2014) who notes that different cultures and communities in the textbook make the learners explore them while aiming interaction of these students with these people in the future.

However, writing and speaking activities are not suitable for students’ age and life experience. It is appropriate for adult learners. Grammar presentation is not satisfactory. According to Alemi and Sadehvandi (2012), considering the weaknesses of the book series, teachers supplement the materials to overcome the problems revealed in the process of language teaching material evaluation. For this book series, it might be concluded that teachers had to supplement communication-based activities and writing tasks, which are suitable for students’ age and their daily life. They have to elaborate on grammar with different sources and activities. Tosun (2013) also put emphasis on the teachers to adapt and supplement the course and she adds that “Textbooks are only as good as the teachers who are using them. It is important to note that a textbook can be a very effective teaching tool in the hands of a good teacher (p.1379).

As the external evaluation of the course book “Life” series was carried out by the researcher and it was found as acceptable for adults with competency-based syllabus and activities alongside real-life videos, texts, and recordings. However, considering the internal evaluation and the suggestions of teachers and students, the book series might be good for face-to-face instruction. Additionally, another suggestion

from learners shows that they need sample sentences for vocabulary teaching. Also, online practice and workbook activities should be differentiated, which is a suggestion of teachers for the book authors and the publisher.

To sum up, considering the analysis of the textbook series, an ideal textbook should cater to students' age, interests, and life experience as the students have just graduated from high school and they do not have any work experience. Especially activities about productive skills (writing and speaking) should cover their daily life such as free time activities, meeting new people, fashion, and technology (smart phones, video games). Vocabulary and grammar exercises should be enriched through a variety of activities. Finally, a textbook should be designed in accordance with the online class objectives, which is a part of today's education due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Limitations of the study

In this study, internal evaluation of the textbook used in the pandemic in online classes was carried out through open-ended questions in one university. In the future studies, after using the textbook in the classroom, a comparison might be done in terms of the opinions of teachers and students. Furthermore, opinions of teachers and students in different universities who use this book might be examined.

Acknowledgement and support

This study has not received any specific grant.

Statement of contribution rate

The whole process was conducted by the only declared author of the article.

Declaration of conflict of interest

There is only one author in this study.

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Appendix A: External evaluation

The intended audience: Adult learners are targeted in this series.

The proficiency level: It is a six-level series from beginner to advanced.

The context in which the materials are to be used: This book series is for general English language learners as it is stated inside the back cover page of the series "Real life lessons model and practice everyday functions, preparing learners to use language in the real world".

How the language has been presented and organized into teachable units/lessons: There are twelve units and each unit has the following parts, which is stated in the teacher's book (p.11).

Opener: a one-page introduction to the unit that gets students interested in the topic

a and b: double-page lessons that teach grammar and vocabulary through reading and listening texts

c: a double-page lesson that focuses on reading comprehension and critical thinking

d: a one-page lesson that teaches functional/situational language

e: a one-page lesson that teaches a writing skill and the features of a text type

f: a double-page lesson of video comprehension exercises

Review: a one-page lesson of practice activities and 'can-do' check statements

The author's views on language and methodology and the relationship between the language, the learning process and the learner: The authors note the following information inside the back cover page of the series:

- A practical, competency-based syllabus helps learners in their development of grammar, vocabulary, functions, pronunciation and skills through appropriate communicative tasks.
- Real life lessons model and practice everyday functions, preparing learners to use language in the real world.
- National Geographic video on the DVD allows teachers to bring lessons to life.
- The carefully designed Critical thinking syllabus challenges learners to understand texts at a deeper level.
- Vocabulary is introduced thematically, with additional emphasis on key words and word building in Word focus and Wordbuilding section.

Are the materials to be used as the main 'core' course or to be supplementary to it?: The student's book is used as the main course book and other materials such as workbook can be categorized as supplementary.

Is a teacher's book in print and locally available?: The teacher's book is in print available.

Is a vocabulary list/index included?: The vocabulary list is illustrated on the website under the heading "Teacher Resources".

What visual material does the book contain (photographs, charts, diagrams) and is it there for cosmetic value only or is it integrated into the text?: All the pictures and videos are integrated into the text and authors state it in the inside of the back cover page as in the following: "Welcome to Life, an exciting six-level series that makes learning English an exploration of the world. Drawing on National Geographic content, Life transforms the learning experience into a fabulous journey with irresistible images, articles and videos that engage learners like no series before. Bring Life into your classroom!"

Is the layout and presentation clear or cluttered?: The layout and presentation of each unit is clear with 10 pages.

Is the material too culturally biased or specific?: The authors state in the teacher's book that "LIFE takes students around the globe, investigating the origins of ancient civilizations, showing the drama of natural forces at work, and exploring some of the world's most beautiful places" (p.8).

Do the materials represent minority groups and/or women in a negative way? Do they present a 'balanced' picture of a particular country/society?: As it is noted in the teacher's book, the Life series

includes a wide range of topics such as people and places, science and technology, history, animals and environment.

What is the cost of the inclusion of digital materials (e.g. CD, DVD, interactive games, quizzes and downloadable materials from the web)? How essential are they to ensure language acquisition and development?: There are various resources for the use of students and teachers available on the website and all of them can be downloaded free.

The inclusion of tests in the teaching materials (diagnostic, progress, achievement); would they be useful for your particular learners?: In the teacher's book, assessment is described as in the following (p.11):

- Each unit in the Student's book finishes with a one-page review where students do the exercises and complete a number of 'can-do' statements linked to the objectives of the unit.
- There are photocopiable tests in the Teacher's Book.
- There is a Check section at the end of each unit in the Workbook for students to check what they have learnt (general knowledge as well as language)
- There are IELTS practice tests at the end of the Workbook. These have been graded to the level of the course, but follow the format of the test. These allow students to benchmark their progress against the course objectives, whilst becoming familiar with a global test format.

Appendix B: Questionnaire

- 1- What do you think about the content/activities of the "Life" textbook series?
- 2- What is your favorite aspect of the "Life" textbook series?
- 3- What are the weak parts of the "Life" textbook series?
- 4- Is there anything else you would like to state about the "Life" textbook series?