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Readers' Forum

Focus on a textbook

It's now a decided issue that our young learners should learn English as a foreign language to acquire capabilities of transmitting their ideas and feelings to others by talking and writing, and to arrive at an understanding by listening to others when they talk, and by reading what they have written. Like the study of other languages, the study of English must as well inculcate in our young learners the habit of thinking clearly, coherently, and sensibly. In this context we, therefore, consider it worthwhile to review as to how much the English text books now being taught in our schools are keeping to these objectives. From this standpoint of view we would like to present the following few paragraphs just to focus on an English textbook named 'English for Today, Book VII' prescribed by the NCTB for classes IX and X.

A good literary piece is virtually composed of some good paragraphs. And a good paragraph is composed of some well-arranged good sentences that tell about one and only one thing which we call the topic of the paragraph. But review reveals that the textbook has paragraphs someone of which is crowded with as many as four topics, not to speak of one and only one topic. For instance, the imaginary student Tareq gives his personal account and the textbook accommodates it just in a paragraph on page eleven, although the given account distinctively has four topics in it, viz the first five sentences tell about who Tareq is, the next three sentences talk about what Tareq's father is, still next three sentences narrate about what his hobby is, and the concluding three sentences inform about what his favourite game is. Overloading a paragraph with too many topics is not only ungrammatical, but the study of such paragraphs also hinders the development of attitude for systematic thinking in learners.

On page 13 of the textbook under the caption 'Making Friends' the following are the beginning sentences: Tarek's class teacher Mr. Rahim introduced him to the class. But he was not received very warmly. Some of the students began to laugh at him from the beginning. At times they were rude. What character of our boys and girls reading in class IX would the authors like to portray in these sentences. Is this the desirable behavioural attitude of students of a class

to a new comer to that class? Here is another quotation from the book: 'When my brother was born there was no midwife to help my mother (Manpower, page 84)'. Isn't it unbecoming for a boy of class IX or class X, in our society to reminisce before his classmates about his own mother when she was in labour?

The piece titled 'An Agricultural Extension Worker' (pages 165-168) is the testimony of assemblage of irrelevant educational items. Surprisingly and ridiculously, the piece tags a discussion on how to look up words in a dictionary.

Incoherence in thought is also evident in the textbook. Here is a quotation from it: 'A good teacher is one of the most important people in any country. She (or he) makes lessons interesting. She keeps pupils and students awake. Why is a good teacher one of the most important people in any country? Is it because she makes lessons interesting or keeps pupils and students awake? It's quite difficult to co-ordinate the ideas.

The text-book writes, 'you do not need go to a university (Manpower, Page 84)' instead of writing, 'you needn't go to a university' which would have been more objective and pleasant to ears. In the article 'A Nurse' on page 181 there is a sentence that runs thus: 'One was studying to be a forester in Sylhet'. Why to be forester in Sylhet alone? Why not in any other place in Bangladesh? The sentence would have been meaningful, if it were written as: 'One was studying in Sylhet to be a forester'.

'Steam Engine' can be a subject of study in a book of literature, history of scientific inventions, and Physics. But the main objectives of teaching the subject under the above three disciplines will differ basically and distinctively from each other. It is natural that this textbook has included a piece on "Gifts of Nature" (pages 17-19). But the number one aim of teaching the piece has been set in the textbook as: "To acquaint the students with the natural resources of Bangladesh. If this be the number one aim of teaching the subject in literature, what will be the number one aim of teaching this subject when it will be a subject of study in social studies?

Under the section "Puzzles and games" on pages 276-278 of the textbook, serial no. 7.2.5. presents some riddles,

But except the worked-out spelling riddle in illustration no. 1, all the four other riddles of the same character under the heading "Now you try these" are constructed very much wrongly, and therefore have become misleading and meaningless riddles. Let's quote one as an example: "My first is in CAT but not in HAT My second is in BALL/ but not in BAT/My third is in WAY/ but not in WEIGH/My fourth is in SUN/ but not in DAY/My fifth is in COWS but not in COW/ My whole is a room and you're in it now." Now according to the clue given in the first line "My first is the letter C," But what's about "My second?" According to the clue given in the second line "My second is LL." Similarly according to the third, fourth and fifth clues "My third, fourth, and fifth are AY, SUN, and S" respectively. Therefore the clues owing to their defective construction lead to the formation of a queer word like "CLLAYS-UNS." But an inquisitive mind may at length discover that the futile attempt of the clues is aiming at the formation of the word "CLASS". In that case the correct version of the riddle might have been as: "My first is in CAT but not in HAT/My second appears twice in BALL but never in BAT/My third is in WAY but not in WHEY/My fourth is in SUN but not in NUN/My fifth is in COWS but not in COW/My whole name's a group of which you're a member, how?" The inquisitive readers will find that the remaining three other riddles of this series presented in the textbook are also hopelessly misconstrued with misleading clues.

In fine, the authors of the textbook in their frantic endeavour to introduce novelty in English textbook reading have modelled most of the lessons on different subjects in dialogue form. But the attempt in most cases has turned futile as the dialogue disregarding the participation of many in the class relapses very often into monotonous monologue. For instance the discussion on "Health" (pages 112-116) begins in dialogue form, but ends in a long lingering lecture of the subject teacher, the text of which comprises six lengthy paragraphs. Although the textbook marks a definite departure from the traditional English text-book, yet, owing to its faulty organisation and construction of texts, it may fail to help its young learners build that command of English as a foreign language as they reasonably need.

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