Evaluation of First Friends English Children's Books: Task Types in Focus

Fahime Talebiyan[*]

Department of English, Shahreza Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shahreza, Iran

Abstract

This study aimed to evaluate First Friends English Children's books in English language institutions in Iran. This research focused on investigating task types and their frequency as well as examining the existence of any significant difference in the task types' frequency in the mentioned books. Accordingly, different tasks were extracted and classified in the selected textbooks utilizing Nunan's framework. The frequency and percentage of each task were also calculated, and the significant differences in the frequency of different task types were discerned in these books. Based on the frequency percentages, It was found that creative tasks were notably insufficient. There was also no significant difference in the occurrence of task types in First Friends English children's books. Nonetheless, it is discussed in the article that improvements should be made in ELT materials used in such learning contexts.

Keywords: Coursebook; First Friends; Task type; TBLT

1. Introduction

Since the advent of communicative language teaching (CLT), task-based learning (TBL) had obtained increasing importance all around the world. In recent years, a number of researchers, syllabus designers, and material developers have called for a shift in language learning and teaching toward task-based methods. Task-based learning is an approach that involves learners with tasks from the real - world. It is recognized as

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* Corresponding Author's E-mail address: fahimetalebiyan76@gmail.com

an effective way for developing students' abilities especially, children who the beginners in English language skills, grammar, and vocabulary.

One of the methods that emerged from the communicative approach is task-based learning (Brown, 2007; Ellis, 2003). The early implementation of (TBL) within communicative frameworks for language teaching was Prabhu's (1987) Bangalore work. In this methodology, the students were presented with a task and didn't focus on the language rules during the performance; the task was meaning–based and had a non − linguistic outcome. Tasks have been used for hundreds of years; in the past, they were a piece of translations often from literary sources while recently they include projects for group discussions, oral presentations, sharing personal experiences, and solving problems. This orientation had a crucial role in teaching and learning the language communicatively. Because of the task-based learning connections with CLT methodology and support from some SLA linguists; it gained considerable attention within applied linguistics. A number of researchers pointed out that TBL refers to an approach that uses tasks as the basic units of planning and instructions in language teaching. It focuses on the communicative skills of language, learner-centeredness, authenticity, and motivation (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). In addition, several linguists argued that the tasks and activities should be from the real − world and focus on the meaning of language rather than the form (Krashen, 1982; Nunan, 2004; Brown, 2007; Willis, 2007; Eliss, 2003). Skehan (1998) described the task as an activity or a related set of strategies that includes the priority of meaning, a problem to solve, and a relationship to real-life tasks, objectives, and outcomes. Thus, the priority of TBL is placed on the completion of tasks that are assessed in terms of outcome (Brown, 2007; Willis, 2007). It emphasizes understanding and suggesting meanings in order to complete the task effectively (Willis,1996).

Task-based learning has a crucial role in enhancing the process of teaching and learning language skills, grammar, and vocabulary. Although it is significant and has been in practice for several decades, little research exists that has examined its effectiveness and appropriateness in textbooks. Most of the studies which examined the role of TBL in teaching and learning the language and its challenges and limitations in the EFL classroom are Iranian, Japanese, and Chinese. Concerning the series of "First Friends" children's books, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, there was no study that aimed to examine the effectiveness of task–based learning and its suitability in Frist Friends English children's books. Thus, this study intended to evaluate First Friends (1,2,3) towards this approach and investigated the appropriateness

of communicative activities in the Frist Friends English children's books. Which included in the First Friends English children's books analyzed based on the suggested criteria. This evaluation is important because it revealed the strengths and weaknesses of TBL in First Friends English children's books and determined how it goes with the children's needs in some English language institutions in Iran**.**

To the best of the researchers' knowledge, not many studies have been conducted on the use of different task types in First Friends English children's books evaluation. Despite the fact that many studies have been carried out on the evaluation of books based on Nunan's Taxonomy Task-Based (Ghasemi & Pasand, 2018), no previous study has been done concerning First Friends English children's books. This is important since as mentioned above, tasks can assist the learners in the acquisition of communicative competence by focusing on meaning rather than form in doing different tasks and in a student-centered context. Therefore, the current study aimed to probe the different task types that were utilized in the First Friends English children's books based on Nunan's (1999) task type classification. The current study utilized Nunan's (1999) classification of tasks as this model seems to be more specific and comprehensive than the other suggested models on task types.

Consequently, the following research questions served as the direction of the current study:

1. Based on the above What task types are covered in First Friends English children's books taught in English language institutions?

2. Is there any significant difference in the occurrence and frequency of task types in First Friends English Children's Books?

2. Literature review

Evaluation has a crucial role in revealing the strengths and weaknesses of the content in the textbook. It is significant in determining how well the content meets the standards of a good textbook. The material evaluation may enhance teachers' personal and professional development by adapting or changing their teaching methodology in EFL classrooms.

Atkins (2001) focuses on textbook evaluation by teachers. He stated that it is beneficial to evaluate the textbooks before choosing one in order to find an appropriate text from among the available sources.

Nunan (2006) defines the task as "a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, producing or interacting in the target language while the irretention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have

a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, middle, and an end.". This means that the task has a non-linguistic outcome. Likewise, Willis (1996 as cited in Murad, 2009) defines the task as "an activity where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome. "In this definition, the notion of meaning is subsumed in 'outcome'.

Dabbagh and Safaei (2019) evaluated the English textbooks used in Iran, namely the Prospect and Vision series, and the global book Four Corners with regard to their learning objectives and based on Bloom's revised groupings of learning goals. The results of their study indicated that the global textbook was superior to the national ones used in the EFL context of Iran. It also covered a more balanced number of different tasks and exercises.

Similarly, Goodarzi, Weisi, and Yousofi (2020) evaluated the English textbooks, the Prospect Series with an eye to the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) model, and inspected the cognitive, communicative, and creative potentials of the mentioned textbooks. The findings indicated that this textbook could not meet the basic principles of CLT and failed to fulfill the communicative, cognitive, and creative potentials.

In a most recent study, Sadeghi (2020) explored English teachers' attitudes toward the book Prospect 3 through an observation checklist. In this mixed-method study, twenty-five teachers took part in the study based on a convenience sampling procedure. The results showed that the main drawback noticed by the teachers was the lack of a glossary list at the end of each unit and also the lack of assigned time to cover the material. Moreover, although the teacher favored the book objectives, teaching aids, and generally the textbook, they argued that this book is not comparable to global textbooks and it is in need of more improvements.

Mizbani and Chalak (2017) analyzed the activities (listening and speaking) of the Iranian high school textbook Prospect3 based on Bloom's (2001) Revised Taxonomy of Cognitive Domain. Their findings suggested that the listening and speaking activities in these books were characterized as low-level cognitive skills. This suggested that this textbook would not be for training the students for higher cognitive levels. They further argued that this calls for more attention to the need for employing extra and supplementary teaching materials to assist the learners to perform better in higher-order cognitive skills.

Furthermore, Ghasemi and Pasand (2018) evaluated the Prospect series with regard to their pragmatic suitability. The results indicated the

existence of all speech acts and functions in these textbooks with various frequencies.

In a mixed-method study, Elmiana (2018) examined the senior high school textbooks used in Indonesia. Nunan's (1999) taxonomy of task types was utilized as a framework for analysis. The results showed that the majority of task types were present in these textbooks. However, some task types, like prediction and discrimination tasks, did not appear at all. The findings further indicated that the most and least frequent task types were the linguistic and creative tasks respectively.

3. Methodology

The current mixed-method research focused on investigating task types and their frequency as well as examining the existence of a significant difference in the task types' frequency in First Friends English children's, books (1,2,3) which are covered in some language institutions in Iran. Accordingly, different tasks were extracted and classified in the selected textbooks utilizing Nunan's (1999) framework. The frequency and percentage of each task were also calculated and specified the most frequent task types and explore the significant differences in the frequency of different task types in these books.

3.1. Materials

The corpus of the current study includes the three First Friends English children's books by Susan Iannuzzi. This corpus was evaluated using Nunan's (1999) classification of the tasks. The list of the books is 1) First Friends 1 (student book), 2) First Friends 2 (student book), 3) First Friends 3 (student book).

Table 1. *Task Types (Nunan, 1999)*

Cognitive tasks	Interpersonal tasks	Linguistics tasks	Affective tasks	Creative tasks
Classifying	Co-operating	Conversational patterns	personalizing	Using new words in various tasks
Predicting	Role-playing	practicing	Self-evaluating	
Inducing Note-taking Concept mapping		Using context summarizing selective	Reflecting	
Inferencing		Reading/ listening skimming		
Discriminating Diagramming				

It also needs to be noted that Nunan (1999) divided tasks into five main groups according to the strategies underpinning them. Each of these tasks has sub-categories; therefore, twenty different micro tasks were classified under the main types of tasks. They include (a) cognitive, (b) interpersonal, (c) linguistic, (d) affective, and (e) creative.

3.1.1 Cognitive Tasks

Cognitive tasks comprise eight task types as sub-groups including classifying, predicting, inducing, note-taking, concept mapping, inferencing, discriminating, and diagramming. In order to make these tasks comprehensible, a short definition is given below for each of them.

Classifying: putting similar things in different groups

Predicting: foreseeing what may happen during learning

Inducing: observing patterns and arrangements

Note-taking: keeping a record of the important information in your own words

Concept mapping: using a map to show the main ideas in a text.

Inferencing: learn something new using what you already know

Discriminating: making a distinction between the main and supporting idea

Diagramming: labeling a diagram by the use of information from a text.

3.1.2 Interpersonal Tasks

The second type of major task is called interpersonal tasks including co-operating, and role-playing.

Co-operating: trying to share the learning experience with other students

Role-playing: imagining a new identity and using the language for the new situation.

3.1.3 Linguistic Tasks

Linguistic tasks, as the third type of macro tasks, constitute six micro task types containing: conversational patterns, practicing, using context, summarizing, selective reading/listening, and skimming.

Conversational patterns: mastering the ability to use expressions to handle a conversation.

Practicing: doing exercises and practice to improve both knowledge and skills of learners

Using context: guessing the meaning of words by using the context

Summarizing: presenting the most important points in a text.

Selective reading/listening: reading or listening only for important information, not trying to comprehend every single word.

Skimming: reading or listening to a text in order to get an overall idea.

3.1.4 Affective Tasks

Personalizing, self-evaluating, and reflecting tasks are the three sub-categories of affective tasks

Personalizing: trying to share ideas and feelings on a specific subject

Self-evaluating: rating yourself and evaluate how you learned

Reflecting: considering the best learning procedure for yourself

3.1.5 Creative Tasks

Brainstorming tasks are the only sub-category of creative tasks. Here is a short description of it.

Brainstorming tasks: encouraging the students to reflect on as many new ideas as they can

3.2. Data Collection Procedures

To collect the data, all the tasks in the available books were extracted and classified under their macro and micro stances based on Nunan's (1999) framework; subsequently, to increase its validity, the classification was crosschecked with two specialists in the field. Following that, the frequency of every task type and the most common and repeated task

types were calculated in each book. Finally, a comparison of these books was made with each other.

3.3. Data Analysis

In this study, data analysis was both qualitative and quantitative by nature. The qualitative phase included the extraction and classification of different task types in the selected book subtilizing. Nunan's (1999) framework. Then, different examples of task types in these books were mentioned and finally were examined the benefits of using every task type. The quantitative phase of the analysis comprised both descriptive frequency and percentage. Analyzing the collected data in the form of frequencies and percentages and organizing it through tables.

4. Results

Question 1) What task types are covered in First Friends English children's books taught in English language institutions?

As can be observed in Table 1, the majority of the macro and micro-task types were not present in the observed course books. The results indicated there was a complete absence of creativity in all books, and (Predicting, Inferencing, and Discriminating) which are related to cognitive activities have low percentages in three books.

Linguistic (with the exception of Using Context, Summarizing, Selective Listening/Reading, and Skimming) tasks were seen in all First Friends books. There was an absence of Self-Evaluating and Reflecting in Affective tasks, but Personalizing tasks are involved in all mentioned books. As it was observed, Interpersonal tasks were the most prevalent, with nearly all of its micro task types observed in the course books, as also Linguistic task types especially (Conversational patterns and Practicing).

Table 2. *Number, Frequencies, and Percentages of Tasks in Each Book*
Book= First Friends; F=Frequency; P%= Percentage

| Books / Task Types	Book 1	F	P	Book 2	F	P	Book 3	F	P
Classifying	3	3	2.8%	6	6	5.4%	1	1	1.1%
Predicting	0	0	0%	0	0	0%	0	0	0%
Inducing	10	10	9.4%	3	3	2.7%	0	0	0%
Taking Notes	10	10	9.4%	12	12	10.9%	9	9	10.7%
Concept Mapping	0	0	0%	1	1	0.9%	0	0	0%
Inferencing	0	0	0%	0	0	0%	0	0	0%
Discriminating	0	0	0%	0	0	0%	0	0	0%
Diagramming	1	1	0.9%	4	4	3.6%	0	0	0%
Cognitive (total)	**24**	**24**	**22.5%**	**26**	**26**	**23.5%**	**10**	**10**	**11.8%**
Co-operating	22	22	20.7%	25	25	22.7%	23	23	27.3%
Role Playing	29	29	27.3%	26	26	23.6%	30	30	35.7%
Interpersonal (total)	**51**	**51**	**48%**	**51**	**51**	**46.3%**	**53**	**53**	**63%**
Conversational pattern	10	10	9.4%	10	10	9%	10	10	11.9%
Practicing	20	20	18.8%	20	20	18.1%	9	9	10.7%
Using Context	0	0	0%	0	0	0%	0	0	0%
Summarizing	0	0	0%	0	0	0%	0	0	0%
Selective Listening/Reading	0	0	0%	0	0	0%	0	0	0%
Skimming	0	0	0%	0	0	0%	0	0	0%
Linguistic (total)	**30**	**30**	**28.2%**	**30**	**30**	**27.1%**	**19**	**19**	**22.6%**
Personalizing	1	1	0.9%	3	3	2.7%	2	2	2.3%
Self-Evaluating	0	0	0%	0	0	0%	0	0	0%
Reflecting	0	0	0%	0	0	0%	0	0	0%
Affective (total)	**1**	**1**	**0.9%**	**3**	**3**	**2.7%**	**2**	**2**	**2.3%**
Brainstorming	0	0	0%	0	0	0%	0	0	0%
Creative (total)	0	0	0%	0	0	0%	0	0	0%
Total	**106**	**106**	**0%**	**110**	**110**	**0%**	**84**	**84**	**0%**
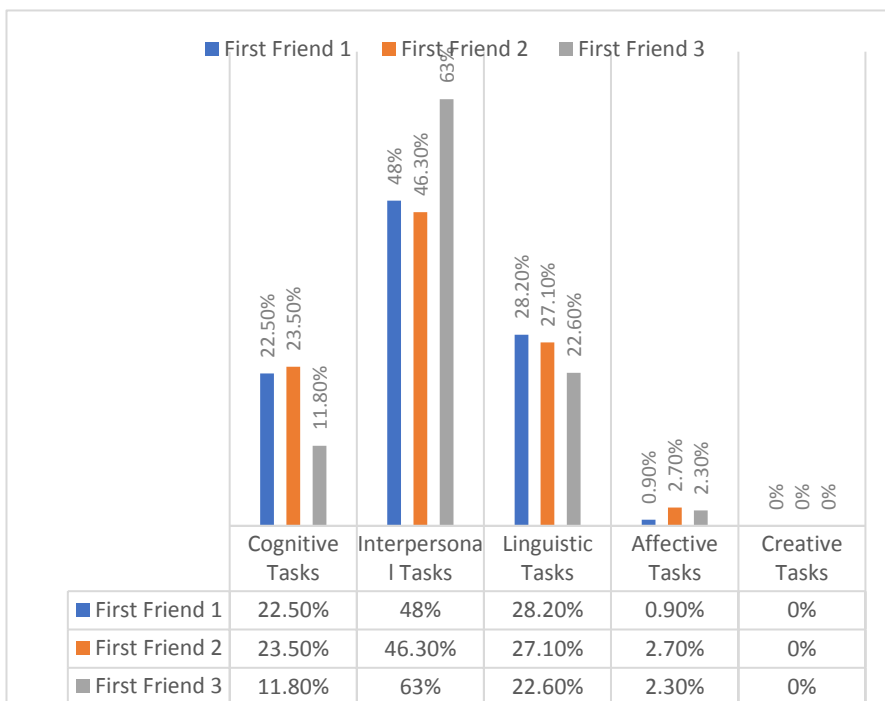
Figure 1. *The frequency of the macro task types in First Friends English Children's books*

Moreover, most of the microtask types were completely ignored and few of them had the least frequency in these course books. Accordingly, Table 2 showed the frequency of all macro task types in each course book. As can be seen in Figure 1, Interpersonal tasks were the most frequent task type in all of these course books. These tasks in First Friends1, First Friends 2, and First Friends 3 were covered 48%, 46.3%, and63%.

Table 3. *The order of macro task types*

Rank	First Friends 1	First Friends 2	First Friends 3
1	Interpersonal Tasks (48%)	Interpersonal Tasks (46.3%)	Interpersonal Tasks (63%)
2	Linguistic Tasks (28.2%)	Linguistic Tasks (27.1%)	Linguistic Tasks (22.6%)
3	Cognitive Tasks (22.5%)	Cognitive Tasks (23.5%)	Cognitive Tasks (11.8%)
4	Affective Tasks (0.9%)	Affective Tasks (2.7%)	Affective Tasks (2.3%)
5	Creative Tasks (0%)	Creative Tasks (0%)	Creative Tasks (0%)

Question 2) Is there any significant difference in the occurrence and frequency of task types in First Friends English Children's Books?

To answer this research question, table 2 which indicates the order of frequencies of each task (Interpersonal Task, Linguistic Task, Cognitive Task, Affective Task, and Creative Task) can help. The results indicated that the textbook (First Friend) is rich in new tasks and activities but not all kinds of the mentioned tasks. Although, course books contain most of them but 0% of creative tasks is obvious.

The First Friend number 1 is containing a considerable percentage of Interpersonal Tasks nearly 485% that is applicable. 28% of Linguistic Tasks were seen in this book which is in the second rank for this book. About cognitive Tasks that are so considerable for learners and learning, 22.5% is achieved by observation. The percentages which are related to the last two Tasks (Affective Tasks and Creative Tasks) are 0.9% and 0% which are not significant numbers and this frequency of tasks in First Friends is not admissible because learner in Task Based learning environment needs all kind of applicable and relevant tasks in order to reach his goal that is acquiring true elements of functional communications.

About the second First Friends, an English children's book, the frequencies of its tasks are able to see in Table 2, there is not a significant difference in the occurrence and frequency of task types. Because the percentage of Interpersonal Tasks that are in the first rank is about 46%, but the percentage of Creative Tasks that are the last in rank order is 0%.

First Friends number 3 also contains 63% Interpersonal Tasks, about 22.6% Linguistic Tasks, 11.8% Cognitive Tasks, and nearly 2.3% includes Affective Tasks, but the frequency and percentage of Creative Tasks is 0%. So, this is obvious that in observing one book's tasks, when one type of task accounts for 63% and the other is zero, it doesn't make sense. Therefore, the answer to the second question of the research is NO. Although there are considerable numbers of functional tasks in First Friends as English children's books, there is not any significant difference in the occurrence and frequency of task types in them.

Moreover, each task can have a significant role in the development of diverse necessary skills in the learners. According to Nunan (1999), these tasks can help learners to memorize vocabulary items very easily. Similarly, focusing on tasks can lead to more efficient learning outcomes and prepare the learners better for the acquisition of new materials (Nunan, 1999). Nunan (1999) also asserted that making an inference is considered to be a very important strategy to be learned by learners. This kind of task provides the learners with a good chance to refer back to their

background knowledge when trying to learn a new language. According to Nunan (1999), learning includes making a relationship between old and new information and this is best practiced in this type of task. The lack of the mentioned task type (Creative) can be regarded as an important limitation and drawback.

5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the First Friends English children's books towards task–based learning (TBL). The aim also was to examine the appropriateness of tasks and activities in these books. To collect the data, all the tasks in the available books were extracted and classified under their macro and micro stances based on Nunan's (1999) framework; subsequently, to increase its validity, the classification was crosschecked with two specialists in the field. Following that, the frequency of every task type and the most common and repeated task types were calculated in each book. Finally, a comparison of these books was made with each other in terms of the frequency of their macro task types. Analyzing the collected data in the form of frequencies and percentages and organizing shown through the tables. Analyzing the tasks and activities in the textbook according to the checklist. The results of the study were discussed and recommendations were presented.

As can be observed in Table 1, the majority of the macro and micro-task types were not present in the observed course books. The results indicated there was a complete absence of creativity in all books, and (Predicting, Inferencing, and Discriminating) which are related to cognitive activities are also totally absent in three books.

Linguistic (with the exception of Using Context, Summarizing, Selective Listening/Reading, and Skimming) tasks are seen in all First Friends books. There was an absence of Self-Evaluating and Reflecting in Affective tasks, but Personalizing tasks are involved in all mentioned books.

As it was observed, Interpersonal tasks were the most prevalent, with nearly all of its micro task types observed in the course books, as also Linguistic task types especially (Conversational patterns and practicing). The next most frequent task types Inducing and Taking Notes that are related to Cognitive.

To answer research question 2, the results in Table 2 indicated that the textbook is rich in new tasks and activities but not all kinds of the mentioned tasks. Although, course books contain most of them, 0% of creative tasks is obvious. First Friend number 1 is congaing considerable percentage of Interpersonal Tasks nearly 48% that is applicable. 28% of

Linguistic Tasks seen in this book it is in the second rank for this book. About cognitive Tasks that were so considerable for learners and learning, 22.5% was achieved by observation. The percentages which were related to the last two Tasks (Affective Tasks and Creative Tasks) that were 0.9% and 0% were not significant numbers and this frequency of tasks in First Friends 1 was not admissible because learner in a Task-Based learning environment needs all kind of applicable and relevant tasks in order to reach his goal that is acquiring true elements of functional communications. About the second First Friends, an English children's book, the frequencies of its tasks are able to see in Table 2, there was not a significant difference in the occurrence and frequency of task types. Because the percentage of Interpersonal Tasks that are in the first rank is about 46%, but the percentage of Creative Tasks that are the last in rank order is 0%. First Friends number 3 also contains 63% Interpersonal Tasks, about 22.6% Linguistic Tasks, 11.8% Cognitive Tasks, and nearly 2.3% includes Affective Tasks, but the frequency and percentage of Creative Tasks is 0%. So, this was obvious that in observing one book's tasks, when one type of task accounts for 63% and the other is zero, it doesn't make sense. Therefore, the answer to the second question of the research is NO. Although there were considerable numbers of functional tasks in First Friends as English children's books, there was not any significant difference in the occurrence and frequency of task types in them.

6. Conclusion

Thus, the overall results of the study showed the main strengths and weaknesses of TBL in the textbook and in First Friends English children's books that are taught in some English language institutions in Iran.

The results of the current study showed that most of the task types which were proposed by Nunan (1999), were not in fact included in the First Friends English children's books used in Iran. The findings indicated that adequate attention was not devoted to all of the macro task types. While, according to the communicative approach, communicative competence necessitates the inclusion of grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competencies, the findings of the current study revealed that Interpersonal Tasks have been over-emphasized by these coursebooks, and other competencies have been excluded. Based on our findings and results, it can be argued that exposing learners to such course books will culminate in learners' competence in producing interpersonal appropriate utterances, while at the same time creativity inappropriate. It is also worth mentioning that nonexistence the of

creativity tasks may fail to prepare the students for real-life communication. This is in spite of the fact that in today's multicultural world, using functional and creative language learners are more than ever required to develop communicative competence in order to be able to successfully interact with interlocutors from different languages and cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, despite the fact that First Friends English children's books were considered the new generation, of course, books to be used in some English language institutions in Iran, they were not yet balanced in terms of the frequency of the various task types. Therefore, it can be concluded that on account of so fine quality of task type distribution, the learners exposed to these course books might be competent in one specific facet of language learning. With respect to the inadequacies of these course books observed in this study, language teachers are encouraged to pay more attention to this issue and help the learners by applying a more communicative type of activities in English language institutions in Iran and supplementing different types of tasks together, and using authentic materials. We argued that language teachers need to take care of the pitfalls by compensating for the deficiencies of the aforementioned course books, as no textbook is perfect. Moreover, the results of this research can provide first-hand valuable information to the material developers and widen their insight with regard to the significance of including a fair share of different areas of knowledge (e.g., task types).

This is so important since through a revision of the teaching materials, the whole curriculum may be refined and improved. Finally, just like any research study, the present study was not also void of limitations. First of all, the evaluation of the series was only made on their task types and their frequencies.

The results of this study, like any other piece of research, should be approached and applied with caution since this study suffered from a number of limitations. Due to the nature of this research, which was in fact a study of the content of the textbook and did not require classroom observations, there was no significant limitation for the researchers, but according to experience, teachers in educational centers such as schools or English institutions, sometimes during Teaching make changes in advancing the classroom process. For example, if a teacher, based on his experiences, notices a lack of activity in a part of the book, he tries to plan an activity for the learners so that the required performance and activity are done in the relevant discussion. For example, despite the lack of zero having a number of activities related to creativity in the mentioned books (English children's books First Friends 1,2,3), sometimes the teacher fills

the gap with a special function and the learner experiences all the desired activities in the classroom in a suitable way.

Therefore, the limitation that can be mentioned is that because the research has only examined the books, there is no information about the activities that the teacher has done outside the content of the book in the classroom.

Future studies may explore these course books from different perspectives. Also, interested researchers may investigate studies to explore the general trend of the improvements of the First Friends English children's books used in the EFL context (English language institutions) of Iran over time. Studies designed to check the extent and frequency of interpersonal, linguistic, cognitive, affective, and creative tasks in First Friends English children's workbooks.

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