

Surface Structure and Deep Structure in the Top Stars 4A EFL Textbook: A Textual Analysis

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ABSTRACT:

This study is qualitative textbook analysis of Top Stars Student Textbook, focusing on its surface and deep structure. The examination delineates two research questions which surface structural features are manifested in the textbook and Which deep structural dimensions are embedded in it. The units, stories, dialogues, visual materials, grammar sections, and cultural texts of this textbook provided data. The analysis shows that the textbook has a highly organised surface structure, which is demonstrated by sequencing, repetition of lessons, visual scaffolding and control of language input. These characteristics make the book user-friendly at a young age. At the deep structural level, however, the textbook's consistent supply of social and moral values such as being on time, working with others, thanking, being responsible, keeping healthy, and obeying. The text portrays cultural diversity, showcasing varied religions, ethnic groups, and lifestyles. The textbook is quite effective for beginner level English learning. However, its deep structure is traditional and has limited critical depth. The Top Stars 4A book proves to be pedagogically functional even though the book does not allow ideological reflection, comparison or critical literacy.

Keywords: surface structure; deep structure; EFL textbook; hidden curriculum; textbook analysis.

Introduction

Textbooks are perhaps the most influential pedagogical tool in formal education. A significant effect textbook have on the human brain is not only what they learn, but how they learn. Scholars have always talked about two analytical planes in textbook content. The surface structure makes up the observable and tangible features of textbooks. This includes things like visual design, language, layout and explicit content. The deep structure, on the other hand, refers to the ideological, semantic and pedagogical hidden in a text (Chacón-Díaz,

2022). The importance of this distinction is for the design, evaluation and critique of teaching materials. The next sections examine the conceptual meaning of this duality and its application to textbook analysis.

Defining Surface Structure in Textbooks

The textbook's surface structure refers to the immediately viewable and physically perceivable features of a text. These are graphical elements, typography, images, choice of words, construction of sentences, metatextual organization, among chapter units and elsewhere. According to researcher Jian (2022), surface-level

features influence not only what a reader remembers but also how the information is mentally encoded during reading. According to Chacón-Díaz (2022), the aspects generally evaluated under surface structure analyze linguistic accessibility, visual aspects, sequence of content and topics' frequency. The quality of these features shapes reading engagement and comprehension outcomes as they are the first point of contact of the learner with the material.

Surface structures are quantifiable and can be observed directly, being the most frequently evaluated dimension in standard textbook analyses. Research that has specifically explored ELT coursebooks for language has systematically documented patterns of surface representation. These are mainly the frequency of culturally specific images, gendered language and lexical diversity. All of these are useful indicators of the quality of textbooks (Afrida, 2017). An analysis based on surface only invites what Chomsky's transformational generative grammar tradition warns against, mistaking form for meaning and treating what is said as equivalent to what is meant.

Understanding Deep Structure in Textbooks

The deep structure is operating at another level which is more implicit in nature. At this structure, the ideological, epistemic, relational, structures are encoded. In educational materials, deep structure manifests through hidden curricula. The unspoken values, worldviews and assumptions about learners and about society are systematically taught through choices of content, patterns of representation, and framing of narrative (Chacón-Díaz, 2022). The deep structure found within textbooks also encompasses, further, the epistemological hierarchies encoded in how knowledge is presented – which disciplines are privileged, whose voices are centered, which forms of reasoning are modeled as legitimate. The research conducted by Schnotz et al. (2014) discovered that, under certain conditions, it was the deep structure of the respective graphic (and not the surface structure!) that would influence the ability of learners to construct a mental model of the

graphic (Schnotz et al., 2015). The results of the research show that the deep structural features are less visible than surface features, but they have a more lasting cognitive and ideological impact on learners.

The Interplay Between Surface and Deep Structure

The association between surface and deep structure is not binary but dialectical: surface features are often the means through which deep-structural meanings are inscribed and communicated. The interplay of contents calls for a layering methodological approach that goes beyond the counting of frequency of occurrence of language contents to critical discourse analysis/ideological critique (Chacón-Díaz, 2022). On the surface, a textbook may seem culturally or gender-balanced. However, its deep structure selectively omits, frames, and uses evaluative language to continue reproducing hegemonic narratives.

Van Dijk (2018) believes that the analysis of discourse must aim at the surface structure, but also, primarily, at the deep structures which are socio-cognitive that organize the production of meaning. This principle certainly implicates research in a textbook critique. Analysis of EFL/ESL textbooks by researchers revealed that covert curricula, the expression of deep structure, reinforce cultural imperialism and gender asymmetry relatively consistently despite varying surface structure (Hassaskhahti & Abdollahi, 2021). Understanding this interaction is therefore fundamental for understanding how textbooks can be made less lexically complex, ideologically fair and pedagogically sound.

Research Questions

The present study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What surface structural features are manifested in the analyzed textbooks?

RQ2: What deep structural dimensions are embedded within the analyzed textbooks, and how do they reflect underlying ideological orientations?

Literature Review

Surface and Deep Features in Teaching and Learning

The distinction between the surface structure and deep structure from instructional material has been more apparent in the research on instruction quality. According to Praetorius et al. (2018), the surface features of instructions refer to classroom management and task presentation, which you can observe and arrange. In contrast, deep features that support meaningful learning are cognitive activation, student engagement, and construction of meaning. The educational psychologists researched empirical findings emphasizing the greater conceptual clarity between these two dimensions and their interdependence with the teaching field. This theoretical distinction refers especially to textbook research. This is because the learning experience is simultaneously embedded in and actively shaped within the two structures of surface and deep.

Surface Structure: Visible Design and Explicit Content

When analyzing teaching materials, the surface structure is the text organization, graphics and layout, words, headings, sequencing by chapters that the students can easily see through and understand the content. Through their critical content analysis of EFL textbooks for ethnic Mongol students in China, Xiang & Yenika-Agbaw (2021) show that surface-level variables (in this case, the frequency distribution of cultures across Inner, Outer, and Expanding circle countries) can be quantified and categorised systematically. The distribution of surface representations was highly unbalanced, with certain cultural groups getting access to a greater share of images and texts. The structural choices are not pedagogically neutral in any way that is 'surface' and the selection of what is made visible is a formulating action insofar as it constitutes an implicit act of cultural valuation.

Deep Structure: Ideology and Knowledge Construction

Surface structure refers to the form of textbook content whilst deep structure refers to the ideological function of the textbook content. Deep structure refers to how textbooks construct subjectivity, normalize worldviews and reproduce social hierarchies through their logic of organization. Shah (2023) analysed Pakistani national textbooks as ideological apparatuses and demonstrated their deep structural mechanisms (i.e. the selective historical narratives, alterity construction, and competing discourses of nationhood) which impact the epistemic orientations of the learners beyond their overt content. His study shows that textbooks don't just transmit knowledge but construct national and social identities at a deeper level than what surface reading would indicate. According to Shah (2023), a deep-seated structural ideological function operates most effectively when it is least visible at the surface level.

Power Relations in Textbook Knowledge Systems

The deep structure of textbooks has an important dimension concerning memory or reproduction of power relations in knowledge selection. The textbook series analysed by Xiang and Yenika-Agbaw (2021) exhibited large-scale but stereotyped representations of race, ethnicity, gender and social class. The researchers note that these subsector asymmetries reflect deeper structural asymmetries, such as knowledge producers, versus passive victims, and other such positions. Likewise, Jalalian Daghigh & Abdul Rahim (2021) proved that the foreign importation of ELT textbooks into Malaysian classrooms brings with them deep structural neoliberal ideology individualism, consumerism, and market-oriented subjectivity which are invisible at surface language instructions. Collectively, these studies confirm that textbooks' ideological aspects are most accurately measured not merely through content audit but through frameworks capable of probing deeper structural levels.

Methodological Approaches to Dual-Level Textbook Analysis

Scholars increasingly argue that an analytical framework that combines content analysis with a critical discourse approach at the surface and deep levels allows for deeper analysis of textbooks. Hattie & Donoghue (2016) set up the empirical basis for treating surface and deeper engagement with educational content as analyzable separable dimensions. They described that learning takes place through three phases: Surface, Deep and Transfer and this requires different types of teaching. Shah (2023) employed the critical discourse lens with the aid of the ideological apparatus theory to showcase that textbooks not only make explicit content choices but also structural silences in order to naturalize norms. This is something which is completely overlooked by conventional superficial judgments. This dualistic perspective gives the study the analytical framework it needs for the present examination. More specifically, the study uses a systematic approach that involves both the explicit and implicit meaning of the textbook.

Methodology

Research Design

This study attempts to determine the obvious and hidden message in the textbook by using qualitative textbook design analysis. The textual and visual aspects are directly related to surface structure. There are various levels of interpretation for the deep structure from the perspective of various ideologies. Represented and omitted. Mullet (2018) notes that critical discourse analysis is especially suited for this purpose to help researchers interpret the ways in which texts create and normalize social meanings in ways that go beyond their literal sense. The study has been organized around two research questions: What are the surface structural features shown in the textbooks and what are the deep structural features found in the textbooks?

Data and Sampling

The unit of analysis is the Qatari Top Stars Student Textbook in Grade 4A. Analysis is

composed of chapters, reading passages, activities and images. The textbook was purposively chosen as it provides the main teaching and learning materials and often conveys curriculum content and covert messages. Unit selection for sampling will focus on the units which are more likely to reflect the instructional priorities and ideological framing. This should include initial lessons, reading texts, cultural sections included, images used, etc. Using this approach enables a systematic comparison of the explicit organization of content with the implicit meanings that a range of different materials is able to suggest. This process is similar to the approach of textbook discourse studies which focus on books as socially constructed artifacts rather than a neutral instructional material (Jalalian Daghigh & Abdul Rahim, 2021; Xiang & Yenika-Agbaw, 2021).

Analytical Procedure

The process of analysis is in two stages. The first method adopted involves a descriptive content analysis of the linguistic, visual and organizational features of text (vocabulary difficulty and sentence patterns, topic distribution, image layout, and cultural reference balance). The second step in the analysis of the deep structure consists of achievement of interpretative coding to identify ideological assumptions, hidden curriculum, representational bias and power relations enmeshed in the text(s). This step examines the "privileged" and "ignored" aspects, the "normal" and "silenced" aspects, of the textbook. This agrees with critical approaches towards educational texts (Shah, 2023). For deep level interpretation, surface observations are used to compare with the deep level to increase the rigour of the analysis, and to determine if the deeper meaning is hidden in the surface meaning or exposed.

Trustworthiness

A concrete coding schema was created to provide transparency to the data with repeated reading of the data presented in the textbooks in order to enhance the trustworthiness of the research. Lateral and vertical comparison of codes is done throughout the writeup to refine them. Analytic

decisions are recorded, ensuring an audit trail. Interpretive claims that are well-grounded in text and connected to the study's research questions are less likely to be overread. A recent publication (Mullet, 2018) provides a more systematic discourse analysis approach, calling for a certain degree of interpretative reflexivity and explicit justification of claims made. The final analysis therefore aims to provide a reasonable account of both the manifest and latent dimensions of textbook discourse.

Results

Surface Structure

The analysis reveals that the surface organization of the Top Stars 4A is very much controlled and structured pedagogically. The structure of the textbook is modular, and every module is clearly labelled. The modules follow a recurring pattern that follows a song, a main reading or dialogue, a grammar presentation, vocabulary practice, speaking tasks, a project, phonics and a round-up. Through this repetition, the book achieves a high level of formal consistency and, most likely, reduces the cognitive load on young learners as they come across the same architecture from one module to the next. Module 1 from pp. 7 to 18 introduces routines, time, date, festival, and nationality. The module uses a predictable sequence of listening, short dialogue, visual, and review. Module 2 on pp. 19–30 employs the same format for school subjects, hobbies, and preferences while Module 3 uses the pattern to actions, helping behaviour, and household chores on pp. 31–42. The surface structure of the textbook is also multi-modal. The colorful illustrations, pictorial vocabulary, tables, boxed rules of grammar and matching activities reinforce meaning, in addition to the printed text. The school transportation lesson on pp. for instance, 8–10 combines a bus stop conversation with questions based on timetables and choice picking listening tasks which make the abstract concept of time more concrete for learners. Similarly, the library-rules poster on p. 38 displays the library's obligations in the form of short statements like 'You have to be quiet' and 'You have to leave before 9.00'. While these statements

are supported by layout and poster genre conventions and not via long explanation. The surface structure of the textbook is designed to help see, understand and use the book. Another significant surface feature is the sequencing of grammar and vocabulary. New structures are usually introduced in short, contextualized exchanges and then practice-based reinforcement takes place. An instance of previously learnt language re-encountered is the use of adverbs of frequency and routines on pp. 7–9; the introduction of 'have to / don't have to' in the domestic responsibility lessons on pp. 34–38 is an example of a new item, as is countable / uncountable noun patterns in the food unit on pp. 43–46. The grammar reference pages later explicitly summarize these items, thus reinforcing the formal transparency and instructional sequentially of the textbook. To put it simply, the surface structure is coherent, repetitive and strongly scaffolded.

Deep Structure

At the level of its deep structure, the textbook conveys a moral and social outlook. Through the various modules, children are often portrayed as punctual, courteous, helpful, clean, family-oriented, and cooperative. The beginning pages of Module 1 present an incident where Karim was late. This is significant as a frame of reference as it establishes responsibility for punctuation on the part of the child whereas the authority of the teacher is established as legitimate and corrective. On pages 1062-1068 of Module 3, which speaks of the helping behaviour more openly, children are portrayed as washing cars, raking leaves, picking up rubbish, and collecting money "to help animals". The underlying message here is not just that these are topics for learning language, but that good children are useful, responsible, and socially responsive.

There is the same pattern in the family and community roles assigned in the book. On pg. 34–35 assignments for the home are considered normal and expected. Zoe and Emma talk about making beds, setting tables, washing dishes, shoveling snow and so on. The textbook normalizes the domestic responsibility of

children in terms of their everyday socialization and does not dispute its division in the household. The classroom rules on p. 38 and library rules reinforce submission, orderly behaviour and self-control through institutional language like “You have to be quiet” and “You have to have a library card”. These instances indicate that the deep structure exhibits discipline and compliance as civic virtues. The textbook is also loaded with a strong moral discussion on food, health and consumption. Throughout Module 4, food is more than just vocabulary. It is also a space of judgement and behavioral guidance. On p. 46, the “Food Quiz” classifies learned people as, ‘very healthy’, ‘healthy, but not very healthy’ and ‘not very healthy’, based on their eating habits. The CLIL science page (p. 53) similarly states that walnuts, carrots, and tomatoes are foods that are good for the brain, eyes, heart, and hair. It associates these foods with a ritual of the body and self-taking care of them. This produces a message of deep structure in which people are required to make moral food decisions and health becomes a part of responsible identity formation. There is a cultural representation but it's selective, harmonious but not critical. Qatar, the UK, Colombia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Canada, Tunisia, Morocco, Korea, China and the USA are mentioned at pp. 10–13, 29, 65–66. However, these references are typically made in the context of a celebration or festival, a sport or just a national label without sophisticated history or social critique. In Qatar, for example, generosity and celebration are linked to Eid al-Adha on page 10 and the school boat in Bangladesh and Forest School in Canada are regarded as interesting and positive variations in education on page 29. Diversity might show up at the surface level. Yet, it is built at the deep level by agreeable and non-conflictual discourses.

Discussion

The research results show that the textbook is very effective at first order level as it provides a stable and very manageable instructional design. Its repetitive structure associated with strong visual scaffolding and careful grammar sequencing make it well suited to the primary EFL classroom which is usually characterized by

predictability and clarity. Essentially, the manual takes away the uncertainty both teachers and students have regarding the subject. So, for instance, each module informs them what type of subject it is, how they will practice it and how they will review it. One of the book's strong points and the reason why it seems pedagogically efficient. Simultaneously, the textbooks deep structure reveals that it does not only teach English. It always informs the learning community more about what behavior, habits, and identity are desirable. In this book, good learners arrive on time, help at home, assist others, respect teachers, eat healthy food, follow the rules, and positively involve in family and community life. The book is presented not merely as a text about language itself, but also as having a moral function. These two sets of values are in themselves not problematic. However, together the two show that the book functions as a moral text as much as a language text. The significance of this argument lies in the fact that while the textbook's hidden curriculum may not be politically radical or ideological, it is nevertheless powerful since it “naturalizes” a particular model of “the good child”. Another problem with Chalabi's book is that it tends to shy away from tension, contradiction, and critique. Cultural and social diversity is seldom represented authentically, instead of referenced in sanitized forms, like festival-hobby-school-sports glories. While students are exposed to difference, they are not exposed to disagreement, inequality, and competing perspectives. The examples of alternative education mentioned next (on p. 29) have been introduced to frame the discussion about either access to school or about social context but are presented only as ‘interesting school experiences’. Similarly, domestic work on pp 1062-1068 is portrayed as normal responsibility without an invitation to reflect on gender, fairness, or division of labour. This means the textbook supports consensus over dissenting and critical literacy.

As a result, the textbook will have greater interpretative opportunities while retaining effectiveness. The clarity and sequencing already present in this material could also lend strong

support to more reflective questions, wider representation and a simple kind of comparison that require learners not just to identify, but to interpret and evaluate. The text is helpful for controlled language development and moral socialization; but not very effective for helping learners examine ways in which the texts represent reality or develop critical awareness.

Conclusion

In general, Top Stars 4A is a strong textbook pedagogically with a clear and carefully scaffolded surface structure which supports the learning of English at primary level. The deep structure of the text promotes values such as responsibility, cooperation, health awareness, gratitude and obedience. However, the text conveys these values through conventional and largely uncritical patterns. Consequently, the textbook is a highly functional EFL learning resource but limited in its critical engagement, ideological inquiry, and social reflection potential.

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Recommendations

For future editions of the textbook, I would recommend keeping the clear surface organization while embellishing its deep structure. This can be achieved by incorporating more varied family and social roles, widening representation across gender and background, and adding short age-appropriate questions so all learners can be encouraged to compare perspectives, explain opinions and notice differences in social experience. The cultural sections might also move beyond celebration towards simple reflection by asking why practices differ from country to country and how people live differently. Similarly, a small number of interpretive tasks along the lines of the stone age, the rules, the food, the school, and the family life can be included. These tasks can help promote some thinking instead of repetition. These alterations would keep the text at a reasonable reading level while also increasing its educational and social value.