Students' perception of "American English File Multipack 3" – a study at people's security university

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ABSTRACT

Keywords: American English File Multipack 3, coursebook, perception, students

Coursebooks are of the utmost importance to language classes, and selecting a good textbook is of great value. Amongst them, the coursebook *American English File Multipack 3 (AEF3)* was chosen and has been used at People's Security University (PSU) for six years now. This study was designed to have a more critical view of AEF3 that could help identify features of the coursebook from PSU students' perspectives. Due to the scope of the study, only five aspects, namely *Layout and design*, *Activities*, *Skills*, *Language type* and *Subject and content*, were chosen to be investigated. In this study, a quantitative method was opted to conduct, and the data were accumulated through coursebook evaluation form returned by 85 students. The findings of the study revealed that under students' perspective, although there existed certain drawbacks in AEF3, was still evaluated positively. And thus, it is obvious that AEF3 is an appropriate coursebook for the context of PSU.

Introduction

Today there is a variety of English Language Teaching (ELT) materials accessible, with numerous up-to-date, financially available headings introduced every year. ELT materials, moreover, are considered useful supports for learning a language. Nothing is perfect, and neither do coursebooks. The assessment of materials, therefore, is worthy of solemn consideration. Cunningsworth (1995) supposed that coursebook evaluation creates favourable conditions for teachers to move beyond generalized valuations and facilitates them to get valuable, truthful, logical, and circumstantial understandings of the general character of the material. Tomlinson (2011) advocated that it is unable to generate a "model framework" for all material evaluations. He also emphasized that the elements that determine the framework are "the reasons, objectives, and circumstances of the evaluation". According to Cunningsworth (1995), "it is important to limit the number of criteria used, and the number of questions asked to manageable proportions". Or else, we endanger being overwhelmed by details.

The research problem underlying the current study arises out of the context of the PSU. Up to now, the coursebook AEF3, one of the coursebook series reported to be suitable in a variety of educational institutions in the world, has been introduced and employed in the curriculum of PSU for six years. Nevertheless, many students of PSU complain that English is one of the biggest obstacles on their way to achieving a BA Degree in Security Science. The aims of the study comprise (1) pointing out the actual characteristics of the coursebook AEF3 under students' perception in the context of PSU; (2) figuring out the particular advantages and disadvantages of this coursebook; and (3) proposing respective and feasible pedagogical suggestions to facilitate the students in using the coursebook AEF3.

Theoretically, this study will reveal more obviously the relationship between teaching materials, especially the coursebooks, and learning effectiveness. Practically, the results of this study would be significant to all the teachers and students of PSU. They have been engaged in the process of learning or teaching English as a foreign language with the coursebook AEF3. Moreover, the study would be helpful not only to teachers and administrators but also to material developers and syllabus planners.

Literature review

Coursebooks

Many scholars have suggested their own definitions for textbooks/ coursebooks. The teacher has traditionally utilized coursebooks as a guide to assist shape learning and offer additional resources for the student in the classroom and at home (Weng et al., 2018). Its aim is to assist foreign learners of English in improving their linguistic knowledge and/or communicative ability. Within this definition is a variety of diverse examples, ranging from books aimed at general English contexts to those centering upon any one of a number of specialist applications. Some try to acquire universal aptitude across a widespread front, while others emphasize more closely on particular skills. Many coursebooks have supplementary materials like teacher's books, cassettes, videos, workbooks, and multi-media programs. Furthermore, it has been identified that they are the collection of tools teachers utilize to access and share information about educational resources with their learners. (Getie, 2020, as cited in Le & Le, 2022).

Existing in the printed form, coursebooks are deemed to play a crucial role in English instructional programs. According to Tomlinson (2011), coursebooks:

> ...aims to provide as much as possible in one book and is designed so that it could serve as the only book which the learners necessarily use during a course. Such a book usually includes work on grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and reading, writing, listening and speaking skills.

Having a similar claim to Tomlinson's, Tran et al. (2021) believe that if learners' needs and preferences are included in the learning resources, this will appeal to students' demands for information processing. Additionally, Hutchinson and Torres (1994) have clarified that coursebooks are a central section of innovation. They propose that coursebooks can back up the teachers by possibly intimidating change courses; moreover, they introduce innovative

methodologies, introduce transformation gradually, and generate a framework upon which teachers can construct more innovative methods of their own.

Coursebooks evaluation

Evaluation is a practice of investigation in which information is collected over different means and from various sources. The result of this process is clarified to make important judgements based on the study's results. These judgements may demand a modification and wield a certain influence over a big change in the framework and the practice of a language curriculum. All these works are carried out to advance an ELT course and yield agreeable outcomes.

Evaluating coursebooks is crucial for the development of a language program since it reveals specific advantages and disadvantages of the resources being used (Tran et al., 2020). The coursebook has to be evaluated after some period of usage whether it has succeeded in meeting users' needs or not. Different ideas for evaluating materials have been developed. The process of evaluating a coursebook involves gathering information, making decisions based on that information, and, most importantly, determining if the material is pertinent to the curriculum's learning goals.

Coursebook evaluation, moreover, would be beneficial in eventually supporting teachers with optimizing the use of a book's strengths and identifying the weaknesses of a particular aspect of a coursebook. As emphasized by Cunningsworth (1995), coursebook evaluation is to identify particular strengths and weaknesses in coursebooks already in use. Evaluating coursebooks, likewise, can be a valuable constituent of teacher guiding programs because it pursues the dual objective of making teachers conscious of principal features to seek in coursebooks whilst acquainting them with a lot of available language teaching materials.

Criteria and frameworks to evaluate a coursebook

Evaluating a coursebook is an important endeavour for matching materials to both teacher and student. Just as there is no universal coursebook for learners, there is no one model for evaluation (Tomlinson, 2011). In order to facilitate the process of evaluating coursebooks, a variety of frameworks have emerged based on various principles and criteria. To find a suitable evaluation method, past frameworks and their subjectivity are examined and described as follows.

Many experts have supported a very detailed investigation of the language content of a coursebook, which has resulted in the formation of general evaluation checklists. Typically, the evaluation process comprises of two or three evaluation stages or levels. Cunningsworth (1995) described these stages as a general impression and in-depth evaluation. He claimed that coursebooks ought to be consistent with learners' needs, facilitate learners in their language learning, assist users in their teaching and learning process, and play an important role in supporting students' learning.

Having a perspective in categorizing a coursebook' aspects to evaluate, Littlejohn (1998) stated that there are two groups of evaluating aspects, namely publication and design. Publication

relates to the tangible or physical aspects of the materials and how they appear as a complete set, whether on paper or electronically. The second section (design) relates to the thinking underlying the materials. This entangles consideration of the clear objectives of the coursebooks and the way to choose and sequence all the content, task, activities, and language in the coursebooks.

Making another contribution to the material evaluation field, Litz (2005) proposed his own questionnaires based on the "specific concerns and priorities" of his research site. Litz's research was conducted by discussing and describing the complicated evaluation practice by aiming to clarify the pedagogical value and appropriateness of a coursebook for a particular language curriculum. Figure 1 demonstrates Litz's scaffold, which comprises many criteria that are relevant and contextually suitable to assess coursebooks utilized in ELT classrooms.
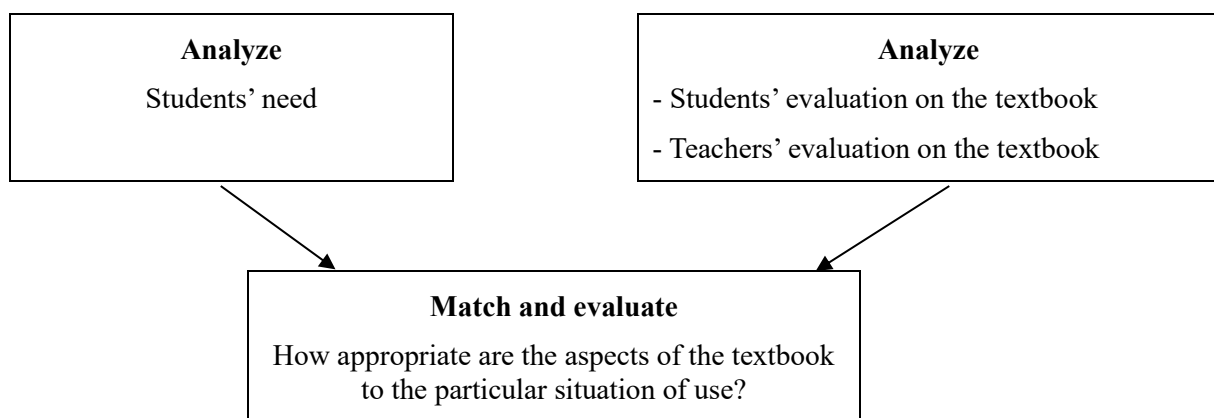

Figure 1: Litz's framework on coursebook evaluation (2005)

Litz's (2005) model is believed to be well suited to the need of the current study. However, due to the scope of this study, only students' perceptions of the coursebook are taken into account to answer the research question mentioned below.

Review of related studies

ELT coursebooks are considered to have made an enormous contribution in most language classrooms. However, the tangible function of coursebooks in teaching ESL/ EFL has recently been debatable in the field of ELT. The popular arguments in these years have been mostly related to certain characteristics of coursebooks, including layout and design, methodological validity, adaptability, the authenticity of language presented, appropriateness of gender, content and culture have shown, etc.

Being considered as both an ESL and EFL coursebook, American English File was investigated by Haghverdi& Ghasemi (2013). This study assesses the American English File series by the utilization of Littlejohn's (1998) framework to investigate the series' explicit features, pedagogic values, the match between the actual and claimed objectives, and merits and demerits. ELT experts and ELT teachers helped the researchers rate the evaluative checklists. The study led to a conclusion that though there existed a number of drawbacks to the American

English File series, its pedagogic merits and encouraging features were much more valuable than its shortcomings or drawbacks.

Another research on evaluating the American English File coursebook was conducted by Shahriari and Tabrizi (2014) based on Cunningsworth's (1995) model. The participants were selected from the total population of available intermediate and advanced students at an English Institute in Kerman. The questionnaire, which was declared to be the only instrument of this research, was a modified version of Cunningsworth's (1995) checklist. The results of this study revealed that the American English File coursebook was assessed to be of beneficial value because it reached the standards of a good coursebook according to Cunningsworth's (1995) criteria.

Another noteworthy research was carried out by Hashemi and Borhani (2015). These authors aimed to examine the "American English File" series in the Iran EFL context. In order to do this, 23 teachers whose qualifications varied from B.A. to PhD and whose ages ranged between 24 and 37 participated in a questionnaire adapted from Litz (2000). Results of the study revealed that the American English File series proved suitable and appropriate to acquire the objectives set by not only ELT teachers but also the language institutes.

Based on the research mentioned above, it is undeniable that there has been a variety of research to evaluate the American English File series in various places. These studies, in general, have proved that regardless of its demerits, the series' merits still outweigh the drawbacks for international learners in such places. However, there has not been any evaluation on using AEF3 at PSU, whereas it has been approved to be utilized for six years. In this vein, an evaluation on AEF3 is determined to be carried out in PSU as described below.

Research Questions

With the purpose of acquiring satisfactory outcomes, the study endeavours to answer the research question: "***How is the coursebook AEF3 evaluated under the students' perception?***"

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The population of the research comprises 175 students at PSU who are taking English classes with the AEF3 coursebook. These students were grouped into four classes right from the beginning of the first university semester. Based on the placement test held at the beginning of the English course, it is obvious that the students of these four classes are at all levels, including level 1, level 2 and level 3. The author tried hard to get data from all these classes. However, due to administrative constraints, only two classes could be approached to send evaluation forms. Ninety-three evaluation forms were sent out, and 85 were returned.

Data collection & analysis

The instrument of the study was a Coursebook Evaluation Form, which elicits the criteria of a coursebook for English courses. The Coursebook Evaluation Form was adapted to the context

of PSU by the researchers. The sixteen-question original version developed by Litz (2005) covers seven dimensions (namely *Practical Considerations*, *Layout and Design*, *Activities*, *Skills*, *Language Type*, *Subject and Content*, and *Overall Consensus)* and applies a Likert-type of 10 ranges. Excluding the *Practical Considerations* dimension, because the students are given the coursebook for free, the adapted one included five evaluation criteria (1) *Layout and Design*, (2) *Activities*, (3) *Skills*, (4) *Language Type*, (5) *Subject and Content*, and (6) *Overall Consensus.* In this study, five-range scales were used to gain the information from students' answers, including *completely disagree* (1), *disagree* (2), *neutral* (3), *agree* (4) and *completely agree* (5) because the five-scale checklists are preferable (Skierso, 1991). After the fourteen-question version was finalized in English, it was translated into Vietnamese to avoid any misunderstanding about the questions. Three teachers in Foreign Language Department checked the two versions in English and Vietnamese. In this process, all necessary adjustments were made to ensure the adjustment of the translated version.

Results

Based on the data gathered, some valuable results about the coursebook AEF3 have been drawn out and discussed in this research.

Layout and Design

Due to the structure of the evaluation forms, the *Layout and Design* aspect, which comprises Questions 1 and 2, was analyzed first, and the data is illustrated in *Figure 2*.

The data for Question 1 presented in *Figure 2* show that the biggest group of students, whose proportion ranks first at 44.2%, agreed that the *Layout and Design* of the coursebook *AEF3* are appropriate and clear. Approximately half of this number said that they completely agreed and were in a neutral position.

Figure 2: Frequency statistics of *Layout and Design* (in percentage)

Moreover, the lowest percentages of students, who disagreed and completely disagreed, were 6.2% and 1.8%. The figure also depicts that regardless of 0.9% for a missing answer, nearly a quarter for neutral position and under 3.5% of "disagree" and "completely disagree" options, the percentage of students, who agreed with the effective organization of the coursebook, still occupies the first position. The similar character of students' evaluation of these two questions is that most of them said that they agreed, and few disagreed or completely disagreed with the statement.
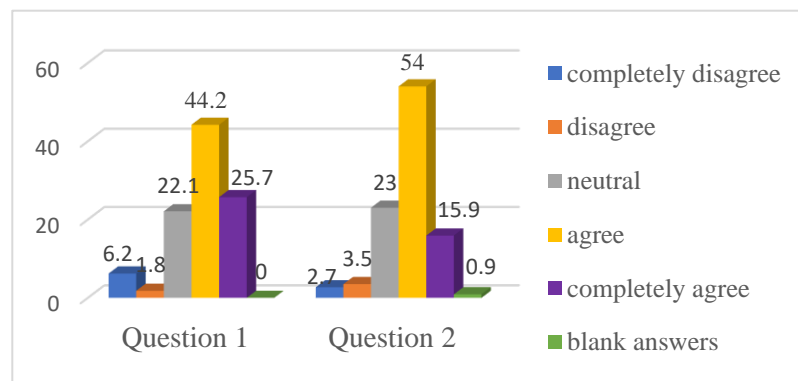
Table 1.

Descriptive statistics of 6 scales

Factors	Minimum	Maximum	Median	Mean	Mode	Std. Deviation
Layout and Design	1.00	5.00	4.00	3.797	4.00	.850
Activities	1.33	5.00	3.33	3.327	3.33	.708
Skills	1.00	5.00	3.5	3.504	4.00	.814
Language Type	1.00	5.00	3.5	3.434	3.5	.825
Subject and Content	1.00	5.00	3.67	3.563	4.00	.765
Overall Consensus	1.00	5.00	3.5	3.252	4.00	.962

Additionally, the overall assessment of students on the *Layout and Design* aspect of *AEF3* is clearly illustrated in *Table 1*. It can be seen from the table that the values range from 1 to 5, with the mean value (M) at 3.797 and standard deviation (S.D.) at .850 so the answers vary mostly from 2.947 to 4.647 (3.797±.850). Especially with the mode of 4.00, the table shows a dramatically superior frequency of this value in the scale *Layout and Design.* From the descriptions above, it can be inferred that despite there were a few who badly evaluated the *Layout and Design* of AEF3, the majority of students highly appreciated it.

Activities

In terms of assessing *Activities* of the coursebook, students were asked questions 3, 4 and 5, as in *Figure 3*.

Figure 3 reveals that more than half of students denoted that the activities given in the coursebook are balanced. Moreover, about one-third of students opted for neutral choice and the others are classified fairly equally into opposite poles of disagreeing and totally agree. Whereas most
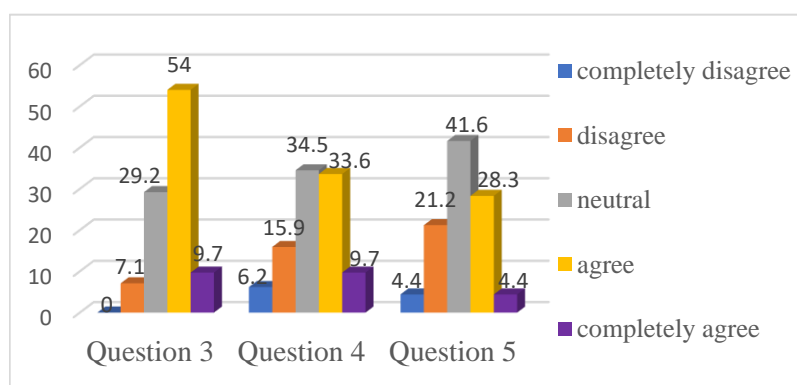
Figure 3: Frequency statistics of *Activities* (in percentage)

students agreed with the balance of activities, the ordinal number of positions experiences a little change with the rise of "neutral" options to communicative and meaningful practice (Question 4) and creative, original and independent responses (Question 5) that the activities aim to promote (34.5% and 41.6%). Additionally, the second-highest percentage is of students

who chose "agree" in both Question 4 and Question 5 (33.6% and 28.3, respectively). Similar to the results of Question 3, the three lowest proportions are for "completely disagree", "disagree" and "completely agree".

It would be uncompleted if the overall assessment of students on *the Activities* aspect of *AEF3* (*Table 1*) were not considered. *Table 1* reveals that the values range from 1 to 5, with the mean value (M) at 3.327 and standard deviation (S.D.) is .708. Particularly, this means that the highest frequencies focus mainly between the scales of 2.619 to 4.035 (3.327±.708).

From the descriptions above, it can be inferred that even if some evaluated that activities of *AEF3* were completely good or completely bad, the majority of students stood on the border of "agree" and "disagree" options. In other words, most of them were in an impartial position while evaluating AEF3's aspect of *Activities*.

Skills

Results for questions 6 and 7 presented below were utilized to assess the *Skills* aspect of the coursebook:

From *Figure 4*, it is clear that nearly half of the students expressed their agreement with the balance of four language skills distributed in the coursebook (Question 6). However, there are sharply higher shares of other ideas. The proportion of students who completely agreed with this balance is under a fifth, and a little lower proportion is of the neutral ones. Some least students totally

Figure 4: Frequency statistics of *Skills* (in percentage)

disagreed with the skills' balance, and they made up only 2.7%. This is similar to the data in Question 7, in which some least students totally disagreed with the subskills provided by the coursebook. However, the share for the neutral option in Question 7 is doubled over that in Question 6, and this is also the highest chosen. However, the number of students agreeing with the sub-skills just stands second with 33.6%.
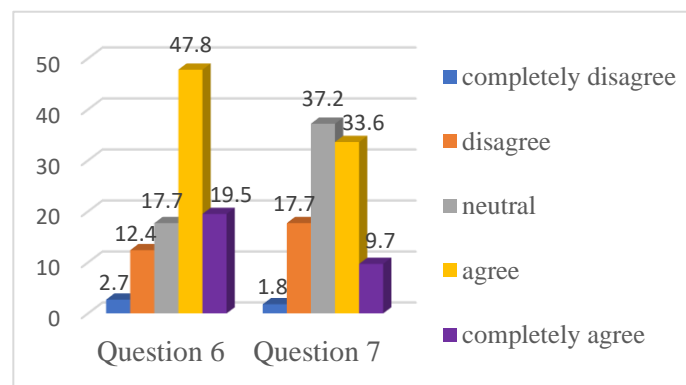
Moreover, *Table 1* reflects the overall descriptive statistics of the data regarding students' assessment of the *Skills* aspect of the coursebook. This scale's mean value (M) is 3.504, and the standard deviation (S.D.) is .814. The table shows that the highest occurrences concentrate mostly between the scales of 2.690 to 4.318 (3.504±.814).

In summation, it can be inferred that though most students chose neutral and agreed on options for the *Skills* of *AEF3*, most of them tended to lean on an agreement to the *Skills* of the coursebook. This means that the students had a fairly positive assessment, rather than an

impartial opinion, of the *Skills* of *AEF3*.

Language type

As for *Language type*, questions 8 and 9 were employed to investigate this aspect of the coursebook (*Figure 5*). When being inquired about the *Language type* aspect of the coursebook, most of the students agreed with the statements given (39.8% and 34.5% for Question 8 and Question 9,

Figure 5: Descriptive statistics of *Language type* (in percentage)

respectively), and the second-highest share is of the students who stood on neutral position (29.2% and 30.1% for Question 8 and Question 9 respectively). While the third-highest rank is for the students who totally agreed with the life-like language of the coursebook and the fourth-highest rank is for those who disagreed with it (Question 8), the order of these two options is reversed in Question 9. Over one-fifth of students denied the suitability of the language used in the coursebook to their current language competence.
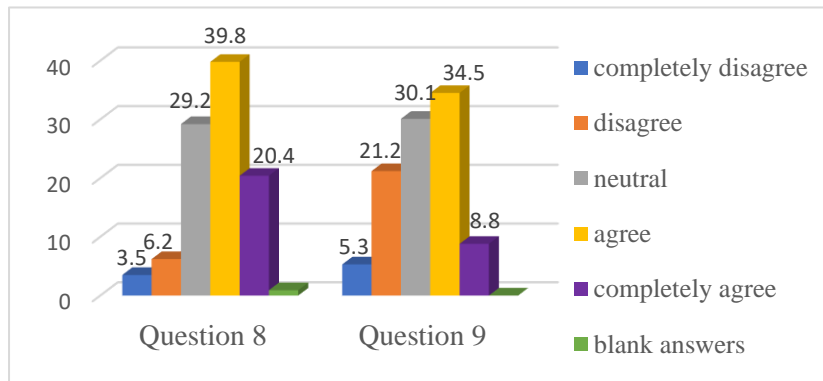
Moreover, *Table 1* reflects the general descriptive statistics of the data regarding students' assessment of the *Language type* aspect of the coursebook. The mean value of this scale is 3.434, and the standard deviation is .825. Remarkably, the table reveals the information that the uppermost frequencies converge mainly in the scales from 2.609 to 4.259 (3.434±.825), especially at a mode value of 3.5.

In short, the students gave quite positive feedback regarding the *Language type* of *AEF3*. However, there were still many who were uncertain or denied the suitability of the language utilized in the coursebook with their present capacity.

Subject and Content

There were three questions (10, 11 and 12) for the students to evaluate the *Subject and Content* aspect of the coursebook.

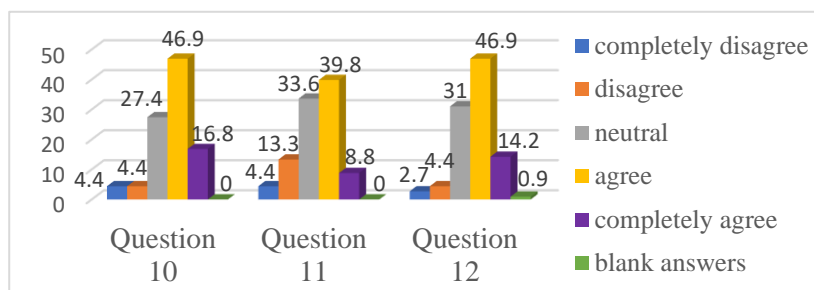*Figure 6* exhibits that the number of students

Figure 6: Descriptive statistics of *Subject and Content* (in percentage)

who ticked the agree on option for questions 10 and 12 is of equality, and this group of students accounts for 46.9%, the highest percentage in the three questions of the scale. This means that most students agreed that, in general, the subject and content of the coursebook are not only realistic but also diverse enough. A little bit lower than that, a percentage of 39.8% illustrates the share of the dominant choice for Question 11 and the total students who claimed their agreement or complete agreement to this question accounts for 48.6%. It means that students generally agree that the materials' subject and content are interesting, challenging and motivating. It is noteworthy that regardless of 0.9% for blank answers in Question 12, the results witness a similarity of these three questions in the rank order in which the "completely disagree" option's proportion is the lowest, "neutral" option is the second-highest and "agree" option's is the highest.

Likewise, *Table 1* gives a general picture of the data of the whole scale *Subject and Content*. With a mean value of 3.563, a standard deviation of .765 and a mode of 4.0, it can be seen that the data mostly focus between 2.798 and 4.328 (3.563±.765), especially at 4.0. This means that although the rate for the students who had completely positive comments on *the Subject and Content* of the coursebook is notable, most respondents had highly positive feedback on this aspect.

In brief, the data given and examined above show that while some students expressed their unbiased viewpoint on the *Subject and Content* of the coursebook, the respondents largely agreed to say that this aspect is realistic, interesting, challenging, motivating and diverse enough.

Overall consensus (general evaluation)

The last category of the evaluation form does not help to investigate the students' assessment of any particular aspect of the coursebook but of the coursebook in general. This was done by giving them questions 13 and 14, as in *Figure 7*.

When asked whether the coursebook could raise their interest in studying English in the future (Question 13), 44.2% of the students chose to stay in the middle. This is the only question in the Coursebook Evaluation Form that has such a high rate for the "neutral" option. Moreover, though
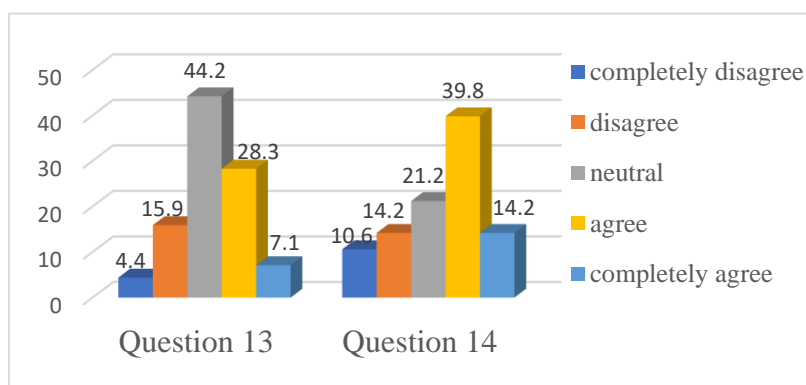

Figure 7: Descriptive statistics of *Overall Consensus* (in percentage)

the percentage of students agreeing and totally agreeing with this statement (35.4%) is much lower than that in other questions, this percentage still approximately doubles that of students

who disagreed and totally disagreed. Furthermore, nearly 40% of students declared that they agreed to choose this coursebook again (Question 14). Apart from 21.2% of students who said they were neutral, the rest are distributed fairly equally to other options with a little inferior part for "totally disagree" choice.

As shown in *Table 1*, it can be seen that the O*verall consensus* scale has a mean of 3.252, a standard deviation of .962, mode of 4.0. However, an easily recognizable point here is that most values do not only concentrate on the range of 3.0 and 4.0 but also on the value of 2.0.

Based on the data above, a conclusion to be drawn here is that although a lot of students were not sure about whether the coursebook could inspire them to study English in the coming time, most of them still wished to use it once again.

It is clear that the students, in general, adopted a fairly positive attitude to the coursebook *AEF3*. Most of them had a fairly encouraging assessment of *Layout and Design*, *Skills*, *Subject and Content*. Additionally, *Language type* was generally evaluated with encouraging feedback. However, the students also expressed their denial of the suitability of language used in the coursebook with their language competence. Furthermore, most of the students chose to have an unbiased position when evaluating *Activities*. Likewise, though it was still disputable whether the coursebook could stimulate the students to study English further, most of them expressed their desire to study English with *AEF3* again.

Discussion

Concerning the *AEF3*'s shortcomings, the results are also congruent with other research, in which it was claimed that the coursebook revealed several shortcomings (Haghverdi& Ghasemi, 2013). The defects include the gap between the language competence of targeted learners of the coursebook and students in PSU; the stimulation of further study for students. However, it can be seen that not all the students agreed with those ideas.

With respect to the overall evaluation, the results are in line with research by Haghverdi& Ghasemi (2013), in which the coursebook's pedagogical qualities and encouraging characteristics were far more helpful than its flaws or downsides. In fact, most of them were in high consensus about the advantages of the coursebook, including appropriateness and clarity, and adequate sub-components. Moreover, the majority of students claimed their desire to study English with *AEF3* again.

Studies by Tabrizi and Shahriari (2014) and Borhani and Hashemi (2015) had similar results, which pointed out that the coursebook was found to be of positive value and the coursebook itself adequate and appropriate for achieving the defined goals.

In short, from students' viewpoint, although there existed certain drawbacks in *AEF3*, a coursebook for international users, it was still evaluated positively. And thus, it is no exaggeration to say that AEF3 is an appropriate coursebook for the context of PSU.

Conclusion

The study sought to investigate students' perspectives on the coursebook AEF3 at PSU. It is undeniable that as an international coursebook, AEF3 cannot satisfy all users' demands worldwide, and the users in Vietnam are no exception. In fact, various drawbacks exist in the coursebook itself that need to be improved to be suited to the learners not only in PSU in Vietnam but also in other institutions in other geographical regions. The users, especially the teachers, can make use of the advantages of the coursebook, modify its contents to suit their real teaching context and offer practical recommendations to the coursebook designers to have a more effective coursebook in the course of creating favourable conditions for the learners in general, and the students in PSU in particular.

In spite of the careful preparation and implementation of this research, its limitations and shortcomings are unavoidable. Only 85 over 175 students sent back the Coursebook Evaluation Form. Although these were mainly because of administrative-constraint and time-constraint reasons, it is undeniable that the results of the study would be much better and more precise if there were bigger samples. Regardless of those limitations, this study is supposed to have achieved its goal of revealing the coursebook AEF3's characteristics from the viewpoints of its real users at PSU.

Within this study's scope, only the students' subjective evaluation is taken into consideration, and the objective evaluation of sections in detail was excluded. Thus, it is recommended to conduct further studies to evaluate the coursebook AEF3 both subjectively and objectively on the basis of the results of this study. Moreover, this research was conducted within the context of PSU. Therefore, more studies should be conducted profoundly at other research sites and in larger-scaled research sites.

Acknowledgements

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