# AN EVALUATION OF THE EFL ENGLISH COURSEBOOK "AMERICAN ENGLISH FILE MULTIPACK 2A & 2B"

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#### ABSTRACT

Cunningsworth (1995) states that it is important to evaluate the coursebook to figure out its weaknesses to improve them. Many researchers and teachers of English are also aware of the significance of coursebook evaluation. The study conducted here is to investigate the merits and demerits of the coursebook American English File Multipack 2A & 2B by Clive Oxenden, Christina Latham-Koenig, and Paul Seligson published by Oxford University Press after nine months' use in Ho Chi Minh City University of Education for first year non-majored students. A checklist delivered to 14 teachers and 103 students, and an interview of 2 teachers are to get the data. Based on the data collected, the authors produce full analysis and make recommendations for better and more effective teaching and learning of English with the coursebook.

*Keywords:* coursebook evaluation, American English Files Multipack 2A & 2B.

## TÓM TẮT

#### Đánh giá giáo trình American English Files Multipack 2A&2B

Cunningsworth (1995) cho rằng đánh giá giáo trình để xác định những mặt tồn tại nhằm tìm ra phương pháp cải tiến là rất quan trọng. Nhiều nhà nghiên cứu và giáo viên tiếng Anh đều thừa nhận và ý thức được ý nghĩa của việc đánh giá giáo trình. Bài viết này đánh giá những mặt mạnh và yếu của giáo trình American English File Multipack 2A & 2B. Dựa vào nguồn dữ liệu thu được từ bảng câu hỏi, chúng tôi phân tích và đề xuất những cách thức để giúp giáo viên và sinh viên sử dụng giáo trình này hiệu quả hơn.

Từ khóa: đánh giá giáo trình, giáo trình American English Files Multipack 2A & 2B.

#### 1. Introduction

No one doubts the fact that course books play an important role in the success of teaching and learning process since they specify the content and define coverage for syllabus items. Therefore, evaluating the course book and pointing out its good and weak points to find ways to improve it are quite necessary. Furthermore, the evaluation of the course book will assist the teachers with the selection of the appropriate course book and familiarize them with its strengths and weaknesses. Cunningsworth (1995) suggests three evaluation types. They are "pre-use, in-use and post-use". From his viewpoint, pre-use seems to be the most challenging because there is no actual experience of using the course book. The second type is the one for suitability, involving and matching the course book against a specific requirement. Learners' objective and background and resources are the factors involved in in-use course book evaluation. In the post-use type, teachers and students express their

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opinions on the coursebook to identify its merits and demerits and find out the ways to improve them. Based on these three types, this paper aims at in-use evaluation of the course book American English File Multipack 2A & 2B by Clive Oxenden, Christina Latham-Koenig, and Paul Seligson published by Oxford University Press in 2008. The paper focuses on the teachers' and students' views on the course book after 9 months' time of using the book. This study was empirical through two checklists designed for teachers and students. The study was conducted in Ho Chi Minh City University of Education (HCMCUE). The checklists were delivered to 14 teachers and 103 first-year non-majored students in the university.

#### 2. Research background

#### 2.1. The teachers and the learners

The Foreign Languages Section belongs to HCMCUE. There are three languages taught here: English, Chinese, and French. English classes can be said to outnumber the Chinese and French ones. There are 21 lecturers of English in total. 12 of whom have teaching experience of more than 10 years, 4 from 5 to 10 years, and 3 less than 5 years. One teacher is a PhD in Comparative Linguistics. Two lecturers are on track to complete Doctor in Education and take PhD degree in Australia and the US. 11 teachers are Masters of Arts and 8 teachers took Bachelor degree in English teaching. The Section is in charge of teaching English to first year and second year non-majored students departments from 15 in HCMCUE. The students come from the departments of Maths, Computing, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Philology, Geography, History, Political Education, Primary Education, Pre-school Education, Physical Education, and Special Education. The students have to study English in two stages. The students learn General English for the first stage and ESP for the second.

# 2.2. The coursebook

In the school year of 2011-2012, the main course book used is American English File Multipack 2A & 2B since the shift from New Headway Preintermediate. The students learn the main course book in three semesters, covering from file 1 to file 9. The first three files are for module 1; files 4, 5, and 6 for module 2. The last three files of 7, 8, and 9 must be covered in module 3. Each file is divided into 7 parts of parts A, B, C, D, Practical English, Writing, and Review and Check. The students learn integrated skills and language content in parts A, B, C, and D. Practical English puts an emphasis on real life communication situations. The writing part familiarizes students with different kinds of writings, especially emails and letters. Review and Check supplies students with an overall picture of the textbook employed to consolidate what they have learnt in each file. Moreover, there are vocabulary, grammar and sound banks to provide students with knowledge of vocabulary, and pronunciation. grammar, А supplement workbook with exercises given for parts A, B, C, D and Practical English aims to deepen students' knowledge and skills. The students are also offered a self-study MultiROM CD with exercises and situations to improve their speaking and listening skills. Vocabulary and grammar exercises are also given in the CD.

#### 3. Literature review

Firstly, Ur (1996) mentions the factors deciding a good coursebook which involves a clear framework; readymade and suitable texts as well as tasks. Besides, inexperienced teachers may be offered help with teacher guides. Learner autonomy should be emphasized to make students less teacher –dependent. Zhorabi (2011) shares Ur's views of the fact that a good coursebook may supply the clear and carefully planned syllabus and a balanced selection for context.

Secondly, according to Cunningsworth (1995),coursebook analysis and evaluation are auite necessary; first of all, to teachers since it assists teachers in gaining good insights into the nature of the coursebook. Coursebook evaluation is to "identify particular strengths and weaknesses in coursebooks already in use, so that optimum use can be made of their strong points, while their weaker areas can be strengthened through adaptation or by substituting materials from other books" (Cunningsworth, 1995, p.15). Secondly, in educational settings and language teaching, the significance of material and coursebook evaluation has been greatly emphasized because there has been an increasing number of coursebooks designed in market. These coursebooks, especially authentic ones, reflect the aims and the methods of a particular teaching and learning context. Consequently, analyzing and evaluating a particular coursebook are greatly significant since they assist in teachers' decisions of choosing the most suitable one.

Thirdly, coursebook evaluation must involve teacher work, since teachers are those who are consciously and directly responsible for their effective teaching. The point pointed out here is that feedback from teachers is to help to get a clear and overall picture of the coursebook. As a matter of fact, teachers are a source of information to gain a thorough and critical view on the coursebook. Harmer (2002) believes that material development can help teachers to develop professionally. Coursebook development can give teachers great help in trying to know their students-their needs, goals and wants. It also provides opportunities for teachers to familiarize themselves with teaching theories and their teaching methods which can be best applied in their teaching process in carrying out tasks in the textbook.

Fourthly, Robinson (1991) believes that three methods of evaluating a coursebook are characterized bv questionnaires delivered to both teachers and students, tests to evaluate its units. and teacher and student interviews. Significantly, guidelines designed and a checklist made to evaluate the coursebook are mostly used to get a good insight into the coursebook. A checklist is considered to show a clear evaluation of a coursebook through a set of criteria. Sheldon (1988) argues that evaluative criteria of the checklists should take many factors into consideration. The learning-teaching situations and the specific learners' and teacher's needs are the first things to be put in the list. Also, Cunningsworth and Kussel (1991) point out similar dimensions like the physical attribute of the coursebook including aims. lavout. methodology, and The organization. language skillslistening, speaking, reading, and writing, sub-skills- grammar and vocabulary, and functions are also presented in the checklist mentioned by Ur (1996), Cunningsworth (1995), and Harmer (2002). Many prominent researchers on material development and evaluation argue about authentic texts included in any textbook or coursebook used. The feature of authenticity plays an important role in language acquisition since it represents real use of language and pictures everyday life activities and situations. Jayakaran Mukudan, Reza Hajimohammandi, and Vahid Nimehchisalem (2011) divide the list of criteria into two general categories "general attributes" including and "learning-teaching content". The first category was further divided into five sub-categories of "relation and curriculum", "methodology", "suitability to learners", "physical and utilitarian attributes", and "supplement materials". On the other hand, the second category falls into general skills and sub-skills.

"General" in the second category mentions task quality, cultural sensitivity as well as linguistic and situational realism. In addition to this classification of textbook evaluation criteria, Jayakaran Mukudan, Reza Hajimohammandi, and Vahid Nimehchisalem (2011) review the textbook evaluation checklists within four decades of over 30 authors presenting the checklists in their books and articles. They present the checklist with 11 questions for general attributes and 27 questions for language-content. The checklist points out the textbook evaluation criteria and satisfies the factors of validity and reliability. Bahumaid (2008) states that any checklist or questionnaire should not be considered to be fit in any language teaching setting. In other words, none of them should be referred to by teachers or educators without any adaptation. Teachers are required and expected to be flexible in applying the framework or checklist and making it suitable in their specific teaching and learning context. Therefore, in this study, the authors make some modifications and adaptation to the real teaching and learning situation in the university where the study is conducted. One checklist is designed and delivered to teachers. The other is the translation of the checklist for students with necessary minor changes to be appropriate for the student subject filled.

Fifthly, as mentioned in the Introduction, Cuningsworth (1995) and Ellis (1997) suggest three types of course book evaluation, i.e. pre-use; in-use and

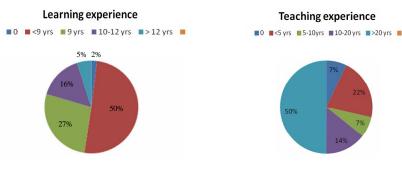
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post-use types. For this study, therefore, in-use evaluation type is employed to identify the merits and demerits of the coursebook used.

### 4. The subject

The target group for the study was first year non-majored students and their teachers at HCMCUE. The students have to cover 195 periods for the course book. There are 75 periods, 45 minutes each, in the first module. For the second and the third module, students have to spend 60 periods each. There were 4 lecturers of English asked to fill in a checklist designed for teachers. 103 first year nonstudents majored were randomly delivered the checklist and were asked to complete in 15 minutes. The checklists are written in English for teachers and translated into Vietnamese for students. If

the students have any difficulty, the teachers in charge of the class offer help in making the checklist easier to understand. After collecting the checklist, the researchers analyzed the data gained. Of 103 students, female dominate male with 68.9 %. In terms of English learning experience, half of them have been studying English for less than 9 years, 27.2 % for 9 years, 15.5% for 10-12 years and only 4.9 % for more than 12 years. Like learners, the teachers also differ in qualifications and teaching experience. In the total of 14 people, 7 have BA in TESOL, 5 get MA and 1 PhD. Their teaching experience varies from less than 5 years to over 20 years with 7/14 (50%) for the former and 3/14(21.4 %) for the latter (Figure 1).



#### Figure 1. Participants' information

#### 5. Instruments

Two separate checklists were given to teachers and students at the same time. There are five scales used to gain the information from the teachers' and students' answers: completely disagree (1), disagree (2), neutral (3), agree (4) and completely agree (5). Daoud and Celce-Muric (1997) and Skierso (1991) prefer the five-scale checklists, a dominant form employed. Then, the data were collected and analyzed using SPSS (17.0). At this point, two data sets were compared to draw out an objective conclusion about the course book based on both sides. Cronbach's Alpha was reported at .864 regarding 29 questions for scale reliability.

## 6. Findings and Discussion

Both teachers and students replied positively on General Attributes since the Linkert scale of all seven items got over 3 (appendix). This proves that most of them agreed and completely agreed with the points. To students, the highest rate (about 87.4%) was on the match of the course book to the specifications of the syllabus whereas 5/14 teachers showed neither strong objection nor great agreement as they ticked on 'neutral'. What is questionable here is that the teachers seem not to be aware of the specifications of the syllabus. White (1998, p.92) states, "A complete syllabus specifications will include all five aspects: structure, function, situation, topics, and skills. The difference between syllabi will lie in the priority given to each of these aspects." Still, the cost was the learners' only concern with 29.1% chose the left side of the scale while this was no problem at all to teachers. When being asked whether the activities can work well with methodologies in ELT, 13/14 teachers agreed and completely agreed. Similarly, 78/103 students (75.7 %) believed that the course book did give them a chance to develop various learning styles suitable to university setting (Figure 2).

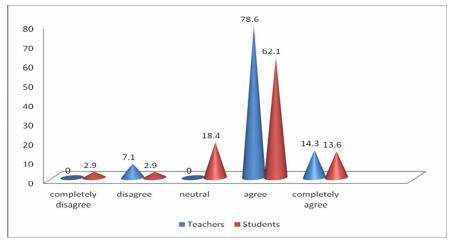


Figure 2. Participant's opinions on item I.2

In terms of Learning-Teaching Content, they also gave positive comments with over 50% for each item and the Linkert scale of all 22 items was from 3.2 to 4.1 (appendix), which means they tend to choose the right side. Among these categories, Vocabulary gained their best agreement for 85.5 % students and 85,7 % teachers believed that words are efficiently repeated and recycled across the book. Thanks to high-frequency and easy-to-use words, common and realistic themes, various activities as well as the Vocabulary Bank with phonetics support, teachers can present new words in a clear and well-organized way; meanwhile, the learners themselves find it easy for self study and review when necessary. Moreover, many visual aids are employed to illustrate the words. The book emphasizes on the word

collocations, which assists students in using the words effectively. To take an example, unit 6 takes confusing verbs into consideration. Take a look at the tasks and examples of "collocations" below, we can see the attractive layout and useful exercises included.



As White (1997) suggests, frequency, coverage, range, and potential learnability are the factors influencing the selection and grading of vocabulary. The coursebook satisfies the criteria of choosing the words and repeating them in subsequent lessons to reinforce the words' meaning and use. Not only the words are appropriate for the students' level but also they cover a variety of topics and real life situations. This is one of the good points of this coursebook.

Also, Speaking, Reading and Pronunciation were highly-rated by most instructors and students. In fact, the book proved to be a multi-skill and integrated one with many sections specifically designed to develop and improve students' listening and speaking, speaking and reading, reading and writing, etc. Authentic tasks in acquiring these skills motivate students. Above all, speaking takes the lead with interesting topics such as vacation, music, sports, animals, etc and real-life situations (at the airport, at the hotel, at the restaurants, at the store, at the pharmacy, on the phone, etc), giving students opportunities to themselves. express talk about themselves and certainly get to know about their friends' learning abilities, hobbies, ambitions, fears, and so on. For the activities at the back of the book, a lot of role play and information exchanging exercises are employed to enhance classroom interaction. In terms of reading skill, the book provides learners with multiple reading texts adapted from different sources (newspapers, magazines, websites, books, etc), giving them a chance to get accustomed to reallife language use. As for pronunciation, a systematic introduction of sounds and spellings with notes on common rules and exceptions is supplied, helping students realize difficult sounds, compare with those in their own language and learn how to produce them correctly.

In contrast, Writing could be seen as their least approval of all skills because of the highest number of negative comments on item II.13 and II.14 with 28.6 % and 14.3% for teachers and 13.6 % for learners respectively (Figure 3). Surprisingly, these 2 items got the most neutral answers from students as well. Why so? One of the reasons for this can be the lack of time necessary for this activity since Writing usually comes at the end of the file and it takes time to produce and assess a piece of writing in the classrooms. Another reason is that the learners themselves do not get used to writing which was somewhat ignored at high school.

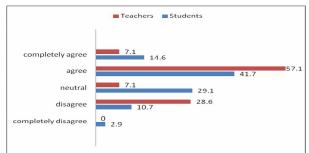


Figure 3. Participants' opinions on item II.13

In addition, Listening seemed to cause some learners difficulties as 15/103 (14.5 %) did not approve that the book has appropriate tasks with well-defined goals while only 1 teacher (7.1%) shared the same idea but 5 of them picked up 'neutral', the highest of this kind, when being asked if the tasks are efficiently graded according to complexity and if they are authentic or close to real language situations. As a matter of fact, many students coming from remote areas lack necessary learning conditions such as labs, CD players, computers, etc, compared with those living in cities; therefore, they were afraid of listening, especially when the script is long and the accents are varied. As a result, teachers, influenced by the learners' big gap, find it hard to deal with the problem.

Besides, Grammar needs to be considered too due to the fact that all three items got the most 'neutral' feedback from teachers. With data gathered from two teachers' interview, they mainly talk about the problem of grammar. In their opinions, it is quite boring with the same way of presentation and types of task (matching, sentence building) focusing more on form than meaning, which, as a result, fails to bring students' attention and motivation.

Based on the information obtained from the teachers' and students' points of views on the textbook, the textbook is shown not to be "...a closed circle... wherein textbooks merely grow from and imitate other textbooks and do not admit the winds of change from research, methodological experimentation or classroom feedback" (Sheldon, 1988, p.239). From the data gained, the teachers and the students showed their appreciation towards the merits of the book. For 7 questions in part I and 22 questions in part II, more than 50% of the teachers and students express their agreement on the aspects of the books for general attributes and skills as well as skills involved. Some practical concerns relating to textbook evaluation are accessibility and availability. The book's cost is reasonable. Another factor is the quality of paper. The paper in this textbook is durable and of high-grade

quality. It contains additional materials with a self-study Multirom CD and workbook and teacher's manual.

#### 7. Recommendations and Conclusion

Based on the findings from the data, some pedagogical implications are drawn concerning better exploitation of the coursebook for the teachers as well as students and for the publisher for the coming version.

When it comes to the sounds thoroughly and consistently presented in American English, most of the students get accustomed to the ways to represent the sounds in British English. That's the reason why teachers have to bring students' attention to the differences in the phonetic symbols to make them more familiar and use the dictionary more effectively on encountering new words. Take a look at the suggested table to see the differences between the phonetic symbols of American English and British English:

	American English	British English	Examples
	[i]	[i:]	Tree, teeth, teach, mean
Phonetic	[£]	[e]	bet, fr <i>ie</i> ndly, spell, very
symbols	[u]	[u:]	boot, suit, juice, lose
	[ər]	[ <b>3</b> r:]	bird, boring, horse, abroad

The differences between the phonetic symbols of American English and British English

For Grammar bank, the feature of presenting the form and use of the structures is clear and repeated with form first and use later. However, it seems not to possess the oral and written practice of the grammar concepts. Most of the exercises in the grammar bank fall into controlled practice with giving the correct forms and matching exercises, which does not stress the communicative competence and meaning practice in which the students have to think, understand what they are saying, and express their meaning (Doff, 2004). It is highly suggested that the classic examples of right and wrong should be less emphasized or should be equally emphasized to meaningful exercises with real situations in order not to create a gap between what the students speak and write and the grammar tasks in the book. Moreover, a supplementary material for more meaningful grammar tasks should be made for the students' good.

Regarding speaking skills which both teachers and students appreciate, the topics are of appropriate levels and make students work. The recommended point here is that individual work is played great emphasis, which mean searchers should resort to many kinds of activitiesindividual work, pair work and group work.

Based on the data, listening skills still challenge students. Although they think good of listening activities in the book, their listening seems not to satisfy their expectations. A question arising here is whether the teachers give them sufficient help. The "help" here doesn't mean teachers have to do everything for students. Once again, as Doff (2004) states, pre-listening activities are not to be neglected. To take an example, section 4D, exercise c, 4.9, requires students to listen and answer the questions about London, where the journalist Tim Moore gave the photo test, the shopping test and the accident test to see if London is the friendliest city. The task is as followed:

	London
	1 Who did he ask first?
The photo test	2 What did the man say?
	3 Who did he ask next? What happened?
	4 What did he buy? Where?
he shopping test	5 How much was it?
	6 Did he get the right change?
	7 Where did he do the accident test?
The accident test	8 Did anyone help him?
	9 What did the man say?

Suppose teachers let students listen and give no guessing preceding listening exercises, they will make the listening boring and ineffective. The answer for question 4 in the shopping test is "the red bus" and question 7 in the accident test is "the subway". Looking at the answers, teachers will easily recognize the problem of culture implied here. At this time, teachers' role is quite significant in supplying the idea and focusing on students' cultural background to

familiarize them and orientate them in listening in order to facilitate their listening. This kind of technique or strategy leads to students' motivation and interest in the upcoming listening tasks.

As discussed in the Data Collection and Discussion, writing could be seen as their least approval of all skills. The authors give critical thoughts in the Discussion, claiming that the students may not get used to this skill in secondary and high schools. An

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important thing put forward here is that teachers are the leader in these situations. They should provide students with "how to write" or the procedure of writing and the ideas supported in brief, which helps students not have to do their utmost in finding the ways and ideas to write about one particular topic. Speaking, а productive skill like Writing, can be made easier in the similar way. Writing should be started with easy tasks like combining the sentences, sentence building, sentence transformation before kinds of exercises like writing an informal or formal letters or emails or some descriptive essays are introduced. This coursebook begins with writing about oneself in File 1 and moves on with vacation description in File 2 and letters in File 3. Files 4, 5, and 6 focus on email writing. The recommendation is that it is necessary for students to learn writing with sentences based on the structures taught in each file and combine them to write a larger "scale" like essays or letters. To take an example, on teaching Conditional sentences Type 2, teachers should give some situations to help students write down their ideas to practice the form and the use, enhance well their imagination as as individualization. One thing should be born in mind is that writing seen as the ability to communicate one's feelings and ideas to a particular person or group of leaders through the orthographic form of

a language should not be in some way neglected in teaching. One suggestion here is that writing will be paid more attention if the test includes parts of writing as the format of the test in action in the university. Another overarching point is the "team writing". Different people with different talents can give support, feedback, motivation to each other. Team writing is important, and cocorrection is also recommended to save time and reinforce the class interaction and enhance learner-centeredness.

conclusion, In it should be acknowledged that evaluating a coursebook is challenging and demanding. To get an overall picture and provide a full and critical analysis of a coursebook is not an as-easy-as-ABC work. Teachers on evaluating the book are at the same time improving their proficiency in language and their skills. Teachers on commenting on the strong and weak points of the book will know what will be done for their teaching to be the most effective in the coming time of using the book. Consequently, this is worth doing in pre-use, in-use and postuse evaluation. The study here focuses on in-use evaluation. After one more year of learning and teaching with this coursebook, more studies should be conducted on more participants and larger scale. Learner-centeredness might be the further research on dealing with this coursebook.

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#### **APPENDICES**

Teacher Textbook Evaluation Checklist HCM University of Education Foreign Language Section

## 'AMERICAN ENGLISH FILE MULTIPACK 2A & 2B' COURSE BOOK EVALUATION

Dear colleagues, 'American English File' has been used as the main course book for almost a year. Now we would like to ask for your opinions in order to have a thorough evaluation about it. Please spare a few minutes to fill in the checklist below. Thanks for your co-operation.

#### Part 1: Background information

1. Name:	 
2. Qualifications:	
B.A /B.S field:	 
M.A field:	
PhD field:	

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Other:

3. Teaching experience:  $\Box < 5$  years  $\Box$  5-10 years  $\Box$  10-20 years

> 20 years

Part 2: Checklist

Read each item and indicate your opinion with the scale of 5: **1-completely disagree, 2-disagree, 3-neutral, 4-agree, 5-completely agree**. Tick the column which best reflects your opinion.

I.G	I. General attributes		2	2	4	~
		1	2	3	4	5
1.	It matches to the specifications of the syllabus.					
2.	Activities can work well with methodologies in ELT.					
3.	1 8,					
4.	Its layout is attractive.					
5.	It indicates efficient use of text and visuals.					
6.	It is cost-effective.					
7.	The book is supported efficiently by essentials (like audio- materials).					
<b>II.</b> ]	Learning-Teaching content	1	2	3	4	5
A. (	General					
1.	Most of the tasks in the book are interesting.					
2.	Tasks move from simple to complex.					
3.	Task objectives are achievable.					
4.	Cultural sensitivities have been considered.					
5.	The language in the textbook is natural and real.					
B. I	Listening skills					
6.	<sup>6</sup> The book has appropriate listening tasks with well-defined					
	goals.					
7.	Tasks are efficiently graded according to complexity.					
8.	Tasks are authentic or close to real language situations.					
<b>C.</b> S	C. Speaking skills					
9.	Activities are developed to initiate meaningful communication.					
10.	Activities are balanced between individual response, pair work and group work.					
D. 1	Reading skills					
11.	Texts are graded.					
12.	Tasks are interesting.					
<b>E.</b> V	Writing skills					
13.	Tasks have achievable goals and take into consideration learner capabilities.					
14.						
<b>F.</b> V	Vocabulary					

15.	The load (number of new words in each lesson) is appropriate to the level.			
16.	6. There is a good distribution (simple to complex) of vocabulary load across chapters and the whole book.			
17.	Words are efficiently repeated and recycled across the book.			
G. (	G. Grammar			1
18.	The grammar is contextualized.			
19.	Examples are interesting.			
20.	Grammar is introduced explicitly and reworked incidentally throughout the book.			
H. I	H. Pronunciation			
21.	It is contextualized.			
22.	It is learner-friendly with no complex charts.			

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# THỰC TRẠNG ỨNG DỤNG CÔNG NGHỆ THÔNG TIN...

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