



EFL TEXTBOOK DESIGN AND CLT ALIGNMENT IN VIETNAM

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Abstract:

Textbooks play a crucial role in second language acquisition since a good textbook enables the process of language teaching and learning to become more effective. In the context of Vietnam, where textbooks are used as a primary resource to teach English as a foreign language, there is a great demand that learners should acquire a satisfactory level of language competence. Therefore, it is essential to design a textbook targeting this goal. Drawing on a larger study that explored the influence of different factors on the beliefs and practices of Vietnamese EFL high school novice teachers, this study aims to provide an insight into how the English textbooks were designed to meet the language demand proposed by the government. Findings reveal that considerable attention was given in constructing the documents to follow the communicative language teaching approach (CLT); however, there is evidence that limited attention was paid to other features of CLT and activities with authentic and real-life contexts that provide learners with opportunities for meaningful interactions in unrehearsed situations.

Keywords: textbook, CLT, Vietnam, EFL

1. Introduction

Textbooks are an integral part of language education and a vital resource that teachers use to assist students in learning. In language teaching, textbooks play a pivotal role in all types of educational institutions, including public schools, colleges, and language schools. They are regarded as one of the main instruments shaping knowledge, attitudes and principles for many generations of learners (Van, 2019). Therefore, as Garinger (2001) points out, in some contexts, although teachers can make their own choice of the textbooks they want, a majority of teachers choose textbooks suggested, prescribed, or assigned to them. There are numerous important and useful features of textbooks to

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learners, teachers, and education administrators that have been highlighted by scholars worldwide (see Van, 2019). As for learners, the textbook serves as the major source of contact they have with the language apart from input provided by the teacher. Learners can also use textbooks to learn new materials, review and monitor progress with some degree of autonomy. Textbooks are a source of activities for students to practice, communicate and consolidate their grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. In the case of teachers, textbooks serve as the basis for the content of lessons, the balance of the skills taught, as well as the kinds of language practice the students engage in during class activities. A textbook designed with effective language models and input, can provide support for non-native teachers who may not be able to generate accurate language input on their own. Teachers can also save time by referring to a textbook with learning tasks available and appropriate to the level of learners rather than preparing their own teaching materials. As for education administrators, textbooks help them keep track of how much of the content and skills teachers have taught their students. In the context of Vietnam, a textbook can serve as a framework, which teachers utilise, and it helps ensure that students in different classes, of different regions, receive similar knowledge and skills, and thus, can be assessed in the same way. The use of textbooks can also help education managers maintain quality. A well-designed textbook provides students with various opportunities to engage with materials that have been piloted and tested, that are built on contemporary teaching principles at an appropriate pace.

Despite the aforementioned benefits that textbooks can bring to their users, there have been criticisms against the use of textbooks. Those who have contrasting views believe that textbooks tend to be prescriptive, inflexible, pedagogic, and reflect the linguistic preferences and biases of the authors (Kodriyah, Dayu, & Rahman, 2018). As such, the methodology implied in the textbook could have an indirect impact on the classroom setting and influence the ways teachers teach and students learn. In other words, the textbook *“essentially determine and control the methods, processes and procedures of language teaching and learning”* (Litz, 2005, p.6). In terms of authenticity, textbooks are perceived as contrived and artificial in the presentation of the target language. The text models and dialogues are deemed to be unnatural and inappropriate to use to communicate in unrehearsed and real-life contexts (Litz, 2005).

In response to the government’s demand to enhance communicative language competence of Vietnamese learners, there have been ongoing efforts from all different stakeholders targeting important components such as teacher professional development, promotion of CLT in the classroom, textbook writing, and improving teaching and learning resources. The curriculum and textbooks were expected to follow a more communicative approach in supporting the major goal of the National Language Policy (Project, 2020). Therefore, it is important to have an evaluation on how the curriculum, particularly the textbooks, were designed to meet the goal stated by the government.

2. Method

2.1 Data collection

The documents collected in this study were the Ministry of Education and Training's English curriculum (MOET) (MOET, 2006), high school English textbooks and teachers' manual (Van, Hoa, Minh, Phuong, & Tuan, 2013a, 2013b). In the context of Vietnam, teachers are expected to follow the curriculum and textbooks issued by the MOET. In this sense, these curriculum texts serve as an overarching guide that teachers can rely on in teaching. These documents help understand the policy context in relation to the expected teaching methods/approaches in Vietnam. Regarding the textbook analysis, this was done by selecting Unit 7, "World Population", from the Grade 11 textbook. Unit 7 was considered representative of many of the units in the textbooks (Grades 10 and 11ⁱⁱ), for the following reason. A careful look throughout all the units in the textbooks showed that, although each unit might have some differences in its contents and activities, overall the units have a similar structure. For example, the reading lessons of most of the units in the textbook (e.g., units 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 14, 16, English 11) consist of "Guessing meaning in context" and/or a "Comprehension passage". Similar patterns are evident for the units in the textbook for Grade 10.

2.2 Data analysis

As CLT was promoted as a preferred teaching method in the language policies, it is, therefore, essential to examine how the language curriculum and textbooks were designed to follow CLT features. In other words, the analysis focussed on evaluating how these documents were constructed in relation to the principles and concepts of CLT. More specifically, the focus of this chapter is to report on how the textbooks were designed in keeping up with CLT. This was done by employing a taxonomy of techniques originally developed by Crookes and Chaudron (1991) and adapted by Baker (2014). This taxonomy allowed us to classify the textbook activities into three types: controlled, guided and free.

3. Findings

3.1 A closer look: An analysis of a textbook unit

The table below presents Unit 7's contents (Grade 11) across the four language skills, pronunciation and grammar, which would be taught, and the specific activities described in the textbook for each of the lessons.

ⁱⁱ In general, English 12 has a similar organization as English 10 and 11. However, as this study primarily involved its data collection at Grades 10 and 11, it is more relevant to describe the textbooks used for these Grades.

Table 1: Unit 7 - World Population - teaching contents

Reading	Speaking	Listening	Writing	Language Focus
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Guessing meaning in context Comprehension passage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying causes for the population explosion Identifying problems facing overpopulated countries Working out solutions to problems of overpopulated countries Talking about problems of overpopulation and offering solutions 	<p>Monologue:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extensive listening: multiple-choice questions Comprehension questions Summarizing main ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interpreting statistics on population from a chart 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pronunciation: /kl/ /gl/ /kr/ /gr/ /kw/ Grammar: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conditional types 1 and 2 Conditional type 3 Conditional in reported speech

Following the teaching contents given in the book map of the textbook, a number of activities are given for each of the lessons in unit 7. Below is an outline of activities designed for the lessons on the Language skills and Language Focus.

3.2 Unit 7: Outline of activities

+ Reading:

- Discussion with a partner (Identify where these scenes can be found, the meaning of the pictures, and state and explain if the larger the population of a country is, the stronger it is)
- Individual work (Read the text and fill in the blanks with suitable words from the text)
- Individual work (Read the text and answer the questions)
- Discussion with a partner (Find out the world's five largest countries in population and say which is the richest and which is the poorest)

+ Speaking:

- Discussion with a partner (Put the causes of population explosion in order of importance and explain why)
- Discussion with a partner (List the problems facing poor and overpopulated countries and report the results to the class)
- Discussion with partners (Work out the solutions to the problems of overpopulation and report the results to the class)
- Discussion with partners (Talk about the problems of overpopulation and offer solutions using the results in the previous tasks)

+ Listening:

- Discussion with a partner (Discuss if our world is populated and which continent has the largest population)
- Individual work (Listen to the interview and choose the best answer from the multiple-choice question task)
- Individual work (Listen to the interview again and answer the questions)
- Discussion with partners (Summarize the main ideas of the interview)

+ Writing:

- Individual work (Study the chart and write a paragraph of 100-120 words, describing the information in the chart)

+ Language Focus:

- Individual work (Listen and repeat the sounds)
- Practice with a partner (Practise reading aloud the dialogue)
- Individual work (Exercise 1: Put the verbs in brackets into the correct form)
- Individual work (Exercise 2: Put the verbs in brackets into the correct form)
- Individual work (Change the following conditional sentences into reported speech)

An analysis of the outline of activities in this unit demonstrates that the four language skills and linguistic knowledge are all learned and practiced through different activities. Noticeably, Reading, Speaking and Listening lessons include pairwork and groupwork activities, which are examples of cooperative learning. Writing and Language Focus lessons, however, do not involve such forms of learning, but instead might require students to work independently on tasks. The Language Focus lesson only includes drill practice rather than communicative and meaningful language drills. For example, while the Pronunciation lesson asks students to practice reading aloud the sounds incorporated into individual words and then in a dialogue, the Grammar lesson only asks them to identify the correct forms of the verbs or transform the conditional sentences into reported speech. These types of exercises may be useful for familiarising students with specific sounds or structures; however, they do not provide students with an opportunity to truly utilise these sounds and structures in a communicative manner in authentic and real-life situations. This suggests that communicative activities tended to be more evident in the first three language skills, but not in Writing and Language Focus lessons.

To understand more thoroughly the nature of these activities with reference to communicative language teaching, first, these activities were examined against the taxonomy of language teaching techniques proposed by Crookes and Chaudron (1991) and adapted by Ben (2011). The purpose of this comparison was to determine the extent to which the activities in the textbook were mechanical, meaningful, or communicative. A description of Unit 7 activities using this taxonomy classification is outlined in Table 2 and discussed further below.

Table 2: Classifications of activities based on the taxonomy techniques proposed by Crookes and Chaudron (1991) and Baker (2014)

Skills		Activities/ Types of activities	Controlled	Guided	Free
Reading		Question-answer referential: (Discussion with a partner: Identify where these scenes can be found, the meaning of the pictures, and state and explain if the larger the population a country is, the stronger it is)		X 5	
		Visual Identification: (Individual work: The words in the box all appear in the reading passage. Read the passage and fill in the blanks of the sentences with suitable words from the passage)	X 8		
		Question-answer display: (Individual work: Read the text and answer the questions)	X 6		
		Discussion: (Discussion with a partner: Find out the world’s five largest countries in population and say where they are, which is the richest, and which is the poorest)			X 5
Speaking		Brainstorming (Discussion with a partner: Put the causes of the population explosion in order of importance and explain why)		X 7	
		Preparation or Information exchange: (Discussion with a partner: List the problems facing poor and overpopulated countries and report the results to the class)		X 10	
		Preparation or Information exchange: (Discussion with partners: Work out the solutions to the problems of overpopulation and report the results to the class)		X 10	
		Discussion: (Discussion with partners: Talk about the problems of overpopulation and offer solutions using the results in the previous tasks)			X 10
Listening		Discussion: (Discussion with a partner: discuss if our world is populated and which continent has the largest population)			X 5
		Audio Identification: (Individual work: Listen to the interview and choose the best answer from the multiple-choice question task)	X 7		
		Production-Audio Identification: (Individual work: Listen to the interview again and answer the questions)		X 8	
		Wrap-up: (Discussion with partners: Listen again and summarize the main ideas of the interview in groups)		X 12	
Writing		Composition: (Individual work: Study the chart and write a paragraph of 100-120 words, describing the information in the chart)			X15
Language Focus	Pronun- ciation	Repetition: (Individual work: Listen and repeat the individual words)	X 3		
		Read aloud: (Practice with a partner: Practise reading aloud the dialogue)	X 4		
	Grammar	Visual Identification: (Individual work: Exercise 1. Put the verbs in brackets into the correct form)	X 3		
		Visual Identification: (Individual work: Exercise 2. Put the verbs in brackets into the correct form)	X 4		
		Visual Identification: (Individual work: Exercise 3. Change the following conditional sentences into reported speech)	X 7		
In total		18	8	6	4

What could be observed from the summary of techniques used in Table 2 is that there are opportunities for communicative interactions across the four language skills. This is evident through a larger number of guided (6 of 13) and free (4 of 13) than controlled activities (3 of 13) included in the language skills lessons. These more communicative activities usually involve students' cooperative learning in pairs and groups, such as Brainstorming, Preparation, Wrap-up or Discussion. To perform these activities, students would likely be requested to communicate with their classmates in order to answer the questions or summarize the main ideas in less predictable circumstances. Table 3 also reveals that there are fewer mechanical activities, which tend to require students to work independently instead of cooperatively, compared with communicative activities (i.e., guided and free activities) in the language skills lessons. The controlled practice activities in the language skills lessons include gap-fill, question-answer, and multiple-choice questions.

Based on the continuum, suggested by Crookes and Chaudron (1991), that drill types develop from "mechanical" to "meaningful" to "communicative" for students' language progression, the analysis of activities in the language skills lessons suggests that substantial attention was given to meaningful and free activities, whilst little attention was paid to mechanical activities. There appeared to be an effort in the textbooks to incorporate communicative practice into these lessons to uphold CLT principles and expectations stated in the curriculum.

Nevertheless, despite the endeavour to include more communicative practice in the language skills lessons, an examination of the Language Focus lesson reveals that its activities were generally designed as mechanical practice, thus giving students limited opportunity to utilise the language sounds and structures in meaningful and communicative practice. For the most part, the controlled drills in this lesson displayed a substantial focus on forms by asking students to repeat the sounds and a given dialogue, identify the correct verb forms, or give sentence transformations. These types of practice are contradictory to the suggestion in the preface of the textbook that the linguistic forms could be translated into communicative activities for students to practice in contexts that are more meaningful. In addition, the language forms appeared not to be integrated with the language skills, as suggested by CLT principles and the National curriculum, so that students might perform different functions and intended meanings. For example, the language features in the Language Focus lesson included the conditional clause Types 1, 2 and 3, which were used to talk about real and possible situations, unreal impossible or improbable situations, and unreal possible past situations, respectively.

Furthermore, despite having students involved in a learner-centred approach through many modes of working (e.g., individual work, pairwork, and groupwork) and scaffolding learning activities, the activities across the lessons in the unit did not necessarily lead students to motivating language practice. There were real-life and scaffolding language activities for students' learning that could give students a sense of confidence; however, these activities did not always present unpredictable information, as many of the answers to the questions could be found with reference to the

reading/listening passage or to the language prompts in the speaking lesson, thus possibly making students less engaged in working on the activities. For example, the final free speaking activity - Activity 4 in Unit 7, English 11 - asked students to work with friends and talk about the problems of overpopulation, offer solutions and report the results to the class. Prior to this activity, a number of cooperative and scaffolding activities were given (See Table 2). Nevertheless, the last activity suggests students discuss the information (i.e., problems of and solutions for overpopulation) that was introduced in the earlier activities. In this sense, the activity suggested a correlation with CLT features (i.e., cooperative language learning and scaffolding) but it may not conclude the speaking lesson with learning that is motivating and engaging to the students.

3.3 A summary of the textbook analysis

In conclusion, the above sections examined how language theory and pedagogies were translated into the design of textbooks in this study. Overall, the analysis revealed that considerable attention was given in designing the textbooks to maintain a communicative teaching approach through a number of guided and free communicative activities, allowing students' opportunities for interaction with peers by answering questions, discussing, and role-playing. Different genres and some real-life situations were included that could enable students to have meaningful communication. Nevertheless, some important features of CLT received limited attention. There were also a few examples of authentic and real-life contexts to provide students with opportunities for meaningful interactions in unrehearsed situations. As the literature argues (Brown, 2007; Guariento & Morley, 2001), such activities are important for student engagement and motivation.

4. Discussion

In EFL teaching, the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) has been traditionally employed as the primary teaching method, especially in Asian contexts (Chang & Goswami, 2011). This traditional method substantially focuses on language form, that is, an emphasis on grammatical rules, memorization of vocabulary, translation of texts, and written exercises (Brown, 2007). However, across Asian countries, there has been a major shift towards the CLT approach, because of the increasing need for oral communication in the context of international cooperation, travel, and technology (Chang & Goswami, 2011). This innovative approach suggests a focus on learners' engagement in meaningful and authentic communication to help learners use the language in real contexts outside the classroom (Brown, 2007; Littlewood, 2007).

Within the context of high school English education, the language curriculum and textbooks are expected to translate the expectations of the policy makers for use in classroom contexts. These documents are viewed as teaching guidelines and resources for teachers, and even compulsory in the case of the textbooks (MOET, 2006, 2008). Thus, they are likely to have a substantial impact on what teachers believe and how they perform in the classroom. Overall, the analysis of these documents, as presented above, demonstrates how these documents were designed to pursue many features of CLT.

Serving as a de facto curriculum, the textbooks (MOET, 2006) were designed as teaching resources to align with the guidelines and expectations of the curriculum. In general, our analysis and that of others (e.g. Nguyen, 2007) of the textbooks used in the schools suggest that they were written to address certain features of CLT, such as promoting a learner-centred approach and focusing on communicative language skills. For example, the inclusion of four Language Skills lessons and a Language Focus lesson in each unit in the textbook suggests equal attention to all of the language skills instead of a focus on the knowledge about the form of the language (e.g., vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar). In addition, a considerable proportion of the communicative activities encourage guided and free practice with students working cooperatively in pairs and groups. Different genres and real-life situations were also included to a certain extent so that students could engage in meaningful communication.

Nevertheless, the textbooks struggle to adequately address some essential features of CLT. For example, although the textbooks included many communicative activities in the language skills lessons (i.e., Reading, Listening, Speaking, Writing), these activities were frequently not sufficiently contextualised or linked to authentic situations, which is problematic, as such links are an important catalyst for students' motivation to learn the language. While these activities tended to promote interaction among students, they did not do this in a way that students would find relevant to their lives; thus, these activities were only able to partially support the curriculum's goal to develop their learners' language skills competence. While there were a few authentic and contextualised situations in the activities in the language skills lessons, there were very few communicative activities in the Language Focus lessons. The activities in these lessons consisted largely of controlled drills with few communicative activities to extend students' opportunities to use the form for communication, such as role plays, interviews, reports and discussions. These findings support previous studies (e.g. Nguyen, 2007; Viet, 2013) and suggest that there are insufficient authentic and situational activities in the textbooks, if CLT is the goal of language teaching.

While the limitations of the textbooks might present difficulties in the implementation of CLT, the Vietnamese system of external examinations imposes a far greater obstacle to applying CLT in the classroom. Similar to previous studies (Canh & Barnard, 2009; Tran, 2015; Viet, 2013), this study found that written-based examinations were used, especially in high-stakes graduation examinations. This places considerable pressure on the ways teachers teach and students learn language. As a result, as indicated in this and other studies (Canh & Barnard, 2009), teachers tend to pay little attention to language skills not included in the written exams, such as listening and speaking skills.

5. Conclusion

This present study provides an insight into how the textbooks were constructed in keeping with the communicative language goals expected by the government. It is quite obvious that CLT is a choice by the policymakers and textbook writers, as demonstrated above. Nevertheless, there is still insufficient attention given to other features of CLT as

well as necessary support to teachers in how to implement CLT in the classrooms, particularly to students of diverse backgrounds and abilities. The study described in this paper hopefully gives language policy makers and textbook writers food for thought if CLT is the goal and preferred approach in the language classroom. Although textbooks are considered as “*the visible heart of any ELT program*” (Sheldon, 1988, p.237), they should not be treated as the Bible but only guidelines for teachers. The textbooks should be written and used in a way that both promotes a communicative approach and provides flexibility so that teachers feel empowered in implementing an innovative teaching approach that facilitates the most effective outcomes for the teaching and learning process.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

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