

Designing Tasks in ELT Textbooks for Young Learners: A Response to Ellis (2024)

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Abstract

This article critically examines the practical challenges of designing tasks in English Language Teaching (ELT) textbooks for young learners, particularly within the Chinese educational context. Drawing from my experience in textbook development and research, I respond to Ellis's (2024) work on task-based language teaching (TBLT) and task-supported language teaching (TSLT) by identifying four key practical issues: crafting 'all-in-one' exit tasks within a hybrid syllabus, designing task-driven teaching units, mastering the intricate art of designing prototype tasks, and the effective use of textbook tasks by teachers. The article concludes by highlighting the importance of ongoing dialogue among practitioners, textbook writers, and researchers to develop ELT textbooks that are effective, practical, and responsive to the needs of language learners and teachers.

Keywords

Tasks, ELT textbook, curriculum standards

1 Introduction

Since my PhD project, which examined the implementation of the national English curriculum standards (MOE 2012) in a Chinese secondary school, I have dedicated over a decade to research, teacher education, and textbook development centred around tasks within the Chinese educational context. In particular, I have spent six years writing nationally endorsed English language teaching (ELT) textbooks for high schools and primary schools in Shanghai. In such a long-term endeavour, my work has been steered by the conviction that well-designed tasks can significantly enhance learning experiences and outcomes for students. In other words, I believe that the communicative task serves as a fundamental pillar in fostering not only the acquisition of target language among learners but also their key competencies (OECD 2006).

Ellis's (2024) article, "Task-based and Task-supported Language Teaching," offers a detailed exposition of task-based language teaching (TBLT) and task-supported language teaching (TSLT), providing insights into their theoretical foundations and practical applications. He further states that a

‘modular curriculum’ can be made for combining TBLT and TSLT. Although Ellis did not explicitly discuss the implications of this article for textbook development, the article does inspire me to contemplate its relevance to ELT materials development. Leveraging the reflective insights gained from my experiences in writing textbooks, this response will tackle several crucial practical aspects concerning the design of tasks in ELT textbooks. The aim is to explore potential avenues for expanding upon the modular curriculum model proposed by Ellis, thereby providing more practical implications for textbook writers.

2 Practical Issues Regarding Task Design in ELT Textbooks

2.1 Practical issue 1: Designing ‘all-in-one’ exit tasks in a hybrid syllabus

In China and other parts of the world, a fundamental requisite for an officially approved ELT textbook is its congruence with the principles of the national curriculum standards. This is the policy justification for incorporating tasks into language instruction, alongside Ellis’s (2024) advocacy for the robust theoretical foundation of TBLT or TSLT. Although Ellis has helpfully outlined the differences between TBLT and TSLT and proposed a more ‘advantageous’ (p.10) modular curriculum, the textbook writers’ job is not akin to choosing a meal set from two packages; rather, it is about crafting a menu that meets the requirements of the national curriculum standards. In China, for example, as the *National English Curriculum for Compulsory Education* (MOE 2022) advocates developing students’ key competencies, including linguistic abilities, cultural awareness, thinking skills, and learning strategies, a hybrid syllabus is prevalent in nearly all mainstream, nationally endorsed English Language Teaching (ELT) textbooks. Rather than a purely TBLT or TSLT approach, a hybrid syllabus normally encompasses all the components listed in the national curriculum standards, such as unit themes, linguistic knowledge, text types, culture integration, and learning strategies.

Reflecting on my experience in developing the officially endorsed ELT textbook series for elementary school students, my team and I encountered the challenge of crafting an ‘all-in-one’ exit task (Long 2014) for each unit across all textbooks, amounting to a total of 100 exit tasks from Grade 1 through Grade 5. Each task should be closely aligned with students’ daily experiences and foster the development of key competencies outlined in each unit. Moreover, the exit tasks should be sequenced to allow for progressive learning. To tackle this challenge, textbook writers should be knowledgeable about the tasks and proficient in designing them. Despite placing significant emphasis on providing textbook writers with knowledge and skills pertinent to their tasks before initiating the textbook development project, we found designing the exit tasks to be an exceedingly challenging endeavour. For example, some textbook writers favoured written assignments over oral ones, mistakenly believing that an exit task should result in a ‘tangible’ communicative outcome like a poster or a flyer. An additional example is that some textbook writers were reluctant to design input-based exit tasks for beginning-level students as they thought there ought to be some kind of production after completing a unit. Among all the deviant practices regarding task design, the most daunting challenge was to preserve the authenticity of an exit task while incorporating all the learning objectives within it. Therefore, textbook writers need a structured guideline or manual containing task design examples with research-informed annotations.

2.2 Practical issue 2: Designing a task-driven teaching unit

Upon designing an exit task for a unit, the textbook writer must develop a sequence of pedagogical tasks that span the entire unit. They are also tasked with constructing texts that support these tasks. These pedagogical tasks should be meticulously planned to progressively enhance student’s skills and knowledge (Gilbert & Malicka, 2021), guiding them towards the successful completion of the exit task. The textbook writer should also consider the equilibrium between form-focused and meaning-focused activities, ensuring that the tasks are not only linguistically rich but also cognitively engaging. For instance, in my experience as a textbook writer, my collaborators and I have faced significant challenges

in striking a balance between facilitating communicative outcomes for students and providing them with opportunities to use the target linguistic knowledge they are expected to acquire, such as lexical, grammatical, phonological, or pragmatical knowledge.

Constructing texts for tasks is another challenge for textbook writers. The texts provided for each task should be relevant and engaging, providing the necessary context and language input for the students to work with. However, creating texts that are both pedagogically sound and appealing to young learners is no easy feat. It requires a deep understanding of the target audience's interests, cultural backgrounds, and language proficiency levels. Textbook writers ought to craft narratives or informational texts that serve as vehicles for language input and stimulate willingness to communicate among learners. This delicate balance is crucial for maintaining student engagement and ensuring enjoyable learning. What challenges many Chinese textbook writers who construct texts for young learners is that they are restricted to a very limited vocabulary as prescribed by the curriculum standards, and sometimes they may have to sacrifice text authenticity to keep the text cognitively appropriate for young learners.

2.3 Practical issue 3: Textbook tasks vs. classroom tasks

Designing tasks for textbooks shares basically the same principles as designing tasks for classroom instruction, but creating textbook tasks requires meticulous attention to rigorous formatting guidelines, including font size and the information density per page. In contexts where officially approved textbooks are used for students with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, the tasks within these textbooks should be adaptable to align with specific contextual realities. Thus, the tasks presented in textbooks serve as basic prototypes to guide teachers in creating lesson plans tailored to their students' specific contexts. Considering these factors, the tasks found in textbooks are generally less complex than those outlined in the lesson plans teachers devise. Even with this distinction, the complexity inherent in the design of textbook tasks still needs to be clarified. Thus, textbook writers should master the intricate art of designing prototype tasks.

A typical example in my textbook writing project is that once a writer designed a task called "a little weather reporter". The students were asked to use the computer in their classroom to search for the weather in various cities and report what they had found. This task was suitable for use in the textbook writer's classroom, which was equipped with a computer. However, the textbook writer did not consider scenarios where students lack computer or Internet access in their classrooms. Consequently, we eliminated the computer-related instructions and instead encouraged students to utilise all possible means to gather information about weather conditions across different cities. In sum, transitioning from a specific design to a more general one necessitates a broader perspective on the diverse educational realities in which students are situated and enhanced creativity to accommodate the variety.

2.4 Practical issue 4: The use of textbook tasks

Ellis recognises that TBLT is not monolithic and that there are different versions, all adhering to shared foundational principles, such as the avoidance of pre-emptive explicit language instruction and a focus on form. However, in practice, teachers may struggle to balance these principles with the need to cover specific linguistic content and to prepare students for traditional assessments. Moreover, teachers may face challenges in adapting tasks to meet the diverse needs of their students. Ellis's article suggests that the distinction between tasks and exercises is not dichotomous. This ambiguity may lead to inconsistencies in how tasks are implemented in the classroom, with some teachers potentially reverting to more traditional, exercise-based activities. The onus is on teachers to interpret and apply the principles of TBLT and TSLT, which requires a deep understanding of SLA and pedagogy that not all teachers may possess.

Furthermore, since textbooks containing tasks typically emphasise meaningful communication and are not confined to predetermined linguistic structures, teachers accustomed to conventional text-based teaching methods may perceive this approach as overly challenging to implement. For instance, during

my visits to schools to monitor the implementation of tasks from the textbook written by our team, I observed that quite a few teachers were concerned about their inability to address almost all the language points within the related texts. This concern often stems from the misconception that language learning should be a linear process, where the content absorbed from textbooks is expected to be immediately transformed into practical application within a single lesson. However, the task-based approach encourages a more holistic view of language acquisition (Willis & Willis, 2007), where the focus is on overall communicative competence rather than the mastery of isolated linguistic forms.

3 Conclusion

Ellis's article provides a valuable framework for understanding TBLT and TSLT and their roles in language teaching. It also inspired me to ponder the complexities and challenges of implementing these approaches in ELT textbook development. The issues raised above underscore the need for ongoing dialogue and research into how best to integrate tasks in ELT textbooks in ways that are effective, practical, and responsive to the diverse needs of language learners and teachers. It is essential that practitioners, textbook writers, and researchers work together to address these concerns and to develop strategies that honour both theoretical insights and practical realities. By fostering a collaborative approach among stakeholders, we can strive towards a more nuanced and effective ELT textbook development paradigm that acknowledges the multifaceted nature of language learning.

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