

Original Paper

Critique of Published Teaching Materials

Qi Luo^{1*}

¹ The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, China

* Qi Luo, E-mail: luoqi1020@gmail.com

Received: September 18, 2022 Accepted: October 23, 2022 Online Published: October 25, 2022

doi:10.22158/wjer.v9n5p101

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/wjer.v9n5p101>

Abstract

This article seeks to explore how teaching materials can greatly facilitate students' learning effectiveness. To do this, it takes the textbook recommended by the Education Ministry as an example. The article first critically analyze the material's strengths and weaknesses, and then to propose some adaptations and supplementations to improve the material and teaching methods.

Keywords

learning motivation, multiple intelligence theory, learning effectiveness, schema theory

1. Introduction

The textbook selected for analysis is *Compulsory Curriculum Standard English Textbook (vol. 2) for Grade Eight- Go For It* (Appendx 1), published by the People's Education Press (2013). It has been recommended by the Education Ministry and is popularly used in China's secondary schools. Targeting students of Secondary Two (Grade Eight), the textbook consists of 10 units rooted in topics relevant to students' daily lives. Unit 9 "Have you ever been to a museum", selected as the teaching material to be critiqued in this report, is divided into Section A and Section B. The former focuses on the input of topic-related vocabulary and the Present Perfect tense, while the latter extends learners' language knowledge and provides exercises and tasks for them to practice what they have learned. The targeted language skills are the understanding of language meaning and the ability to correctly express ideas and suggestions. Based on Littlejohn's (2011) 3-level analysis theory, this paper is intended to critically analyze the material's strengths and weaknesses, and then to propose some adaptations and supplementations to improve the material and teaching methods.

2. Strengths of the Teaching Material and Methodology

One of the strengths in the teaching material is the clear language goal and target topic presented at the beginning, which allows learners to expect what they are going to learn in the unit. Based on the schema

theory (Carrell, 1983), this may help excavate learners' prior background knowledge and enhance their learning motivation with a specific goal. And the arrangement of content in the teaching material take account of the nature of the language and learners' learning purposes and information (Nunan, 1988). Breen (1987) believes the rich diversity instead of a general picture can contribute to language teaching. Another strength is the properly-designed teaching process demonstrated by the material. Apart from the topic, warm-up activities (e.g., Section A-1a) are presented at the beginning to help learners move into a learning frame of mind, followed by the listening and reading sections which engage students in the learning of new vocabulary and grammatical items related to the topic. Then comes the grammar section together with related exercises. Subsequently, talking and writing tasks are provided for students to use what they have learned, and lastly, a self-checking task is given to gauge how much they have actually learned. This arrangement follows the typical sequence of second language acquisition, that is, from input to output and from easy to difficult (Ellis, 2015), and therefore makes standardized instruction possible (Richards, 2001; McGrath, 2013).

The teaching material also exemplifies a good model of sequencing the exercises for the reading section. Before reading, there are pre-reading exercises to draw on learners' prior knowledge and prepare them for reading the text. This scaffolds learners with the top-down approach where reading is mainly directed by goals and expectations (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). In the text, new or unfamiliar words are underlined to facilitate learners to adopt a bottom-up approach to decode them. As Anderson (2008) suggests, utilizing reading strategies can enable learners to consolidate their comprehension of the reading text. Meanwhile, the types of comprehension questions in the material are diversified, such as blank filling, multiple-choice and short answer questions. These questions are typical in public examinations in mainland China, familiarizing learners with the format in standardized assessments (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Great efforts are put to narrowing the gap between what students actually know and what teachers expect students to know. During the preparation of teaching materials, factors such as the difficulty level of knowledge, the connection and difference between new and old knowledge, and the key and difficulty points for students to understand and master are considered so that students can learn new lessons without fear of difficulty.

3. Weakness

While some aspects of the teaching material are well designed, there are still a number of inadequacies. Firstly, the texts are fabricated to highlight the grammatical structure for readers, thus leading to a lack of authenticity and coherence. According to Rahmt Allah (2020), coherence plays a significant role in the communication and English language teachers should emphasize it to consolidate students' awareness. For example, the conversation illustrated at the beginning of the unit is inauthentic and unnatural, under which two students talk about the experience of going to the National Science Museum, but without any ideas or opinions on this experience, the conversation goes directly to the History Museum. These texts overuse the present perfect tense, failing to create authentic language contexts. Furthermore, the limited

illustrations in this unit are insufficient to convey messages needed for engaging students in authentic contexts and facilitating their comprehension of the content topic (Essel et al., 2017).

Secondly, the four basic language skills (i.e., listening, reading, speaking, and writing) are developed separately in the tasks, which seems to be efficient to achieve pedagogical and examination-oriented purposes, but fails to meet the pragmatic and communicative purposes. As there is no way for students to only use a single language skill in real-life tasks, these tasks cannot help students develop the fluency needed for communication and interaction outside the classroom.

Thirdly, the tasks in this unit attach more importance to the new vocabulary and the involved grammatical items for pedagogical purposes, focusing more on accuracy than fluency. These dumb tasks expect students to play roles as passive learners receiving the knowledge their teachers impart, which can significantly reduce students' interests and enthusiasms in language learning (Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu, 2011). Apart from tasks on grammar or vocabulary, students are not involved in any creative or interactive communication tasks to improve their language fluency. As a result, this material may help students get good grades in the examinations which have high demand on grammar and vocabulary, but they may still find it difficult to communicate fluently in real-world performance.

Fourthly, the difficulty level of the exercises is relatively low, neglecting the difference of students' English proficiency and learning preferences. As stated by Dörnyei and Ryan (2015), teachers should be aware of the difference between their students and choose suitable materials and activities that fit their capabilities. Last but not least, the self-checking sheet at the end of the unit is only concerned with grammar and vocabulary and thereby is not well-rounded. Therefore, it is ineffective and useless for both students and teachers, because it cannot truly facilitate students' self-reflection.

4. Adaptation

To address the above-mentioned weaknesses and make the teaching material more appropriate for target learners, some adaptations are put forward to improve the material and teaching methods. According to McGrath (2002), adaptation that plays a significant role in teaching material improvement has two categories, namely addition and change. In terms of addition, relevant pictures are added to the task 1a in Section A to make the material more coherent and visually appealing. These exploited pictures serve as a visual aid to help students review vocabulary as well as make predictions for the reading text. As stated by Ellis (2015), visual aids used in the classroom can encourage learning and make it easier and motivating, while making predictions is one of the most effective practices for developing reading comprehension (Duke & Pearson, 2009). Meanwhile, these pictures help to consolidate vocabulary, which is essential in L2 learning (Schmitt, 2010).

Given the lack of authenticity in the language content and the scarcity of interaction in tasks of the material, the task 1d in Section A is changed into a contextualized talk task in order to involve learners in exchanging their ideas and opinions on the most impressive places they have visited. By focusing more on contextual meaning than sentence patterns and grammatical items, the task promotes fluency rather

than accuracy, cultivates students' pragmatic competence and encourages students to use language for communicative purposes. As Thomas (1983) notes, teachers should create meaningful contexts and incorporate pragmatic knowledge into L2 teaching to improve students' pragmatic competence and develop their proficiency in intercultural interaction. In addition, learners involved can finish the task by cooperative learning. It is widely acknowledged that cooperative learning is essential to EFL learners, and efficient cooperative learning have been explored and applied since the last century. A number of studies have been conducted to evaluate the influence of cooperative learning. Based on the importance of learning's active feature, Slavin (1980) explored 28 case studies that involved cooperative learning and thus claimed that cooperative learning methods can facilitate students' academic performance, ameliorate race relations as well as other positive outcomes. Teaching strategies have changed from just teaching knowledge to recognizing the active feature of learning. Johnson and Stanne (2000) proved that cooperative learning was more efficient than competitive and individual learning by studying 164 studies with regard to cooperative learning. Deutsch (1949) claimed that cooperative learning and interaction can facilitate the realization of goals when people in the group depend on each other.

Another change to the material is the substitution of the writing task (Section B-2e) with a creative groupwork summary game. The summary game requires students to work in groups and use the given words, with each worth 20 cents, to write a \$2 summary to advertise Singapore. The objective of this task is to consolidate the learnt vocabulary, grammatical items and other language knowledge in the unit and encourage collaborative writing among students. With teacher playing the role of facilitator and students as the center of learning (Freeman, 2016), the creative task not only makes learning more interesting but also increases the authenticity of writing for a real and meaningful purpose and thus enhances students' motivation. (Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2014; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). What's more, the task enables students to collaborate, negotiate and work as a learning community during the writing process, which is beneficial to learning effectiveness (Wenger, 1998).

5. Supplementation

Apart from the adaptation above, supplementation also plays a decisive role in teaching designs. Regarding supplementation's definition, it can be concluded as adding new materials into the textbook or class, and the materials can be worksheets and activities. As mentioned in the weakness analysis, the textbook materials lack authenticity, for example, the reading concerned with museums in Section A. The languages skills throughout this unit are not integrated but taught separately. The first supplementation designed to address these weaknesses is named "Museum Guide". To begin with, authentic pictures, English videos, and English brochures about museums have been searched as authentic learning resources to engage students. According to Nunan (1988), authentic materials are "those which have been produced for purposes other than to teach language", and therefore all the supplementation materials are originally from newspapers or museum websites (p. 99). For example, one of the videos is a guide to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, one of the most famous

museums in the world. It might not be localized, but its fame would significantly interest students. Secondly, while using the authentic materials mentioned above, students are exposed to vocabularies and phrases about museums and their enthusiasm for learning them may be increased (McGrath, 2002). For example, in a video named “English Vocabulary for Museums”, commonly used vocabularies are blended in the museum guide. Next, after learning the materials, students will be asked to discuss their favorite museums in groups, and then write a museum brochure in English, using the present perfect tense, which is the grammar focus on this unit, as well as the vocabulary they have just learned. In the end, the highlight of the class is to invite students to act like museum guides based on the brochures they write. This “Museum Guide” supplementation can provide an opportunity for students to practice their productive and receptive skills together (McGrath, 2002). It is also a task-based approach that enables students to be the center of learning (Freeman, 2016). Moreover, According to Gardener (2011), students have multiple types of intelligence, therefore such a multisensory activity can benefit learners with various learning styles.

Regarding the second supplementation to address the weakness of the ineffective self-checking sheet, I redesigned a more reasonable and well-rounded self-reflection worksheet for students. To complete this sheet, students need to not only actively reflect on the grammar and vocabulary they learn in this class, but also identify their improvement in their reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. In addition, as important evaluators, students can evaluate the instructional materials and activities themselves through the self-checking sheet, which can also offer the teacher valuable feedback (McGrath, 2002). Students’ feelings, lacks, necessities, and needs can be expressed too, to reflect on their own learning process, which is vital for themselves and teachers (Hutchison & Waters, 1987).

With regard to teaching, teachers need to comprehensively analyze the eight kinds of intelligence that students possess, and design different teaching methods correspondingly. According to Gardner (1992), intelligence is the ability of individuals to solve problems in life or to produce effective products in a certain social environment and his multiple intelligence theory points out the eight kinds of intelligence that people possess. These are linguistic intelligence, logical intelligence, visual-spatial intelligence, musical intelligence, kinaesthetic intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, intrapersonal intelligence, and naturalistic intelligence. For instance, for learners whose learning style is kinaesthetic, it is more than better to add some gestures and simple dance as a stimulus. For interpersonal learners, activities such as role play and group work can help encourage students to express themselves and grasp the knowledge better in the learning process. In other words, everyone has their own intellectual strengths and weaknesses. Some people perform well because their intellectual strengths have been fully explored, and they have made up for their intellectual weaknesses to the greatest extent while most people do not recognize their own intellectual advantages, and therefore cannot fully explore their own learning styles. This may be the fundamental reason why it is difficult for them to make a difference in school and social life. With the aim to reach more students and help explore their learning styles, I generally enrich the teaching material and strive to combine visual, listening, and speaking in a variety of ways. Specifically,

the frequent use of vivid and concise pictures can help students understand texts, arouse their interest, and invigorate the classroom atmosphere.

To summarize, the weaknesses mentioned above can all be addressed by these adaptations and supplementations, making the teaching and learning more authentic and engaging.

6. Conclusion

Although the teaching material presents clear language goals, appropriate teaching process, various types of exercises as well as conformity with the *English Curriculum Standards*, and basically meets the teaching and learning needs, it lacks authenticity in its language content and creative and interactive tasks, overemphasizes the separate cultivating of the four language skills and neglects learners' differences in English proficiency. To improve its inadequacies, authentic learning resources together with interactive and integrated tasks are put forward to encourage learners to use language pragmatically. Integrated tasks require learners to be psychologically and cognitively prepared (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015), and therefore it is necessary for teachers to cultivate an appropriate atmosphere at the beginning of the tasks. It is suggested that English teachers should occasionally design innovative learning tasks or activities in order to provide opportunities for students to learn in real-life contexts and to make learning more meaningful and authentic. More importantly, these tasks and activities can facilitate students to apply the four language skills in an integrated manner.

References

- Anderson, N. (2008). *Reading*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Breen, M. P. (1987). Contemporary paradigms in syllabus design. Part I. *Language teaching*, 20(2), 81-92.
- Carrell, P. L. (1983). Three components of background knowledge in reading comprehension. *Language Learning*, 33(2), 183-201.
- Deutsch, M. (1949). A theory of cooperation and competition. *Human Relations*, 2(2), 129-151.
- Dörnyei, Z., & Ryan, S. (2015). *The psychology of the language learner revisited*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Duke, N. K., & Pearson, P. D. (2009). Effective practices for developing reading comprehension. *Journal of education*, 189(1-2), 107-122.
- Ellis, R. (2015). *Understanding second language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Essel, H. B., Tachie-Menson, A., Amponsah-Fordjour, A., & Appiah, I. K. (2017). Analytical Study of the Implications of Text Illustrations on Lower Primary Pupils' Construal in the Classroom: The Case of Illustrations in Ghanaian Language and Literacy Textbook. *Learning*, 59.
- Freeman, D. (2016). *Educating second language teachers*. Oxford University Press.
- Gardner, H. (1992). *Multiple intelligences* (Vol. 5, p. 56). Minnesota Center for Arts Education.
- Gardner, H. (2011). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. Basic Books.

- Grabe, W., & Stoller, F. L. (2011). *Teaching and researching reading* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Hadfield, J., & Dörnyei, Z. (2014). *Motivating learning*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hismanoglu, M., & Hismanoglu, S. (2011). Task-based language teaching: What every EFL teacher should do. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 15, 46-52.
- Hutchison, T., & Waters, A. (1987). *English for Specific Purposes*. Cambridge University Press.
- Littlejohn. (2011). The analysis of language teaching materials: inside the Trojan Horse. In B. Tomlinson (ed.), *Materials Development in Language Teaching* (2nd ed., pp. 179-211). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Stanne, M. B. (2000). *Cooperative learning methods: A meta-analysis*.
- McGrath, I. (2002). *Materials Evaluation and Design in Language Teaching*. Edinburgh University Press.
- McGrath, I. (2013). *Teaching materials and the roles of EFL/ESL teachers*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Nunan, D. (1988). *The Learner-Centred Curriculum*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nunan, D. (1988). *Syllabus Design*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- RahmtAllah, E. A. E. (2020). EFL Students' Coherence Skill in Writing: A Case Study of Third Year Students of Bachelors in English Language. *English Language Teaching*, 13(8), 120-126.
- Richards, J. C. (2001). *Curriculum development in language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2014). *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
- Schmitt, N. (2010). Key issues in teaching and learning vocabulary. In *Insights into non-native vocabulary teaching and learning* (pp. 28-40). Multilingual Matters.
- Slavin, R. E. (1980). Cooperative learning. *Review of educational research*, 50(2), 315-342.
- Thomas, J. (1983). Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics*, 2, 91-112.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.

Appendixes

Appendix 1. The Textbook Selected for Analysis

UNIT 9

Section A

Have you ever been to a museum?

Language Goal: Talk about past experiences.

Look at the map of the town. Listen and circle the places you hear.

Listen again and circle T for true or F for false.

Look at the map in 3a and make conversations about the places.

Role-play the conversation.

Ask and answer questions about the places in 3b.

UNIT 9

Section B

Match the pictures with the names.

the Terracotta Army, the Great Wall, the Badaling Great Wall, the Summer Palace, the Temple of Heaven.

Listen to a student interviewing a foreign student. Check (✓) the questions you hear.

Listen again and take notes.

What places have you been to? Ask your partner.

UNIT 9

Section C

These students talk about the most interesting museums they have ever been to. Read the magazine article and answer the questions.

Read the article again and answer the following questions.

Which of the underlined words in the passage have the following meanings?

UNIT 9

Section D

Write an article to advertise your hometown as a place you have been to.

Think about the things below and write an answer for each one.

Complete the conversation.

Complete the chart.

Appendix 2. Adaptation and Supplementation

Supplementation: Reflection Sheet

CLASS REFLECTION SHEET			
Class Content/Goals	My Outcomes	Difficulty Level	Interest level
Use present perfect tense to talk about past experiences, like going to museums.	Sample sentences:	<input type="radio"/> Low <input type="radio"/> Medium <input type="radio"/> High	<input type="radio"/> Low <input type="radio"/> Medium <input type="radio"/> High
Vocabulary about museums	
Reading Skills			
Listening Skills			
Writing Skills			
Speaking Skills			
Comments on class materials			
Favorite activity/task in class			
I need to work more on....			
After class, I feel... because...	😊	😊	😊

1. Video: English vocabularies for museum

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yyYwhF6CsWk>)

2. Video: Make the Most of the Met

(<https://www.nytimes.com/guides/culture/guide-to-the-metropolitan-museum-of-art>)

Adaptation:

1. Activity 1:

Think of a place which impressed you most and then to exchange your ideas with classmates.

Have you visited?

Have you been to?

2. Activit2:



Show students five pictures in the cartoon and answer the following questions:

What's in the five pictures?

Where are the places?

Can you guess what the two girls are talking about?

1. Activity 3:

Work in groups and use the words below each of which is worth 20 cents, write a \$2 summary of the article in 5 minutes.

Singapore, holiday, food, temperature, environment, English-speaking, zoo, population, tourists, excellent, island, Southeast, Asia.