



An Evaluation of a Textbook for Integrating Reading and Writing in ESL Classrooms

Kevin Wai-Ho Yung

The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Introduction

Curriculum reforms in English language education in many English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) contexts have increasingly emphasised authentic communication and the integration of language skills, namely reading, writing, listening and speaking (Curriculum Development Council, 2002). These skills, alongside grammar and vocabulary, are encouraged to be taught through task-based and communicative approaches (Freeman, 2016; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Tasks which integrate the four skills tend to be more authentic and motivating than drilling the skills in isolation. Among the four skills, reading and writing are generally more complex in terms of the syntactical structures and lexical density of written texts (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2018; Hirvela, 2016). Compared to traditional teaching of reading and writing characterised as *product-oriented*, a more *process-oriented* approach has been promoted in ESL classrooms (see Nunan, 2015). In addition to testing students' comprehension of the texts and presentation of new vocabulary and structures in context in reading, recent focus has been shifted to helping learners to be familiar with a wide range of genres and reading strategies and the adoption of a combination of bottom-up, top-down and interactive reading approaches in teaching (Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Nunan, 2015). Similarly, in writing, the process-oriented approach emphasises the recursive process of information gathering, composing, drafting, editing and proofreading, as well as collaboration with peers and the use of model text types and exemplars (Hyland, 2016). The purposes for reading and writing have also gone beyond *institutional* purposes for study and examinations to *personal* ones such as writing and reading for pleasure, interest and creative reasons (see Curriculum Development Council, 2002; Hedge, 2005). It is therefore important to promote authenticity of reading and writing in real-life situations and make the processes motivating to ESL learners.

Despite the aforementioned initiatives in curriculum reforms, achieving authenticity has always been a challenge due to various constraints, one of which is the isolation of language skills in the design of tasks in published textbooks (Richards, 2006). In this case, the evaluation and adaptation of these tasks and materials are crucial in catering for ESL learners' needs, but how these can be done has so far been overlooked in the literature (Chan, 2013). To fill this void, this paper reports on preliminary findings of a larger study evaluating textbooks for secondary students regarding how the materials and suggested tasks can be used to promote the integration of language skills, in particular reading and writing, in Hong Kong ESL classrooms. I first outline the teaching methods and materials exemplified in a selected textbook and critically analyse their strengths and weaknesses. Then I propose improvements to the teaching methods and materials and design two activities to promote reading and writing. The report concludes with the ways forward in evaluating the proposed teaching approaches and materials.

Methods and Materials Used to Teach Reading and Writing

The textbook selected for analysis is *Longman Activate JS3* (Second Edition) published by Pearson Education Asia Limited (Harfitt, Potter, Rigby, & Wong, 2012). Its series has been on the Education Bureau's recommended textbook list and is popularly used in Hong Kong secondary schools. The target group of students is Secondary Three (Grade 9). It consists of eight units rooted in themes relevant to students' daily lives. Each unit is divided into eight sections: (1) an opening page introducing the theme of the unit and a summary of the target vocabulary, grammar and skills featured in the unit; (2) warm-up activities which engage students in the theme and spark creative thinking through pre-reading and pre-teaching of new vocabulary; (3) a reading and listening section comprised of a variety of text types; (4) a comprehension section with a number of questions resembling the formats in public examinations; (5) a vocabulary section introducing key lexical groups related to the theme with practice of the new words and phrases; (6) a grammar section presenting and explaining the target grammatical items; (7) an integrated task which provides an opportunity for students to use the vocabulary and grammar presented in the pre-task support in productive tasks; and (8) self-assessment which allows students to gauge how much of the vocabulary and grammar presented in the unit they have actually learnt. The unit selected for analysis as an illustrative case is 'Our beautiful planet,' in which students learn vocabulary for environmental issues and expressing opinions and grammar items of participle phrases and conditionals through a variety of contextualised tasks using the four language skills.

Strengths of the Methods and Materials Used

One of the strengths in this unit is the wide range of text types provided for students for reading and writing. The first three written texts cover a poem, a webpage and a newspaper report. Based on schema theory (Carrell, 1983), this scaffolds learners with vocabulary related to environmental issues and expressing opinions, and grammatical structures of conditionals and participle phrases. This exposes learners to a variety of genres, which the Curriculum Development Council (2002) encourages. The newspaper report also serves as a model of genre which forms a sound basis for the later integrated writing task.

Another strength demonstrated from the tasks is the reading skills and the wide range of comprehension questions following the texts. The skills in the unit analysed include summarising and paraphrasing. As Anderson (2008) suggests, students are encouraged to learn strategies of reading. Teaching these skills can enable students to consolidate their understanding of the reading texts by identifying main ideas. The comprehension questions also include various question types, such as summary cloze, true or false, multiple-choice and searching for words. These questions are typical in public examinations, which familiarises students with the format in standardised assessments. This also fulfils the pragmatic need of reading for institutional purposes (Hedge, 2005).

The teaching methods and materials also exemplify a good model of sequencing tasks. Before reading, students are encouraged to engage in pre-reading tasks such as learning prefixes of antonyms and answering a set of questions related to the theme of the unit. This draws on learners' prior knowledge and prepares them for reading the texts. This is a typical approach in the top-down model where reading is 'primarily directed by reader goals and expectations' (Grabe & Stoller, 2011, p. 25). However, at a certain point, a bottom-up model is adopted when students need to decode unfamiliar words. An example is the glossary next to the text giving definitions of challenging words (e.g., the poem). Such a combination of the top-down and bottom-up models is an example of the interactive reading approach. Vocabulary related to environmental issues and grammar rules of participle phrases and conditionals are introduced after reading the texts. This focus-on-form approach (Ellis, 2015; Long, 1991) allows students to focus on meaning first before focusing on forms. Input is then followed by exercises such as sentence writing, fill-in-the-blank and proofreading for consolidation of learnt vocabulary and grammar items. Finally, there is

an integrated task requiring students to write a newspaper report using the skills learnt such as the structure of the newspaper report genre through text analysis. Students are provided with a variety of texts to guide them with the writing process. The pre-writing stage involves answering a list of wh-word questions and sample sentences for reporting what people said. Students are then asked to create and develop the newspaper report with hints for structuring. This process-oriented writing approach treats writing as a process instead of solely as a product (Hyland, 2016; Nunan, 2015). The task ends with peer review with a checklist guiding students to provide peer feedback. This promotes a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) and encourages students to use their metacognitive skills in evaluating the writing of their peers (Oxford, 2017).

The tasks are also provided with contexts and situations relevant to students' school life, which increases the authenticity of the tasks. An interesting example is the vocabulary task where the situation states 'Your Geography teacher has asked you to prepare some information cards about environment issues' (p. 66). The provision of a context in a school subject is in line with the recent promotion of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (see Lin, 2016), so students may be more aware of the language use when they are learning their subject knowledge such as Geography. Another example is, in the integrated task, the students need to imagine themselves as reporters for the school newspaper and they have to read minutes and listen to interviews to prepare for their writing. This gives clear purposes for reading and writing, which may enhance students' learning motivation with specific goals.

The authors of the textbook are also sensitive about learners' individual differences, as demonstrated in the teacher's notes offering additional guidelines to teach stronger and weaker students. As Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) noted, teachers should be aware of the level of their students and choose suitable materials and activities that fit their ability. This caters for the diversity of students at different schools. The teachers are also encouraged to adapt the materials to suit the capability of their students, which is also a strength of the materials.

Inadequacies and Proposed Improvements to the Materials

While some aspects of the textbook are well designed, there are still a number of inadequacies. One of them is the lack of authenticity of some model texts. A particular example is the report of a school newspaper. While the authors may want students to be exposed to the grammar items which the unit covers in the latter part, the overuse of participle phrases and Type 3 conditional, as evidenced in paragraphs 4 to 6 (Harfitt et al., 2012, p. 62), makes the text unnatural. As Chan (2013) has argued, a common problem of models in textbooks is their lack of authenticity due to the awkward use of language. Therefore, if teachers want to keep using this text, they may ask students to also search for the use of these grammar items in authentic newspaper reports and analyse how they are used. Students can then compare the differences between 'textbook language' and authentic use of the grammar items in the real world. This could also encourage students to read extensively and then the grammar items could become implicit knowledge which students could potentially use in their writing (Ellis, 2015).

There are also some inadequacies in the grammar section. Probably influenced by the traditional Grammar-translation method in language teaching (Freeman, 2016), students learn the rules of participle phrase and then complete exercises to consolidate their understanding. The same approach applies to learning Type 3 conditionals. This elicits students' explicit knowledge by focusing overtly on forms but meaning is unavoidably downplayed. Teachers can, therefore, ask the students to re-read the texts earlier and identify how the participle phrases and conditional sentences are used to express meanings, and how they can use them in daily life. Students can also try to produce output by using those grammar items in writing. An example is to go back to the question 'If animals could speak, what do you think they would say about humans?' (Harfitt et al., 2012, p. 60) in the poem and ask students to share their answers with their classmates. This could increase the opportunities for students to use the grammar items in authentic contexts and hence strengthen their writing skills instead of merely using the grammar items in isolation

(Hyland, 2016). Asking students to imagine an unreal situation for writing could also make use of their creativity and potentially increase their learning motivation (Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2014).

Moreover, there is currently a lack of connection between the two grammar items covered in the unit. In fact, participle phrases can sometimes be used to express conditions. Teachers can ask students to change the participle phrases in the model texts to conditional sentences, and vice versa. For example, one of the comments in the webpage 'Caught in huge numbers, though, many species of fish could disappear forever' (Harfitt et al., 2012, p. 61) can be changed to 'If many species had not been caught in huge numbers, they would not have disappeared forever'. This could allow students to use the two grammar items interchangeably in writing and integrate what they have been learning. Connection could be further strengthened with the students' prior knowledge (Carrell, 1983). Since students should have already learnt conditionals Types 0, 1 and 2 earlier, after teaching conditional Type 3, there could be a task requiring students to decide when they should use which type of conditionals. This could consolidate their understanding of conditional sentences so that they could decode the meaning in the texts more accurately when they encounter different conditionals in reading and use them flexibly in their writing.

Another inadequacy is the level of difficulty for some tasks. Despite the different suggested approaches for stronger and weaker students stipulated in the teacher's notes, asking students to read a poem as the first text in the unit may be challenging to both groups of students. While the Education Bureau is promoting language arts in secondary schools (Curriculum Development Council, 2002), the poem is still a less familiar genre to students. The sequence of texts could be adjusted so that students can understand the themes better with familiar texts before reading the poem. Another way is to pre-teach unfamiliar words in the poem such as the different parts of animals (e.g., beak, claws and feathers) and the structure of the poem before engaging students in reading it. This can also enhance students' schema and allow them to use acquired knowledge to comprehend the text as proposed in the top-down model (Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Nunan, 2015).

On the contrary, the summary cloze exercise in the comprehension section may be too easy for higher-level Secondary Three students. Most answers can be directly copied from the text. The task can be modified by requiring students to change the part of speech of certain words and use the appropriate grammatical forms to fill in the blanks. This requires higher cognitive skills in reading and writing and can train students to produce higher quality paraphrased or summarised paragraphs in writing (see Oxford, 2017).

Planning for Change

In this section, I plan and devise procedures for implementing two learning activities which extend the acquisition of reading and writing skills in the unit analysed.

Activity 1: Visiting an Environmental Education Centre

In the middle of the unit, after teaching the vocabulary related to environmental issues, the teacher can organise a visit to an environmental education centre (e.g., the Lung Fu Shan Environmental Education Centre in Hong Kong). This can ensure that students have got enough exposure to texts and learnt enough vocabulary related to the topic and use their experience to continue learning the unit which contains more productive tasks later. The main objective of this activity is to expose students to the language use in reading authentic materials related to the theme of the unit. This activity can be organised with the collaboration between English language teachers and Geography teachers so that students' language learning can be integrated with the content as promoted in CLIL (see Lin, 2016).

Students gather at the centre and travel in small groups (3-4 students), perhaps on a Saturday morning. They explore the centre such as the exhibition area and information corner and read the exhibition boards about the natural environment and issues related to environmental protection in English. When they

encounter unfamiliar words or have difficulties understanding some sentences, they can discuss with their group mates before resorting to reading the Chinese version. The group needs to select at least five pieces of information and write a summary for each of them. This can consolidate their skills of note taking, summarising and paraphrasing introduced earlier in this unit. They are also encouraged to take note of new words and useful expressions. For writing, they are required to take photographs and create an English caption for each photograph. This trains students to write for an authentic purpose and use their creativity and ability to express main ideas. These photographs and captions will be used in Activity 2.

The visit provides students with the opportunity of experiential learning outside the classroom. This can be motivating as students' learning does not need to be confined to classroom settings, and more importantly, students can relate what they have been learning in the classroom to real-life contexts (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). A limitation is that the activity can be time-consuming and may not be easily organised during class time.

Activity 2: Extended Integrated Writing Project

After teaching the whole unit, teachers can extend it by creating an integrated task which requires students to write for an authentic purpose. Since students have already practised writing the genre of newspaper report, they can be given the opportunity to write for a webpage as introduced in the unit (Harfitt et al., 2012, p. 61) to promote the idea of environmental protection in school. The objectives of this activity are to consolidate the learnt skills and vocabulary in the unit and encourage collaborative writing among the students.

After the visit in Activity 1, students bring the photographs taken with captions and their written summaries to the class. The teacher can reserve a computer room for a double lesson. Students sit in groups of three or four and upload their photos and type their captions and summaries onto the computer. The writing process involves collaboration and negotiation of meaning among the students as a learning community (Wenger, 1998). The students organise the photos and words to create a webpage. To encourage creativity, they can decide what format they want to use and what key messages they want to convey on the webpage. An example is to encourage students to use conditional sentences to write in the voice of animals (e.g., 'If I were a bird, I would like to fly in a blue sky.' to highlight the problem of air pollution). This task-based approach of language teaching requires the teacher to play the role as a facilitator who guides them in the writing process by answering questions and solving problems together with the students (see Freeman, 2016).

When all the groups have finished, they can publish their work by sending around the link of their webpage. Other groups can add comments discussing different environmental issues. This extends the community of practice onto the Internet (Beatty, 2010). This can also increase the authenticity of writing for a real and meaningful purpose, thus enhancing students' motivation (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2014). For assessment purposes, apart from the teacher grading the quality of the webpages, students can also participate in peer assessment and exchange feedback with one another. A challenge for teachers in this activity is the knowledge of technology, particularly in how a webpage can be created and published. This may need support from the school's IT department.

Conclusion and Future Directions

This report has analysed the strengths and inadequacies of a unit exemplified in a typical textbook used in Hong Kong Secondary Three classrooms and proposed activities for improvement. A way forward is to solicit responses from students on the proposed activities. A typical method is to collect students' views through questionnaires (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Statements for students to express the extent of agreement in a 5-point Likert scale may include:

- Visiting the environmental education centre has motivated me to learn reading in English.
- Creating a webpage has motivated me to learn to write in English.
- My summarising skills have improved after visiting the environmental education centre.
- Collaborative writing while creating the webpage has made me learn writing more effectively.

To obtain more qualitative responses, interviews can also be conducted to ask students open-ended questions, such as what they liked most about the activities and what they think can be improved to better facilitate their learning of reading and writing.

Evaluation can also be conducted through the perspective of subject teachers. Since the visit may involve Geography teachers, the language teacher can invite the Geography teachers to comment on the effectiveness of the visit and the extent to which they think their students have improved in using English to acquire subject knowledge. Other colleagues can also be invited to comment on the quality of the webpages the students create. Language teacher's self-evaluation is also an important component in evaluating the effectiveness of the activities. This requires the teacher to be reflective and have the ability to do self-monitoring (Freeman, 2016). A checklist can be designed to facilitate a more systematic way of reflection. Items may include whether the activities have achieved the learning outcomes, whether they are motivating and whether the atmosphere is conducive to learning.

Since the proposed activities are learner-centred and the teacher plays a facilitating role, it is important to promote a learning community with peer support. Students need to be psychologically and cognitively prepared to engage in collaborative activities (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). This requires an atmosphere cultivated in the classroom at the beginning of the year. It is recommended that teachers create tasks that are innovative and occasionally require learning outside the classroom so that students can learn in real-life contexts. Learning can then become more authentic and meaningful. More importantly, the four language skills can be applied in an integrated manner.

Acknowledgements

The research was supported by The Education University of Hong Kong under the Start-up Research Grant for Newly Recruited Assistant Professors (RG55/2017-2018R).

The Author

Kevin Wai Ho Yung is an assistant professor at the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Faculty of Education and Human Development at The Education University of Hong Kong. His publications have appeared in international journals such as *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, *ELT Journal*, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, *System* and *TESOL Quarterly*. His research interests include curriculum and assessment, English for academic purposes, second language learning motivation and shadow education.

Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Faculty of Education and Human Development
The Education University of Hong Kong
10 Lo Ping Road, Tai Po, New Territories
Hong Kong
Tel: +852 29487522
Email: kevinjung@eduhk.hk
ORCID: 0000-0001-5252-9422

References

- Anderson, N. (2008). *Reading*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Beatty, K. (2010). *Teaching and researching computer-assisted language learning* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Carrell, P. L. (1983). Three components of background knowledge in reading comprehension. *Language Learning*, 33(2), 183-201.
- Chan, J. Y. H. (2013). The role of situational authenticity in English language textbooks. *RELC Journal*, 44(3), 303-317. doi:10.1177/0033688213500583
- Curriculum Development Council. (2002). *English language education key learning area curriculum guide (primary 1 - secondary 3)*. Hong Kong: Government Printer
- Dörnyei, Z., & Ryan, S. (2015). *The psychology of the language learner revisited*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ellis, R. (2015). *Understanding second language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Freeman, D. (2016). *Educating second language teachers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 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.
- Harfitt, G., Potter, J., Rigby, S., & Wong, K. (2012). *Longman Activate JS3B* (2nd ed.). Hong Kong: Pearson Education Asia Limited.
- Hedgcock, J. S., & Ferris, D. R. (2018). *Teaching readers of English: Students, texts, and contexts* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hedge, T. (2005). *Writing* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hirvela, A. (2016). *Connecting reading & writing in second language writing instruction* (2nd ed.). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Hyland, K. (2016). *Teaching and researching writing* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lin, A. M. Y. (2016). *Language across the curriculum & CLIL in English as an additional language (EAL) contexts: Theory and practice*. Singapore: Springer.
- Long, M. (1991). Focus on form: A design feature in language teaching methodology. In K. d. Bot, R. Ginsberg, & C. Kramsch (Eds.), *Foreign language research in cross-cultural perspective* (pp. 39-52). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Nunan, D. (2015). *Teaching English to speakers of other languages: An introduction*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Oxford, R. (2017). *Teaching and researching language learning strategies: Self-regulation in context* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Richards, J. C. (2006). Materials development and research: Making the connection. *RELC Journal*, 37(1), 5-26. doi:10.1177/0033688206063470
- Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2014). *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (3rd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.