

# An Evaluation of Teaching Grammar as Ability in the Integrative Textbooks for Chinese EFL High School Students

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to evaluate whether and to what extent the integrative textbooks for Chinese EFL learners in high schools reflect the principles for teaching grammar as ability. Based on the principles proposed by Richards and Reppen <sup>[1]</sup> and relevant literature, six principles have been identified and employed to evaluate three most popular integrative textbooks for senior 1 students. The results show that Textbook C (published by Beijing Normal University Edition) performs the best in terms of teaching grammar as ability with a score of 15 (18 in total) while Textbook A (published by People's Education Publishing House) and Textbook B (published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press) have just reached the borderline (i.e., 9). Although the editors of these three textbooks have attached importance to cultivating students' grammar ability with the focus on text to a varying extent, it is suggested that teachers should also critically evaluate the integrative textbooks as not all the texts and tasks contained in these books are sufficient and effective to facilitate cultivating students' grammatical ability.

**Keywords:** Teaching grammar as ability; Principles; Textbooks

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## 1. Introduction

Although teaching grammar as ability <sup>[1]</sup> is insightful in grammar instruction, little has been known about whether and to what extent textbooks can facilitate teaching grammatical ability. As textbooks are the important media of input and output for learners <sup>[2]</sup>, especially for Chinese EFL high school students who acquire their grammar knowledge mainly from the integrative textbooks, the grammar instruction offered by the textbooks is necessary to be explored and evaluated. Therefore, in the following section, a set of principles will be identified first from relevant literature and then applied to evaluate the integrative textbooks in terms of teaching grammar as ability.

## 2. Integrative textbooks for Chinese high school students

For Chinese EFL learners in high schools, the most popular textbooks are the three series of integrative textbooks that are designed by different educational publishers: People's Education Publishing House, Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, and Beijing Normal University Edition. They are being used currently by teachers and students and will continue to be used for many years in the future, so it is of great pedagogical value to evaluate the content related to grammar instruction.

Three textbooks intended for the senior 1 students for their first semester have been chosen for evaluation in this paper as they can represent the designs of the three publishers. For convenience, I use Textbook A as a label for the one published by People's Education Publishing House, Textbook B for Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, and Textbook C for Beijing Normal University Edition. The content of three units in these textbooks will be sampled for detailed analysis, including texts, tasks, activities and appendices.

## 3. Principles for evaluating the textbooks

As the principles provided by Richards and Reppen <sup>[1]</sup> are designed for teachers and not all of them are suitable for evaluating learning materials, some fine-tuning is needed. In addition, for theoretical adequacy, relevant literature has been employed to support and explain the rationales behind the principles chosen for evaluating the textbooks. Besides, in light of the purposes of this paper, particular attention will be given to literature related to grammar teaching and learning materials evaluation. To evaluate whether the

textbooks facilitate teaching grammar as ability, the six principles are presented below.

1. The textbook exposes students to engaging and meaningful texts that contain features of the target grammar. Texts in the integrative textbooks are generally considered as one of the most important sources of input for language learners as grammar should not be taught in isolation but in context. However, not all the texts can become useful input so the textbooks need to provide cognitively and affectively engaging texts for students [3].

2. The textbook guides learners to notice the specific features of grammar structures. Input alone is not sufficient as noticing the specific grammatical features in the input is necessary for acquisition to take place [4]. The textbooks should draw learners' attention to the salient grammar structures with guiding questions or prompts, such as underlining the target features [5].

3. The textbook employs both deductive and inductive approaches in grammar-teaching activities in a flexible way. The learning style preferences are likely to vary greatly between learners so different approaches should be employed in designing grammar-teaching activities [1].

4. The textbook provides opportunities for students to use grammar knowledge for meaningful communicative purposes. The Output Hypothesis [6] reminds us that learners' noticing or comprehending the grammar structures is not enough and they should be given opportunities to process the knowledge in a syntactic mode. However, Ellis [7] warned that "controlled practice exercises typically result in output that is limited in terms of length and complexity" (p. 218) so more open-ended activities like interacting with peers in the target language are needed to enhance the grammatical ability.

5. The textbook connects the usage of grammar with vocabulary. Though it is understandable to separate grammar and vocabulary teaching for different focuses, the connections between the two should also be emphasized [1].

6. The textbook integrates grammar into listening, speaking, reading and writing activities. Mastery of grammar rules can facilitate comprehension in receptive skills, i.e. listening and reading, and help learners better express themselves in productive skills, i.e. speaking and writing. Therefore, grammar should be integrated into the activities for the four skills as an essential component [1].

#### **4. The evaluation of the textbooks**

Based on the principles stated above, the three recently published textbooks will be evaluated with a score. As with the design by Tomlinson and Masuhara [8] and Renandya et al. [9], the scores range from 1 to 3, showing to what extent each principle is reflected in the three textbooks respectively (with 1 indicating that this textbook has little evidence reflecting the principle, 2 indicating partial evidence and 3 indicating strong evidence). Each principle has been turned into a question and the results of evaluation are presented as follows, with the number in each bracket representing the score.

Principle 1. To what extent does the textbook expose students to engaging and meaningful texts that contain features of the target grammar?

Textbook A (1). In general, the textbook contains interesting texts with topics and these texts are not too long to cause fatigue. However, the texts do not present many features of the target grammar that is stated in the contents of every unit. The grammar points seem to be isolated from the texts.

Textbook B (2). The textbook provides texts of different topics and genres, which can be potentially appealing to students. In addition, the first parts of "Using Language" in every unit will always refer to some sentences in the reading passages that contain the features of target grammar.

Textbook C (3). The texts in the textbook are engaging for students as they not only include classical topics like sports and festival celebrations, but also talk about up-to-date issues like a digital native. More importantly, the book raises students' awareness of learning grammar from the texts by encouraging them to find out more examples in the texts.

Principle 2. To what extent does the textbook guide learners to notice the specific features of grammar structures?

Textbook A (1). Overall, the textbook does not explicitly guide students to notice the specific grammar features. It just refers to the grammatical terminology, provides some examples and asks students to figure out the features by themselves.

Textbook B (3). This textbook draws students' attention to not only the forms of grammar features but also the difference between the use of the target grammar points and that of other similar points. For instance, it has boldfaced the subordinate clauses and proposed questions on the functions of the conjunctions in attributive clauses to help students notice the difference of two clauses.

Textbook C (2). Just like Textbook A, it also asks students to circle or underline the grammatical features in the sentences by themselves without providing much guidance. However, in addition to sentences, there are some prompts to guide students to notice the features at the text level.

Principle 3. To what extent does the textbook employ both deductive and inductive approaches in grammar-teaching activities in

a flexible way?

Textbook A (1), Textbook B (1), Textbook C (1). It is surprising that the three integrative textbooks have adopted inductive approaches in nearly all the grammar activities, so I summarize their evaluation in this comment. The tasks have mentioned the grammatical terminology and required students to elicit the rules or functions of forms from the given examples. Although detailed explanations have been provided in the appendices and are presented in Chinese, the mother tongue of the target students, but there is no activity and it is likely that students will not notice their existence until they are reminded by the teachers. In general, the three textbooks have heavily relied on inductive approaches in grammar-teaching activities.

Principle 4. To what extent does the textbook provide opportunities for students to use grammar knowledge for meaningful communicative purposes?

Textbook A (2). Many activities in the textbook have utilized pictures or photos to construct a specific scenario where students are invited to communicate with their peers. However, most of them are semi-controlled activities as there are requirements of using a particular grammar structure. It seems to make students practice in a meaningful way but not for communicative purposes.

Textbook B (1). The textbook makes no attempt to provide students with communicative activities. All the activities are controlled for practicing the target forms, such as gap filling and sentence rewriting.

Textbook C (3). There are many open-ended activities in this textbook with potentially engaging prompts or questions for students such as discussing what they would say when “an underdog defeated a famous player”. In addition, the types of activities include both individual tasks and group work. Students are also encouraged to better prepare themselves for the communicative tasks through searching for more information.

Principle 5. To what extent does the textbook connect the usage of grammar with vocabulary?

Textbook A (2). There are some gap-filling tasks that connect vocabulary with grammar learning by asking students to complete the passage with the correct forms of the new words. Nevertheless, these tasks seldom require students to pay attention to the forms but only to the vocabulary.

Textbook B (1). The textbook does not explicitly combine the usage of grammar with vocabulary. Many tasks are solely designed for either vocabulary learning or grammar learning.

Textbook C (3). This textbook contains many tasks that present the link between grammar and vocabulary. For example, make students complete the word builder first for indefinite pronouns and then use the words or phrases to complete the text.

Principle 6. To what extent does the textbook integrate grammar into listening, speaking, reading and writing activities?

Textbook A (2). Overall, the textbook makes little effort to integrate grammar into listening and reading activities. However, it is effective in using some grammar choices and features to facilitate students’ learning of productive skills, especially in terms of writing.

Listening: Most of the listening activities are designed for listening comprehension or as a warming-up section that introduces the topics of the units.

Speaking: There are some pair-work activities where students are asked to make a conversation and some useful expressions are provided.

Reading: The while-reading and post-reading tasks are mainly used for practicing reading comprehension skills, making no attempt to help students to explore the grammar features of the reading passage.

Writing: There is a learning section called Reading for Writing in every unit of the textbook. In this section, students are presented with a sample writing first and then asked to study its organization and language features, followed by a group discussion. Some prompts or general steps are used to help students construct their own passage. Moreover, as a final task, it asks students to exchange their drafts and use the checklist to give feedback on their partner’s draft.

Textbook B (1). The textbook tends to make students pay more attention to the meaning in the activities for the four skills. Though many useful expressions are provided, it seems that grammar only exists as a prompt to form sentences but not the structure of texts.

Listening: There are two parts of listening activities. The first one serves as a starting-out section to lead in the topics with some comprehension-focused questions while the other one usually adopts gap filling tasks to help students focus on specific expressions.

Speaking: Communication bank is provided in the textbook for speaking activities where some interesting topics and real-world situations are offered to the students. It also reduces students’ cognitive challenge as there are relevant expressions alongside the topics.

Reading: Although many authentic texts are potentially engaging for students, the tasks are mainly designed for comprehending the content of the passage or inferring the meanings of unfamiliar words

Writing: The majority of the activities in the writing section are designed for analyzing the content of an essay and helping students to developing their ideas without paying much attention to the grammatical choices.

Textbook C (3). As the designs of the sections for four skills are more or less the same, the writing section is taken as an example. Students are guided to learn in the following order: get ready for writing, read for writing, focus on language and structure and finally compose writing. The third part contains tasks or questions that help students understand the discourse features of the writing sample such as asking students to underline the words that link sentences and paragraphs. To its credit, the book provides a peer editing sheet for students to evaluate and comment on their peer's drafts in terms of both forms and meanings. In general, the textbook has well integrated the grammar teaching with the skill-based activities.

#### 1. Discussion and Conclusion

If we add up the scores for each textbook and set half of the total score as a borderline (i.e. 9), then Textbook C performs the best in terms of teaching grammar as ability with a score of 15 while Textbook A and Textbook B have just reached the borderline. Generally, Textbook C has organized the activities in a more clear and structured way, enhancing students' ability step by step. However, it does not excel the other two textbooks at all the principles as little explicit guidance has been provided to help students notice the forms. As for Textbook A and Textbook B, they appear to put more focus on teaching grammar as knowledge at the sentence level though there are some gap-filling activities based on a short-written text. Nevertheless, it is worth noticing that the three textbooks have failed to employ deductive approaches to design their activities. In other words, they require students to elicit the rules or functions of the target grammar on their own. Although deductive approaches are not necessarily adopted in grammar activities, only employing inductive approaches may be potentially unfriendly for the students with low-level proficiency or those who are in favor of clear and detailed explanations of the grammar rules.

Overall the editors of these three textbooks have attached importance to cultivating students' grammar ability with the focus on text to a varying extent. Although subjective views are inevitable during the analysis and evaluation process, these results can provide some insights for teachers who want to improve students' grammatical ability. It is suggested that teachers should also critically evaluate the integrative textbooks as not all the texts and tasks contained in these books are sufficient and effective to facilitate cultivating students' grammatical ability. More often than not, teachers need to provide other texts and activities as a supplement for those in the textbooks.

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