

Using Corpora as an Innovative Approach to Assess Textbook and Exam Readings

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Abstract

Textbooks and exams are important aspects of English language teaching (ELT) as they influence or even determine what students learn. Previous studies have compared ELT materials and proficiency exams to verify and ensure consistency and reliability in both testing and teaching materials designed for the same target students; a mismatch might lead to tests negatively affecting teaching and vice-versa, which is called the educational washback effect. However, the Chinese ELT context remains under-investigated, and rare studies illustrate a step-by-step guidance of this comparative corpus-based analysis approach. This research aims to provide researchers with hands-on suggestions for the construction and analysis of ELT-specialised corpora which can improve future ELT material development and assessment practices to be better aligned and more statistically objective.

Keywords: Corpora, Material Development, Exams, ELT.

Introduction

In English Language Teaching (ELT), the significance of textbooks has gained widespread recognition (Ryu & Jeon, 2020). Some scholars suggest that language textbooks, due to their structured and comprehensive nature, influence learning outcomes even more substantially than language teachers themselves (Nicol & Crespo, 2006), or that they should be given the status as the main and principal teaching material in language classes (Ryu & Jeon, 2020). This underscores the pivotal role that textbooks play in shaping the language teaching curriculum and guiding the instructional and learning process, which thus arises the necessity of continuous textbook-oriented research and revolutions.

Besides the critical role played by language textbooks, language assessments are also vital in language education. In contemporary educational contexts, an increasing number of English language learners are learning English with an aim to be ‘certified’ by taking proficiency tests (Richards & Pun, 2022). In this case, the standardized tests are benchmarks for measuring learners’ language proficiency, and thus the exams are supposed to be in line with textbooks in difficulty, question type, language context, and other relevant parameters. If there is a disparity between the content of the text-

books and the exams, the exam will no longer be an appropriate assessment instrument of what the students have learned; in short such a disparity would afford a ‘skewed interpretation of testing and assessment’ (Hatipoğlu, 2016). This is a critical factor that would undermine the validity and reliability of the assessment process.

Thus, both language textbooks and assessments are essential components of the ELT ecosystem, and there should be coherence and alignment between these two elements to provide an effective ELT experience.

However, as Gedik and Kolsal (2022) noted, the lack of correspondence between textbooks and exams is a recurring theme across diverse educational systems and contexts. Most comparative studies under this topic reveal that exams are more difficult than textbooks even though they are intended to target the same group of students, e.g., those in the same school year or educational stage (Zhou & Prado, 2024). This discrepancy indicates that students are facing assessments that are not adequately representative of the content and difficulty level they have been exposed to in their textbooks. This problematic situation stimulates increasing interest in academia to assess the texts in ELT textbooks and exams comparatively to identify the nature and extent of the discrepancies, which could