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Reconceptualizing Textbooks in ELT: Pedagogical Functions, Challenges and Innovations

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Abstract

Textbooks are acknowledged as a cornerstone of the teaching-learning process and a key component of any language program. They continue to shape how language is taught and learnt in diverse contexts. Considering their pervasive influence in the English language teaching (ELT) and applied linguistics, this study aimed to examine the role of textbooks as pedagogical tools in English Language Teaching (ELT), focusing on how they mediate between curriculum, teachers, and learners. Positioned within the broader context of applied linguistics and pedagogy, the study responds to the need to understand textbooks not merely as repositories of linguistic content but as dynamic instruments shaping instructional design and learner engagement. Using a qualitative document-based approach, the research analyzed key theoretical and empirical works, policy documents, and scholarly discussions related to textbook functions, adaptation strategies, and innovations. The findings reveal that textbooks serve multiple pedagogical functions: Textbooks provide structured linguistic input, organize content, guide classroom tasks, support assessment, and foster learner autonomy. However, challenges such as overreliance, lack of contextual relevance, and limited flexibility were also identified. The study contributes to the field by highlighting the mediating role of textbooks in linking theory, pedagogy, and ideology while advocating for flexible, context-sensitive, and technology-enhanced integration. The paper also highlights the importance of teacher agency in adapting textbooks to diverse learning environments and recommends further research on multimodal, culturally responsive, and AI-augmented textbook design for enhancing learner engagement in evolving ELT contexts.

Keywords: textbooks, English Language Teaching (ELT), pedagogical functions, learner engagement, adaptation strategies, multimodal materials

Reconceptualizing Textbooks in ELT: Pedagogical Functions, Challenges and Innovations

Textbooks have occupied a central place in English Language Teaching (ELT), serving as the most visible and widely used instructional materials across diverse educational contexts. They provide not only the content but also the structure and sequence of language learning, which often act as the *de facto* curricula in many classrooms worldwide. As Cummingsworth (1995) states, "Coursebooks are best seen as a resource in achieving aims and objectives that have already been set in terms of learner needs" (p.7). Textbooks serve as valuable resources for preparing presentation materials, generating ideas for classroom activities, providing reference materials for students, outlining the syllabus, and supporting less experienced teachers. Textbooks provide the basis for the content of lessons, language skills to be taught, and what will be learnt by order in which students learn. For teachers, textbooks function as ready-made resources that guide lesson planning and classroom activities, while for learners, they serve as familiar tools that support both classroom engagement and independent study. In this sense, Hutchinson and Torres (1994) argue that "the textbook is an almost universal element of ELT teaching" (p. 315). Because of their ubiquity and influence, textbooks play a decisive role in shaping the nature and quality of language learning experiences.

Understanding textbooks as pedagogical tools also has significant research and practical implications. Pedagogically, they occupy a unique position between curriculum, teachers, and learners, serving as the medium through which curricular objectives are interpreted, enacted, and experienced. McGrath (2013) highlights the importance of the textbook as a stimulus for communicative interaction, serving as the foundation and central component of the entire teaching- learning process. From a research perspective, textbooks are not neutral; they embody particular pedagogical, cultural, and ideological orientations. As Sheldon (1988) reminds us, "textbooks are often the visible heart of any ELT program" (p. 237). Situating textbooks within this triadic relationship underscores their importance not only in guiding language instruction but also in shaping how teachers teach and how learners experience language learning.

The objective of this article is to critically examine the role of textbooks as pedagogical tools in English Language Teaching (ELT). Specifically, it aims to explore how textbooks function not merely as repositories of linguistic content but as dynamic mediators between curriculum, teachers, and learners. Tomlinson (2011) notes that "teaching materials can provide exposure to language, stimulate learners to use language, and help them to

acquire new knowledge and skills” (p. 7). At the same time, they mediate between prescribed curricular goals and the classroom realities negotiated by teachers and learners. The article seeks to analyze their multiple functions in organizing content, setting classroom tasks, providing input and assessment support, and shaping both teacher identity and learner engagement. In doing so, it also highlights emerging innovations and adaptation strategies that reposition textbooks in response to changing pedagogical, technological, and sociocultural contexts. Ultimately, this discussion contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how textbooks influence teaching and learning processes.

Theoretical Perspectives: Textbooks as Mediators of Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Ideology

Beyond functional definitions, textbooks can also be understood through theoretical perspectives that position them as mediators of curriculum, pedagogy, and ideology.

Textbooks have been a part and parcel of the entire teaching learning process, which serve as teachers and guides in many contexts where qualified English teachers are not available. It is often the case that qualified English teachers are not easily available in many contexts in Nepal and several other parts of South Asia. Hutchinson and Torres (1994) argue that “the textbook is an almost universal element of ELT teaching” and functions as “a support for teachers, a resource for learners, and an instrument for implementing change” (p. 315).

Tomlinson (2011) expands this view by suggesting that textbooks and other teaching materials can provide exposure to language, stimulate learners to use language, and help them acquire new knowledge and skills (p. 7). At the same time, they embody particular pedagogical orientations and ideological assumptions. As Sheldon (1988) points out, “textbooks are often the visible heart of any ELT program,” but they also transmit “attitudinal and cultural values” embedded in their content (p. 239). In this way, textbooks mediate between curricular intentions, teaching practices, and the sociocultural ideologies that shape learning environments.

Historical Role of Textbooks in Shaping English Teaching Worldwide

Historically, textbooks have played a decisive role in shaping how English has been taught across the globe. They have been central to the teaching–learning process for decades, providing continuity and stability in diverse contexts. Their widespread availability has meant that, in many contexts, textbooks have served as the *de facto* curriculum, especially in situations where teachers have limited training or resources. Hutchinson and Torres (1994) note that in times of curricular reform, textbooks often become “agents of change” because they embody and disseminate new pedagogical approaches to teachers and learners alike (p.

317). From the spread of grammar-translation manuals in the 19th century to today's globalized communicative and digital coursebooks, textbooks have been instrumental in determining not only what English is taught but also how it is taught.

Conceptualizing Textbooks in ELT and Applied Linguistics and Pedagogy

Textbooks are widely acknowledged as the backbone of instructional design and delivery. In applied linguistics and pedagogy, the term 'textbook' is generally understood as a structured set of learning materials designed to guide both teaching and learning. In the ELT world, textbooks are considered structured pedagogical instruments that not only deliver linguistic content but also embody methodological, cultural, and ideological dimensions of ELT spheres. Cunningham (1995) defines a textbook as "a resource in achieving aims and objectives that have already been set in terms of learner needs" (p. 7). He explains that textbooks serve multiple roles- "as a resource for presentation material, a source of activities for learner practice, a reference source, a syllabus, and a support for less experienced teachers" (p. 7). Textbooks can be viewed as the mainstay of the teaching-learning process, emphasizing their role in structuring curriculum content and language practice. For Richards (2010), textbooks "provide the basis for the content of lessons, the balance of skills taught, and the kinds of language practice the students take part in" (p. 252). Hutchinson and Torres (1994) echo this view, noting that "the textbook is an almost universal element of ELT teaching" and acts as an agent of stability and change within evolving educational systems. Graves (2000) broadens the scope of the definition by describing textbooks as part of a larger system of instructional planning. She argues that a textbook is a set of materials that provides a basis for language input and practice, but it must be adapted by teachers to suit their particular teaching contexts. Grave (2000) compares a textbook with a piano. "The piano provides us with the means for producing music, but it cannot produce music on its own. Just as the piano doesn't play the music, the textbook doesn't teach the language" (Graves, 2000, p. 175).

Tomlinson (2011) takes an even more inclusive stance while defining textbook, asserting that "materials refer to anything which is used by teachers or learners to facilitate the learning of a language. Materials could obviously be videos, DVDs, emails, YouTube, dictionaries, grammar books, readers, workbooks, or photocopied exercises. whether printed, digital, or experiential" (p. 2). Tomlinson (2011) situates textbooks within a wider framework of pedagogical resources. Good materials "should help learners to feel at ease, develop confidence" (Tomlinson, 2011, p. 7), and be perceived by learners as relevant and useful.

Textbooks, thus, are not merely collections of exercises but comprehensive tools that simultaneously provide input, guide learning, and support classroom organization.

Methodology

The methodology for this critical review followed a document-focused qualitative approach, emphasizing an analytical examination of research and scholarship on textbook use in ELT and Applied Linguistics. The analysis drew upon published books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, and reports addressing textbook functions, learner engagement, teacher mediation, adaptation strategies, and pedagogical innovations. The analysis involved thematic categorization, focusing on conceptual frameworks, pedagogical functions, learner engagement, adaptation strategies, and criticisms of textbook use. Through content analysis and synthesis, patterns, trends, and critical perspectives were identified and integrated. This approach enabled a structured synthesis of existing knowledge, offering a nuanced understanding of textbooks as pedagogical tools within an evolving ELT context.

Results and Discussions

This section presents the key insights emerging from the critical review of literature on the role of textbooks in English Language Teaching (ELT). The analysis presents that textbooks are not merely instructional aids but powerful pedagogical tools that shape teaching and learning processes at multiple levels. Textbooks provide structured linguistic input, organize content systematically, guide classroom interaction through task design, and support assessment and learner autonomy. Furthermore, the findings highlight their dual function as both scaffolds for teachers and resources for learners, influencing classroom practices, teacher identity, and learner engagement. While textbooks offer clear benefits such as structure, standardization, and pedagogical support, they also pose challenges when over-relied upon, including reduced flexibility and contextual mismatch. This section discusses these functions, affordances, and limitations, situating them within broader pedagogical and theoretical perspectives.

Pedagogical Functions of Textbooks

Textbooks perform multiple pedagogical functions that make them indispensable tools in English Language Teaching (ELT). Textbooks act as providers of linguistic input, organizers of content, setters of classroom tasks, and supporters of assessment, thereby shaping the instructional process at every level. Cummingsworth (1995) has stated the roles of textbooks as:

- a) a source for written and spoken presentation material
- b) a source of activities for learner practice and communicative interaction

- c) a reference source for learners on grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and so forth
- d) a source of stimulation and ideas for classroom activities
- e) a syllabus where it reflects learning objectives that have already been determined and
- f) a support for less experienced teachers who have yet to gain in confidence. (p.7)

Thus, textbooks “serve as the primary source of language input that students receive both inside and outside the classroom. Hutchinson and Torres (1994) described them as “providers of input into classroom lessons in the form of texts, activities, explanations, and so on” (p. 317). Richards (2010) has identified several advantages of using textbooks in English classrooms. These advantages are outlined below:

- a) They provide structure and a syllabus for a program
- b) They help standardize instructions.
- c) They maintain quality
- d) They provide a variety of learning resources
- e) They are efficient
- f) They can provide effective language models and input
- g) They can train teachers
- h) They are visually appealing

Beyond input, textbooks systematically organize content, ensuring sequencing, scaffolding, and syllabus alignment. They also function as task setters, guiding classroom activities and promoting meaningful interaction through both traditional and digital modalities. Finally, textbooks contribute to assessment and learner reflection by incorporating exercises, tests, and self-assessment tools (Sheldon, 1988; Tomlinson, 2011). Collectively, these functions demonstrate that textbooks are not passive repositories of content but active pedagogical instruments that mediate input, structure learning, engage students, and evaluate progress in ELT classrooms. Ur (2013) outlines the advantages of textbooks as follows:

- a) Framework: A coursebook provides a clear framework.
- b) Syllabus: In many places, the coursebook is used as a syllabus.
- c) Ready-made texts and tasks: The coursebook provides texts and learning tasks which are likely to be of an appropriate level for most of the class.
- d) Guidance: For teachers who are inexperienced or unsure of their knowledge of the language or teaching skills, the coursebook can provide helpful guidance and support.
- e) Autonomy: The student can use the coursebook to learn new material and review and monitor his or her own progress autonomously.

Input Provider: Models of Language, Vocabulary, and Grammar

Textbooks remain one of the main sources of linguistic input in ELT classrooms. As Cunninghamsworth (1995) explained, they provide “a resource for presentation material” and offer samples of language in context (p. 7). Richards (2010) also observed that textbooks provide a structure, a syllabus for a language program offering various models of efficient learning. Textbooks provide language exercises and also support teachers. Highlighting the role of the textbook, Hutchinson and Torres (1994) state, “We generally think of textbooks as providers of input into classroom lessons in the form of texts, activities, explanations, and so on (p. 317).

Recent work confirms and updates this role. Tomlinson (2011) emphasizes that learners acquire language best through repeated exposure to meaningful input, and textbooks help deliver such exposure in systematic ways. Thus, textbooks have become the dynamic providers of multimodal input; they not only model vocabulary and grammar but also integrate visual, audio, and digital input for richer learning.

Organizer of Content: Sequencing, Scaffolding, and Syllabus Alignment

Textbooks also organize content systematically, ensuring that learning progresses from simple to complex. According to Cunninghamsworth (1995), the coursebook functions as “a syllabus embodied in the coursebook itself” (p. 7). McGrath (2013) adds that “They reduce the time needed for lessons and provide a visible, coherent program of work” (p. 6), helping teachers manage long-term instruction. Textbooks translate curricula into practical lesson units following the principles of gradual progression and balance.

Task Setter: Guiding Classroom Activities, Interaction, and Practice

A major function of textbooks is to provide tasks and activities that guide learning. Cunninghamsworth (1995) refers to this as “a resource of ideas and activities for classroom work” (p. 7). Textbooks help organize classroom interactions and promote language learning.

Contemporary perspectives emphasize communicative and task-based activities. Textbooks are crucial in structuring task-based learning opportunities that promote meaningful interaction. Textbooks guide teachers in balancing mechanical practice with communicative tasks if they are properly written. They include interactive tasks that enhance learner engagement. This shows that the task-setting role is central to the way textbooks influence pedagogy.

Assessment Support: Exercises, Tests, and Self-Checks

Finally, textbooks also function as assessment tools. Sheldon (1988) noted their centrality in including “tests, revision exercises, and self-assessment activities” (p. 239).

Tomlinson (2011) similarly observed that textbooks provide "opportunities for learners to check their progress" (p. 7). "Textbooks can serve as a grammatical and functional framework which leaves enough space for improvisation, adaptation, and a spontaneous and creative interaction in the classroom" (p.141). In addition, textbooks contain "a wealth of extra material" (Harmer, 2001, p. 7). Beyond the Textbooks, the modern coursebook package provides students with a range of additional resources for both classroom use and self-access purposes.

Textbooks must integrate assessment tools such as online quizzes and reflective activities. The tools focus on "real-world language use by prioritizing realistic, performance-based tasks, such as portfolios, projects, presentations, and peer assessments" (Pandey, 2024, p. 31). In a more recent study, Thanh (2019) argues that well-designed textbooks contribute to learner autonomy by including self-assessment checklists.

Promoting Learner Autonomy

Textbooks can serve as catalysts for learner autonomy when they provide opportunities for self-direction, reflection, and choice. Holec (1981) defined autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 3), and later scholars linked this to textbook design. Textbooks can "mediate between the official syllabus and classroom realities, offering opportunities for learners to extend their learning beyond the text.

Teacher-Textbook Relationship in ELT (Support vs. Dependency)

Textbooks often serve as scaffolds for less experienced teachers, offering structured lesson plans, ready-made tasks, and pedagogical guidance. Cummingsworth (1995) describes one of the functions of textbooks as providing "ideas for activities" and a "support for less experienced teachers" (p. 7). In many contexts, teachers feel pressure to follow the textbook closely to ensure alignment with institutional expectations and standardized curricula. For Cortazzi and Jin (1999), textbooks serve as a teacher, a map, a resource, a trainer, and an authority. A textbook entails relevant information about grammar and vocabulary, as well as English-speaking countries and their cultures. A good textbook serves as an instructional GPS showing an outline of linguistic and cultural elements as a structured program, and it guides students and teachers to follow the steps taken in previous lessons. For Sheldon (1988), "Coursebooks are perceived by many to be the route map of any ELT program, laying bare its shape, structure, and destination, with progress, program, and even teacher quality being assessed by learners in terms of sequential, unit-by-unit coverage (p. 238). The coursebook writer is responsible for the selection and organization of language content, as well as the provision of instructional and learning materials. The most critical responsibility of a

professional writer is the coherent integration of theory, practice, activities, explanations, text, visuals, content, formats, and all other elements that contribute to the final product.

However, such dependency risks reduce teacher agency. Sheldon (1988) cautions against “textbook-centered teaching” that can overshadow teacher initiative (p. 240). The challenge is to strike a balance: teachers may accept the support offered by textbooks but should retain the freedom to make pedagogical decisions according to contextual needs.

Thus, the support-dependency tension is a central feature of the teacher–textbook relationship: textbooks can guide and scaffold, but overreliance risks reducing flexibility and undermining teacher autonomy.

Textbooks, Teacher Identity, and Classroom Decisions

Beyond practicality, textbooks influence how teachers see themselves and how they make pedagogical choices. Hence, they help shape teacher identity. Textbooks can implicitly communicate pedagogical beliefs and values. As Hutchinson and Torres (1994) argue, the textbook carries assumptions about what counts as “good teaching” and may act as an “agent of change” (p. 315). Teachers may internalize or resist these implicit stances, and through this process they negotiate their professional identities.

Sheldon (1988) suggests that “textbooks are often the visible heart of any ELT program” (p. 239), meaning that teachers’ allegiance to or critique of the textbook becomes part of their professional stance. If a teacher consistently diverges from a textbook, that can signal a more experimental or student-centered identity; conversely, teachers who align closely with textbooks may present themselves as faithful implementers or curriculum enforcers.

In more recent research contexts, this shaping of identity becomes more nuanced. For example, in contexts where textbooks are aligned (or misaligned) with national curricula, teachers’ adherence or resistance becomes a statement of professional stance. Thus, textbooks not only provide content but they also frame possible pedagogical decisions, signal normative teaching practices, and thus co-constitute teacher identity in the ELT environment.

Learner Engagement with Textbooks in ELT

Students interact with textbooks both within and outside of the classroom, utilizing them not just as organized guides during classes, but also as resources for individual study. When textbook material corresponds to learners’ needs and interests, it promotes motivation, good attitudes, and active involvement. In this approach, textbooks serve as more than just teaching tools; they are valuable aids for learning and engagement.

How Learners Use Textbooks Inside and Outside Class

Learners interact with textbooks in multiple ways, both within and beyond the classroom. Inside class, textbooks guide learners through structured lessons, communicative tasks, and group discussions. Outside class, they serve as sources for revision, vocabulary learning, and exam preparation. Cunningham (1995) described textbooks as “a resource for presentation material, ideas for activities, a reference source for students, and a support for less experienced teachers” (p. 7), emphasizing their multifunctional nature. Similarly, Hutchinson and Torres (1994) viewed the textbook as “an almost universal element of ELT teaching” (p. 315), suggesting its indispensability in both guided and independent learning contexts. They are a useful resource for students. Learners also benefit from the visible coherence, which is a sense of purpose and direction. Due to the fact that coursebooks allow students to review or preview the material covered in class, they can foster a sense of security and progress.

Learner Motivation and Attitudes Toward Textbook Content

Learners’ motivation and attitudes toward textbook content significantly shape their engagement. When learners perceive materials as relevant, interesting, authentic, and culturally resonant, their motivation rises; when content feels disconnected from their lives, engagement diminishes. Dornyei and Csizer (1998) assert that positive attitudes toward the learning material contribute directly to the learner’s effort and persistence.

Many previous studies on the role of textbooks in ELT noted similar trends. Sheldon (1988) emphasized that learners’ “attitudes toward course materials are often a decisive factor in their classroom behavior” (p. 241). Thus, learner motivation is deeply influenced by how well the textbook content connects to learners’ identities, goals, and experiences—turning the textbook from a static object into a meaningful pedagogical partner.

Learner Engagement with Textbooks

When textbooks are conceived as pedagogical tools rather than static resources, learner engagement moves to the forefront of design and use. Engagement is multifaceted, including behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of how learners interact with materials. In the context of English Language Teaching (ELT), textbooks that include multimodal elements like pictures, interactive designs, and different layouts seem to be better at keeping students’ attention and encouraging deeper thinking. These rich multimodal features also support deeper understanding and greater student engagement.

Recent studies confirm that in digital or hybrid learning environments, engagement is a strong predictor of outcomes: for instance, EFL learners show higher persistence and performance when their materials foster active interaction. Meanwhile, student engagement

research in ELT has surged in recent years, highlighting gaps in how materials engage across contexts. Because textbooks mediate the learner's access to language input, tasks, and discourse, they must invite learners into active negotiation with content rather than passive reception.

Teachers' Adaptation Strategies: Selecting, Supplementing, Modifying

Teachers seldom treat textbooks as monolithic or immutable. Rather, they engage in continual adaptation, selecting, supplementing, and modifying content to better fit learners' needs and classroom realities.

Selecting

When selecting coursebooks, it is necessary to fit the material to the context in which it will be utilized. No coursebook intended for a broad market will be exactly appropriate for a particular group of learners, but the goal is to discover the greatest possible match, as well as the opportunity for changing or supplementing sections of the material where it is inadequate or unsuitable. Teachers may pick and choose among textbook units, skipping or rearranging them. Teachers interpret the textbook syllabus selectively, adjusting it to their learners' proficiency, interests, or institutional constraints. English teachers are responsible for selecting and modifying appropriate assignments from various texts, as well as devising work for their students.

Supplementing

To compensate for gaps, teachers often add materials (e. g., realia, authentic texts, ICT resources). Tomlinson (2011) writes that "materials can also stimulate exposure to authentic input through the activities they suggest" (p. 14). Coursebooks provide an abundance of supplementary content. In addition to the student book, sometimes the contemporary coursebook package offers a variety of supplementary materials for both classroom application and independent study. These items are intended to give more exposure to the language or opportunity for practice, which may be as simple as borrowing from other published works.

Modifying

The content may require modification as it may not align with the target learners due to reasons such as age, linguistic proficiency, infrastructural limitations of the school or classroom, or cultural background. Teachers may alter tasks, skip difficult parts, simplify or extend exercises, or reshuffle sections. Hutchinson and Torres (1994) describe textbooks as providing a default framework, but they stress that "the teacher is the key to adaptation and

implementation” (p. 317). In other words, the textbook is not a fixed prescription but a starting point for teacher mediation.

A recent empirical study by Deng and Wang (2023) illustrates this adaptive role vividly. They found that teachers frequently modified locally developed ELT materials “by inserting contextual examples, cultural references, or expanding speaking tasks to make the materials more meaningful and accessible for students” (p. 6). Such findings underscore how teachers act as mediators who reconstruct and personalize textbook content to align with learners’ linguistic and cultural realities. In the same vein, Erkir and Alkhaldi (2025) advocate for more flexible and inclusive textbooks that allow room for teacher adaptation. These adaptation strategies highlight the teacher’s central role in bridging the standardized textbook and the lived classroom context.

Challenges and Criticisms of Textbook Use in ELT

Textbooks play a central role in language classrooms, but overreliance on them often leads to textbook-centered teaching. They serve as a foundation for learning, yet they carry an inherent limitation: they operate on a one-size-fits-all model. This dependence can limit teacher creativity and flexibility. Textbooks may also contain outdated or culturally inappropriate content, offer little scope for differentiation in many cases, and fail to reflect learners’ diverse contexts and needs.

Overreliance and “Textbook-Centered Teaching”

One major challenge frequently raised in the literature is teachers’ overreliance on textbooks, leading to what is often termed textbook-centered teaching. Hutchinson and Torres (1994) observe that “the textbook is an almost universal element of ELT teaching” (p. 315) and caution that this reliance can cause teachers to “abdicate part of their responsibility to the textbook” (p. 320). Similarly, Cummingsworth (1995) warns that when teachers depend too heavily on coursebooks, “the flexibility and initiative of the teacher may be lost” (p. 9). In some cases, textbooks may deskill the teachers when they heavily rely on the content of the textbook. Textbooks do not teach language on their own; rather, effective teaching depends on how teachers mediate and adapt the material. Moreover, the content included in a textbook may not always be appropriate for the specific group of learners the teacher is teaching. In addition, textbooks are often rigid, containing the pedagogical and psychological perspectives and biases of their authors. They impose, determine, and control the language teaching and learning process, minimizing the role of teachers.

Ur (2013, p.198) outlines the disadvantages of using a coursebook as follows:

Inadequacy

Each class has unique learning needs, and no single coursebook can fully address them effectively.

Irrelevance and Lack of Interest

The topics in a coursebook may not match the interests or needs of the students. They can also become outdated quickly, whereas teacher-selected materials can be more current and relevant.

Cultural Inappropriateness

Some coursebook content may not align with students' cultural contexts. This can make the material feel irrelevant or unengaging and may even lead to discomfort or offence.

Limited Range of Levels

Coursebooks are usually designed for a specific proficiency level and often fail to cater to the diverse abilities and learning levels present in real classrooms.

Negative Impact on Teaching

Over-reliance on a coursebook can discourage teachers from exercising creativity and professional judgment, reducing their role to simply mediating the textbook content rather than actively teaching.

Lack of Contextual Relevance to Learners' Socio-Cultural Backgrounds

Another recurring criticism concerns the limited contextual and cultural relevance of many ELT textbooks. Sheldon (1988) points out that most global coursebooks fail to be "culturally neutral" and that "inappropriate or alien cultural content may hinder learner identification" (p. 240) when learners cannot relate to the social contexts, values, and identities embedded in textbook content, engagement and motivation decline-a problem especially acute in multilingual societies such as Nepal, India, Thailand and Bangladesh.

Constraints on Creativity

However, textbooks can also constrain learners' creative and critical engagement. Hutchinson and Torres (1994) cautioned that textbooks may "impose a single view of language and learning, restricting flexibility and innovation" (p. 320). Sheldon (1988) also noted that prescriptive coursebooks "may threaten learner agency" (p. 241).

Limited Flexibility for Differentiated Instruction

A further challenge relates to the restricted adaptability of textbooks for differentiated or inclusive instruction. Most textbooks assume a uniform group of learners following a single sequence of units, which prevents teachers from responding to mixed-ability classes. At the same time, textbooks rarely allow for individual variation in pace or style of learning.

Guidelines for Evaluating and Selecting Textbooks

If textbooks are pedagogical tools, their selection must be based on criteria aligned with both pedagogical goals and contextual realities. In recent work, Gholampour (2023) conducted a literature review of textbook evaluation approaches and emphasized criteria such as usability, adaptability, learner appropriateness, cultural representation, and alignment with learning objectives. By also invoking foundational ideas from Sheldon (1988), who calls textbooks “the visible heart” of ELT programs (p. 239), any selection process needs to integrate both the visible artifacts and hidden assumptions embedded within textbooks. Thus, an effective evaluation-selection protocol should include: (1) coherence with syllabus and curriculum aims, (2) match to learner profiles, (3) strength and variety of tasks, (4) cultural authenticity and balance, (5) layout/usability, (6) supplementary/digital support, and (7) flexibility for teacher adaptation.

Similarly, effective textbook development requires systematic planning, mirroring the test development cycle Pandey (2025) describes as “the entire process of designing and implementing a test, from initial planning and conceptualization to final administration and result archiving” (p. 63).

Pedagogical Strategies for Effective Textbook Integration

A well-selected textbook still requires smart integration for it to become an active pedagogical tool. One strategy is to orient learners before tasks, using visuals, questions, or discussion to activate prior knowledge and set goals. Teachers may unpack textbook tasks in stages they need. Textbooks can help teachers provide scaffolding in their teaching. This aligns with Tomlinson (2011), who emphasizes that materials should “provide the learners with opportunities to use the target language to achieve communicative purposes” (p. 15). Teachers should also mediate textbook content: selectively omitting, adapting, or resequencing units to better fit learners’ needs. Textbooks integrate linguistic and cultural elements that respond to learners’ needs, background, and proficiency level of students. Thus, textbooks are “undoubtedly the most popular teaching materials used in foreign language classes” (Radic-Bojanic & Topalov, 2016, p. 138).

Hutchinson and Torres (1994) emphasize that the textbook should act as an “agent of change,” not a rigid script (p. 322). Adaptation of textbooks and materials is always of paramount importance as it attempts to tailor materials to better match a specific learning context. To foster learner autonomy, extension tasks, learner-designed materials, or project work connected to textbook themes can help move beyond rote use. In contemporary contexts, integrating digital supplements or AI-driven enhancements (e.g. auto-generated

questions, interactive visuals) can enrich static textbook content and foster multimodal interaction.

Research Directions: Textbook Analysis, Teacher Mediation, Learner Responses

To deepen our understanding of textbooks as pedagogical tools, future research should span three interrelated domains. First, textbook discourse and content analysis can reveal ideologies, power relations, and absences in language, culture, and task design. Multimodal assessments of how design, layout, image, and text interact offer insights into the affordances for learner meaning-making. Second, studies of teacher mediation and materials use are essential: how teachers interpret, resist, adapt, or co-construct textbooks in situ. Third, exploring learner perceptions, engagement, and use is critical: longitudinal or fine-grained studies can trace how particular textbook tasks resonate (or not) with learners. In blended/online settings, research into how digital textbook features influence engagement and outcomes is increasingly pressing. Mixed-methods and design-based intervention studies will help link textbook features to learning results and guide future textbook design.

Innovations and Alternatives

As technology becomes ever more intertwined with language learning, digital textbooks, apps, and interactive platforms offer novel ways to engage learners beyond the printed page. Electronic delivery of materials is already viewed as one dimension of innovation, and it is argued that materials should exploit the affordances of new technologies. More recently, Tomlinson (2023) proposed the development of principled blended learning materials that integrate face-to-face and online modalities to maximize communicative and contextual opportunities. Such a blended design allows learners to access multimedia input such as videos, simulation tools, quizzes, and forums. Outside the classrooms, these materials help them engage in collaborative or scaffolded language use (Tomlinson, 2023). In parallel, scholars have explored AI-augmented textbooks, which layer adaptive pathways, multiple representations, and personalization on top of static content (LearnLM Team et al., 2025), effectively transforming textbooks from fixed scripts into responsive pedagogical environments. These innovations help textbooks become more dynamic, appealing, and interactive for learners.

Multimodal and authentic materials, as well as Open Educational Resources (OER)/teacher-created materials, offer alternative pathways to more immersive learner engagement, in addition to digital enhancements. Multimodal resources, including podcasts, videos, and interactive web pages, enable learners to comprehend language through visual, auditory, and textual channels, thereby accommodating a wide range of learning styles.

Conclusion

This study critically examined the role of textbooks as pedagogical tools in English Language Teaching (ELT), exploring how they function as mediators between curriculum, teachers, and learners. Employing a qualitative document-based analysis of theoretical and empirical literature, the study synthesized perspectives on textbook functions, teacher mediation, learner engagement, and adaptation strategies. The findings revealed that textbooks serve as dynamic pedagogical instruments providing linguistic input, structuring content, guiding interaction, supporting assessment, and fostering learner autonomy. At the same time, the study identified key challenges such as overreliance on textbooks, limited contextual relevance, and constraints on teacher creativity. Theoretically, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the textbook's mediating role within the triadic relationship of curriculum, pedagogy, and ideology, while practically emphasizing the need for teacher agency and contextual adaptation. The paper also suggests that textbooks should be integrated flexibly through scaffolding, digital enhancement, and learner-centred adaptation. Future research should investigate how teachers and learners co-construct textbook use in diverse contexts, and how multimodal and AI-augmented materials affect engagement.

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