

Issues and Countermeasures in Chinese FLTRP Primary School Textbooks under the New Curriculum Standard

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Abstract: The New Curriculum Standard (NCS) is the norm and quality requirement of the Chinese national educational curriculum as well as the basis of teaching management, curriculum evaluation, and textbook compilation. In textbook design, the selection of textbook materials should meet the objectives and requirements of the NCS. Since appropriate teaching materials are essential to curriculum standards and effective teaching, we must follow the consistency between textbook materials and curriculum standards to achieve an ideal degree of conformity with the textbook system and teaching objectives and promote the sustainable development of the English curriculum reform. However, the current primary school English textbooks fall short of the NCS, which leads to difficulties in implementing teaching tasks and achieving teaching goals. Given these difficulties, we should analyze the causes from three dimensions: linguistic knowledge, cultural awareness, and learning strategies. In addition, a high recurrence of phonetic knowledge, systematic grammar presentation, diversified learning styles, level grading, and in-depth involvement of cultural factors are keys to the perfect conformity of the NCS and English textbooks.

Keywords: Curriculum standards; Conformity degree; English textbooks

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1. Introduction

Over the years, the development of primary school English textbooks in China has made significant progress, with numerous textbooks being introduced, self-compiled, and co-compiled^[1]. Many experts and scholars have researched how to reflect the curriculum standards when compiling primary school English textbooks. They have analyzed the conformity degree between textbook content and curriculum standards from three dimensions: objectives, content, and activities, and proposed various strategies to address the issues. These strategies include improving curriculum standards to reduce ambiguity and vagueness, establishing communication channels between curriculum standard setters and textbook compilers to minimize information loss and misunderstanding, and creating a comprehensive textbook evaluation system to select

textbooks that fully reflect the curriculum standards for the smooth implementation of curriculum reform.

However, there are various English textbooks in China, overlapping in content, and lack systematic coherence, making it difficult to achieve the goals set by the New Curriculum Standard (NCS) ^[2,3]. For instance, the widely used Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP) primary school English series textbooks in many regions of China show significant gaps with the NCS regarding language knowledge, cultural awareness, and learning strategies. Their arrangement, overall structure, and knowledge framework make it challenging to achieve the teaching objectives stipulated by the NCS, which have not been paid much attention by relevant departments.

2. Current issues

The FLTRP primary school English textbooks have the following notable deficiencies:

2.1. Implicit representation of phonetic symbols and disconnected phonics instruction

The phonetic knowledge content in the FLTRP primary school English textbooks generally meets the curriculum standards' requirements. However, the structure lacks systematic planning, which hinders students' comprehensive grasp of phonetic knowledge. The thinking patterns of elementary school students gradually shift from concrete image thinking to abstract logical thinking ^[4]. Therefore, phonetic instruction should primarily adopt a systematic and direct teaching approach at the initial stage of English teaching.

The FLTRP textbooks for grades below Grade 6 do not directly present phonetic symbols. Instead, they let students perceive the pronunciation of the 26 letters through words, chants, and songs in the Practice section. From the second semester of Grade 6 and on, the Pronunciation section was introduced in the textbooks, which includes phonetic symbols, enabling students to learn phonetic symbols more comprehensively and establish connections between letters and phonetic symbols. Besides, from Grade 2, students begin learning letters. They are introduced to the pronunciation of the 26 letters in words and some common letter combinations, which aligns with the phonetic requirements of the curriculum standards. However, the pronunciations of 48 phonetic symbols and letter combinations are only implicitly presented through songs and chants, without dedicated sections introducing phonetic symbols and letter combinations until the second semester of Grade 6. Consequently, students cannot systematically and scientifically learn phonetic knowledge or master simple phonics rules.

2.2. Fragmented layout and lack of cohesion in grammar content

Grammar represents the conventional rules of language use, serving as the foundation and reference for language learning. A solid grammatical foundation is a necessary precondition for advancing English proficiency ^[5]. The adverse effects of grammatical deficiencies on English learning are subtle but pervasive; they may not be as apparent as those in listening and reading but can hinder the comprehensive improvement of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Grammar content needs to be appropriately connected; otherwise, learning English will be less efficient.

The grammar content in the FLTRP primary school English textbooks is comprehensive. However, there needs to be more cohesion and continuity among different sections of grammar. Specifically, there is no clear transitional context between the simple present and the present continuous tense or between the simple present and the simple past tense. The grammar is merely repeated across different grade levels without logical connections.

2.3. Narrow scope and superficial content of cultural awareness

Language is not only an integral part of culture but also the carrier of it. The new curriculum standards state: “In foreign language teaching, culture refers to the history, geography, customs and traditions, lifestyles, literature and arts, behavioral norms, and values of the countries where the language is spoken.” At the primary school level, textbooks should provide essential language knowledge and incorporate cultural knowledge to cultivate students’ cultural awareness.

The cultural content in the FLTRP primary school English textbooks includes daily greetings, farewells, and titles as required by the curriculum standards. It also covers representative foods from English-speaking countries and traditional Chinese foods, major Western holidays and traditional Chinese festivals, major global entertainment and sports activities, and Western etiquette. However, to better meet the curriculum standards, it needs more information on the national flags and capitals of important English-speaking countries, the traditional clothing of different countries, and traffic rules in Western and Chinese contexts.

2.4. Monotonous learning strategies and lack of progression

English learning strategies encompass cognitive strategies, regulatory strategies, communicative strategies, and resource strategies. Individual activities, pair tasks, and group interactions such as “Listen and say,” “Do a survey,” and “Point, ask, and answer” in each module of the FLTRP textbooks effectively encourage students to use communicative and cognitive strategies.

However, the syllabus of the book needs to be improved. Each book in the FLTRP series only includes one review unit at the end, which uses exercises to reinforce learned knowledge and assess mastery. There needs to be more transition between units and more opportunities for students to self-evaluate and test their knowledge.

The use of regulatory and resource strategies is also limited. Most practices are teacher-led, with students playing a supporting role, and there are many task-based activities but few opportunities for students to explore and discover independently.

The learning strategies included in the textbooks are quite monotonous. Learning strategies should be tailored to the material and context. Students at different stages of English learning should adopt different strategies: lower-level students often use cognitive and communicative strategies, while higher-level students would actively use regulatory and resource strategies. This contrast is closely related to their cognitive development. In the FLTRP series, there is significant overlap in learning strategies between lower and higher grades, and this lacks clear progression. For example, the “Listen, point, and say” section in Module 1, Unit 1 of the Grade 1 textbook is still “Listen, point, and say” in the Grade 4 textbook, and it is not until the Grade 5 textbook that it changes to “Listen and chant.” Students’ cognitive strategies should rely on pointing and reading rather than quick and abstract reading.

3. Analysis

There are several factors why the FLTRP textbooks fail to meet the National Curriculum Standards’ objectives:

3.1. Limitations of the National Curriculum Standards

Although curriculum standards are authoritative, inevitably it has limitations, specifically in terms of ambiguous language. Countries worldwide focus on curriculum reform, particularly developing and refining

curriculum standards. Nations such as the UK, the US, and France are mobilizing their strongest resources and investing substantial funds to develop curriculum standards for various subjects, demonstrating their increasing emphasis on national curriculum standards.

Each round of curriculum reform in China includes interpretations of the curriculum standards. Any primary or secondary education journals, newspapers, or other literature contain articles interpreting the new curriculum standards. These interpretations are necessary because the curriculum standard developers are concerned that frontline teachers may not understand the content or the new terminology. Besides, while interpreting the new curriculum standards, they also aim to instill new reform concepts and academic trends in frontline teachers. However, this also indicates that our curriculum standards are not clear and understandable enough. For example, the English curriculum standards emphasize “humanistic literacy,” but there is still no universally accepted explanation or definition, leading to diverse and often conflicting interpretations. Therefore, it is essential to refine the curriculum standards to reduce ambiguity and ensure clarity.

3.2. Monotony in textbook compilation

Textbook compilation should be done by collaborative efforts of different education practitioners instead of a fixed team. The authors should include educational theorists, curriculum and teaching researchers, subject curriculum and teaching experts, child psychologists, linguists, and frontline teachers from both urban and rural areas. This roster would allow the application of the latest research findings from various disciplines, making the textbooks more contemporary and relevant to China’s national and educational contexts. Additionally, the selection of language materials should cater not only to children living in urban areas but also to over 70% of rural primary schools and students. Therefore, textbook authors and researchers should not enclose themselves in urban experimental schools and classes but should set foot in schools in rural or mountain areas and gather firsthand materials, making the scope of textbook compilation more diverse and objective.

Textbook compilation can also involve the assistance of international organizations such as UNESCO and UNICEF, guidance from the English Subject Education Research Association, close cooperation and support from educational researchers and frontline English teachers at all levels, and discussions and consultations with domestic and international English textbook publishing institutions.

3.3. Timeliness of feedback on textbook use

The weaknesses and limitations of textbook development are in its long operational cycle and lack of flexibility. Textbook development cannot be adjusted and changed according to time and place. The compilation, use, and evaluation of textbooks occur at three different levels, with textbook authors, users, and evaluators being isolated from each other, making it difficult for evaluations to get feedback on the actual achievement of curriculum goals. Eventually, this leads to a tendency to overlook the practical experiences, conditions, and situations of teaching, as well as the feelings of teachers and students, failing to reflect the basic requirements of social development for student quality development and the consistency and continuity of textbooks.

Students are the users of textbooks, but for lower-grade students, evaluating textbooks seems to be too difficult to conduct. For higher-grade students, although they have certain cognitive abilities, they do not know the evaluation methods, and even if they do, they lack scientific and operational capabilities ^[6].

Therefore, textbook evaluation mainly relies on frontline teachers. They are in the actual educational context, clearly understand student needs, and can reflect and summarize based on classroom teaching effects and student reactions after class, proposing reasonable suggestions to improve the textbooks. However, the lack of appropriate communication channels affects the timeliness of feedback on textbook use. Textbook authors lack firsthand user feedback, making it challenging to understand textbook deficiencies and make timely adjustments.

4. Countermeasures

Given the numerous issues in textbook compilation, we should adhere to the following strategies:

4.1. Enhancing the systematic nature of phonetic knowledge

Starting from Grade 4, textbooks should include a “Pronunciation” section to introduce phonetic knowledge. This section should provide phonetic symbols to enable students to learn phonetics systematically and comprehensively, establishing connections between letters and phonetic symbols. The sequence of phonetic learning should be letter names, consonants, vowel sounds, and combinations, reflecting the progressive nature of phonetic learning.

For lower-grade students, the focus can be on input-based phonetic knowledge sections, such as “Listen, point, and say” and “Listen and chant,” to enhance students’ perception of stress, intonation, and rhythm. For higher-grade students, the focus can shift to output-based phonetic knowledge sections, such as “Find and say” and “Discuss and say,” presenting words with phonetic symbols and letter combinations for students to listen to and explore the patterns themselves. For example, in the second-semester textbook of Grade 4, the “Practice” section presents the words “cake,” “make,” “take,” and “wake,” allowing students to repeatedly listen and read to discover the pronunciation of the letter “a” in open syllables.

4.2. Reflecting the cohesion of grammar content

The textbooks should include both the simple present tense and the present continuous tense. For instance, in the second-semester textbook of Grade 2, the present continuous tense is introduced through the “I like doing sth.” sentence pattern, but students still do not understand the difference between the simple present tense and the present continuous tense. The first module should review and summarize the usage of the simple present tense: describing characteristics or states of things or people (e.g., “The sky is blue”), habitual actions (e.g., “I get up at six every day”), and objective realities (e.g., “The earth goes around the sun”). Then, transition to the present continuous tense through the “I like doing sth.” sentence pattern, and explain that the present continuous tense indicates ongoing actions.

The textbooks should distinguish between the simple present tense and the simple past tense. For example, the last two modules of the second-semester textbook of Grade 3 introduce the past tense of the verb “be,” and the first-semester textbook of Grade 4 systematically introduces the simple past tense. However, Module 10 of the second-semester textbook of Grade 4 returns to introducing imperative sentences (simple present tense), confusing students’ understanding of the simple past tense. Therefore, Modules 9 and 10 of the first-semester textbook of Grade 3 should include the grammatical structure distinguishing the simple present tense from the simple past tense.

4.3. Emphasizing cultural differences between East and West

Culture is a system for expressing language thinking and meaning, and its depth reflects the levels of language thinking ^[7]. Culture is also a microcosm of a nation's or country's customs. In the foundational stage of English education, it is essential to expand the breadth of English-speaking countries' cultures and delve into their cultures in depth ^[8]. Given the importance of culture, the cultural knowledge in the FLTRP primary school English textbooks needs further exploration and expansion. This can be achieved through the following measures:

- (1) Adding important symbols of major English-speaking countries: Revising Module 2, Unit 2 of the second-semester textbook of Grade 3 to introduce important symbols of major English-speaking countries, such as capitals, national flags, and landmarks. For example, London + Union Jack + Big Ben for the UK; Washington + Stars and Stripes National Flag + Statue of Liberty for the USA; Paris + Blue, White, Red Tricolor National Flag + Eiffel Tower for France; Ottawa + Maple Leaf Flag + Château Laurier for Canada; Sydney + Union Jack + Sydney Opera House for Australia; Amsterdam + Red, White, Blue Tricolor National Flag + Windmills for the Netherlands, etc.
- (2) Adding traditional clothing of different countries: In Module 4, Unit 1 of the first-semester textbook of Grade 2, adding the English expressions for traditional clothing of various countries and China's ethnic minorities to enhance understanding and integration among different ethnic groups in China. For example, Englishmen may wear kilts, French people prefer rococo dresses, Tibetans in China wear khata, Miao people wear silver ornaments, and Han people wear Hanfu.
- (3) Adding traffic rules of East and West: In Module 7, Unit 1 of the first-semester textbook of Grade 2, on the basis of introducing the major means of transportation, comparing the traffic rules of East and West can be added. For example, cars drive on the right in China and on the left in the UK; in South Africa, cars must yield to animals; in Saudi Arabia, women are prohibited from driving; in Italy, motor vehicles are banned from entering tourist attractions.
- (4) Using English to introduce local culture: In Module 10 of the second-semester textbook of Grade 3, introducing famous tourist attractions to students can be devised to incorporate English expressions for China's magnificent landscapes and promote Chinese culture while learning English. Module 1 of the second-semester textbook of Grade 2 can introduce weather terms to integrate geographical knowledge to discuss climate differences between the northern and southern hemispheres and daily expressions in Eastern and Western countries.

4.4. Promoting diversified layered teaching

- (1) Reasonably using regulatory strategies in the teaching process: More transitional sections between units can be added, such as "Let's check," to consolidate and summarize the knowledge learned in the current unit while leading students to the content of the next unit. This allows teachers to reflect and adjust promptly and students to self-evaluate and test their knowledge. For example, Module 4 of the first-semester textbook of Grade 3 mainly covers declarative and negative sentences with the modal verb "can," while Module 5 covers interrogative sentences with "can." A dialogue can be used between Module 4 and Module 5 to review the content of Module 4, with questions effectively introducing the key sentence patterns of Module 5.
- (2) Flexibly using different levels of teaching strategies: The "Listen, point, and say" section in Module 1, Unit 1 of the Grade 1 textbook remains "Listen, point, and say" until the second-semester textbook

of Grade 4, and finally changes to “Listen and chant” at the first semester of Grade 5. Students’ cognitive strategies rely on pointing and reading, instead of quick, abstract reading. Therefore, it should be changed to “Look, listen, and say” in the first semester of Grade 4. Additionally, the resource strategies used in higher grades are monotonous. Teaching can adopt task-based methods, using information gaps to motivate students to learn and encourage them to cooperate with others to complete tasks.

On the contrary, lower grades should be teacher-guided, while higher grades should be self-directed^[9]. Lower-grade students’ self-awareness and cognitive abilities are still in the early stages, it is challenging to implement self-monitoring strategies and self-evaluation strategies, and effectively use resource strategies^[10]. In most cases, the teacher guides and leads lower-grade students to learn together. Higher-grade students with relatively mature cognitive development possess specific analytical and logical reasoning abilities. They can choose appropriate learning strategies based on their situation and learning environment. Teachers can provide necessary suggestions for students at this stage, encouraging them to explore independently and discover the inherent rules of language and teaching.

5. Conclusion

The Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press primary school English textbooks are a mainstream resource in China’s primary English education. However, they struggle to meet the new national curriculum standards in terms of language knowledge, cultural awareness, and learning strategies. To address this, we should refine the language structure of the entire textbook series, organize the content systematically, integrate both Eastern and Western cultures, and optimize learning strategies. These improvements will enhance teaching efficiency and meet the demands of modern English foundational education and national curriculum standards.

Disclosure statement

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