

Towards Balanced Literacy Instruction: The Evolution of ELT Textbooks for Young Learners in China

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Abstract

This essay discusses the changing landscape of English Language Teaching (ELT) textbooks for young learners in China over the past decade, depicting the move from traditional skills-based instruction towards the balanced literacy approach. Through the lens of textbooks, it identifies three subsequent development stages characterized by instructional focus: (1) learning to read, (2) reading to learn, and (3) reading to think. It also introduces three groups of ELT textbook users at various points along these three stages. The essay thus aims to share insights into evolving language and literacy practices in EFL settings concerning textbooks and suggest implications for teaching English in China and other EFL contexts. It also calls for ELT material developers to adapt to or initiate changes that could better accommodate the needs of English language learners in these contexts.

Background

I am writing this article at a time of dramatic education reform in China. About a month ago, in June 2021, the national government issued new regulations, including reducing after-school tutoring courses for students in compulsory education and restricting the use of foreign textbooks. The textbook publishing industry, where I have worked for almost a decade, has suffered a massive blow as mainstream English Language Teaching (ELT) businesses have been hit hard by these new policies.

With the way forward now less clear (for the time being, at least), I have decided to pause and reflect on the evolution of ELT in China through the lens of textbook development. What follows are some personal observations as someone working in publishing language and literacy instruction materials. My discussion is also limited to the young learners’ age group (kindergarten to primary), which has proven to be China’s most robust ELT segment. (The emphasis on preparing for success early in life is reflected in an old Chinese saying, “Cannot afford to lose at the starting line.”) The aim of this article is twofold: to draw on experiences from wider language and literacy communities elsewhere for best-practice sharing and cross-cultural collaboration going forward, and thus perhaps shine a bit of light towards possible future directions for ELT in China.



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Three Stages in the Evolution of ELT Textbooks

For a long time, the China market was happy with the four-skills approaches exemplified in most ELT textbooks (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). However, rising interest in literacy instruction over the past ten years has led to calls for a more sophisticated approach and different textbook presentations. I will divide China's shift towards literacy education into three chronological stages from the perspective of ELT textbook development.

Stage 1: Learning to Read

Realizing the importance of reading, educators in China began trying to have students emulate how young native English speakers learn to read in the early 2010s. This practice involved a strong focus on phonics instruction, instead of phonetic symbols, which had been proudly taught for several years previously. With the discovery of this “magic key” to learning English, a significant number of institutions began to offer phonics courses, starting with students around age three and lasting for about three years until children were in lower elementary levels. A demand for phonics readers soon emerged as students needed texts to practice decoding skills. Most decodable readers were supplied by local publishers who hired foreign writers to create these readers. “Midi Phonics,” published by an Asian-based company called [Town4Kids](#), was one of the most popular phonics readers. It has seven levels (see Figure 1) with a progressive instructional focus at each level (see Figure 2).

Figure 1

The Seven-Level Midi Phonics Program (reproduced from [Midi English's Midi Phonics Program](#))



Though the China market may be less interested in theoretical underpinnings, there is research supporting phonics instruction as an integral component of literacy instruction. The U.S. National Reading Panel Report (2000) summarized several decades of scientific research that clearly shows that effective reading instruction addresses five critical areas: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. According to the Learning Point Association (2004), the role phonics plays, among others, is “a means to an end,” in other words,

only when students can recognize letter-sound relationships can they use those relationships to read a connected text and read more proficiently. August and Shanahan (2006) draw implications from the National Reading Panel Report concerning language learners in the U.S.: The five skills are necessary to become successful lifelong readers, and therefore effective reading instruction should incorporate these skills.

Figure 2

Instructional Focus for Each Level (reproduced from [Midi English's Midi Phonics Program](#))

MidiPhonics (3-year Program)

MidiPhonics is a 3-year program that comprises a Starter and 6 levels of study.

- Starter: The Alphabet
- Level 1: Beginning Sounds
- Level 2: CVC (Consonant-Vowel-Consonant) Words
- Level 3: Word Families /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/
- Level 4: S-Blends, L-Blends, R-Blends
- Level 5: Digraphs, Long Vowels /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/
- Level 6: R-controlled Vowels, Diphthongs, Hard and Soft Sounds, Silent Letters, Variant Vowels

While English language learners in the U.S. differ in several respects from English language learners in China, they are still the closest group available for cross-referencing. With regard to English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Shin (2000) argues that developing literacy skills can begin as early as foreign language instruction begins, and explicit phonics instruction is recommended for young EFL learners, especially those whose L1 writing system and literacy practices are vastly different from those in English.

Stage 2: Reading to Learn

Phonics instruction paved the way for a new approach to learning English as a solid foundation in decoding skills necessitated and facilitated subsequent reading instruction. It did not take long to reap the fruits of phonics instruction. Before long, parents in China were excited to learn that children could read books with unfamiliar words. The proven effectiveness of phonics confirmed that they were on the right path, so what would come next? Observations from U.S. classrooms would suggest reading comprehension as the next rung up on the ladder. The rope model from Scarborough (2001) shows that among the many strands woven into skilled reading, word recognition and language comprehension are two major factors in reading development. Similarly, “while fluent decoding is an essential component of skilled reading, it should be considered a prerequisite to strong comprehension rather than an end in itself” (Learning Point Association, 2004). The National Reading Panel Report (2000) also identified commonalities among proficient readers in using comprehension strategies to understand different types of text.

Previous textbooks on the China market either lacked authentic reading content or just created texts to teach vocabulary and sentence structures. Decodable readers, on the other hand,

aimed solely at phonics instruction at this stage. Some global ELT publishers, therefore, responded by quickly adjusting their materials designs for the China market. For instance, the syllabus of *Reading Explorer* (see Figure 3 for level 4 scope and sequence), an elementary textbook published by National Geographic Learning, is arranged around reading skills which are then presented in real-world contexts in thematic units composed of authentic reading materials.

Figure 3

*Reading Explorer Level 4 Scope and Sequence**(reproduced from National Geographic Learning's Sample Unit Level 4)*

UNIT	THEME	READING	READING SKILL
1	Images of Life	A: The Visual Village B: My Journey in Photographs	A: Understanding Words with Multiple Meanings B: Scanning for Information (1)—Short Answer Questions
2	Natural Attraction	A: Living Light B: Feathers of Love	A: Summarizing (1)—Using a Concept Map B: Identifying Figurative Language
3	Food and Health	A: How Safe Is Our Food? B: The Battle for Biotech	A: Recognizing Cause and Effect Relationships (1) B: Evaluating Arguments
4	Design and Engineering	A: Design by Nature: Biomimetics B: Weaving the Future	A: Scanning for Information (2)—Matching Information to Paragraphs B: Recognizing Lexical Cohesion
5	Human Journey	A: The DNA Trail B: Fantastic Voyage	A: Synthesizing Information B: Distinguishing Fact from Speculation
6	Money and Trade	A: How Money Made Us Modern B: The Rise of Virtual Money	A: Understanding the Function of Sentences B: Summarizing (2)—Creating an Outline
7	Group Behavior	A: A Crowd in Harmony B: Our Online Behavior	A: Understanding Words from Context B: Understanding Word Roots and Affixes
8	Investigations	A: Who Killed the Emperor? B: In the Crime Lab	A: Evaluating Evidence B: Understanding Idiomatic Expressions
9	Rediscovering the Past	A: Virtually Immortal B: Lure of the Lost City	A: Recognizing Ellipsis B: Scanning for Information (3)—Summary Completion
10	Healthy Living	A: Living Longer B: In Search of Longevity	A: Recognizing Cause and Effect Relationships (2) B: Understanding Quantitative and Qualitative Data
11	Green Solutions	A: Saving Water B: Technology as Trash	A: Identifying Sources of Information B: Understanding a Writer's Attitude
12	Earth and Beyond	A: Planet Hunters B: The Threat from Space	A: Recognizing Cause and Effect Relationships (3) B: Interpreting Analogies

There were also calls from the China market for a balance between fiction and non-fiction content as the latter, though more demanding for comprehension, had generally been overlooked in teaching. In many American primary classrooms, it had been observed that fiction comprised the majority of books read aloud in classrooms, but teachers were increasingly aware of the necessity for assigning informational texts as recommended by the Common Core Standards (Kuhn et al., 2017).

In China, leveled reading programs were seen to be good candidates in this regard, with, for example, 30 readers per level guaranteeing a good variety of genres and text types. Moreover, the benefit of these materials being leveled meant that students would only read books that fit their current reading abilities. Graded reader series such as *Oxford Reading Tree* (Oxford University Press) and *Big Cat* (Harper Collins) soon became well known among English language learners in China during this period.

Stage 3: Reading to Think

Explicit reading instruction was soon found to be serving more extensive purposes in China as students realized they were also learning about the wider world by engaging with texts.

For example, *Wonders*, a U.S. literacy program, began attracting attention while educators in China were seeking more ambitious materials. It also has a companion program for catering to learners of English as a second language in the U.S. The *Wonders* program employs the balanced literacy approach that integrates all four language skills and provides a language-rich environment with numerous opportunities for reading and writing meaningfully in English. It also includes explicit instruction in reading and writing skills and strategies.

Figure 4

Wonders Level 5 Literature Anthology Unit 2 (reproduced from McGraw Hill's Wonders Program Samples)

Respond to the Text

Summarize

Summarize how Luisa and her team made it to the finish line in *Second Day, First Impressions*. Include events and details from your Problem and Solution Chart.

Write

Think about how the author uses repetition. Why does she use the idiom “butterflies in her stomach” at the beginning, middle, and end of the story? Use these sentence frames to organize your text evidence.

Michelle Knudsen repeats . . .
The reason she does this is to . . .
This helps me know that Luisa . . .

Make Connections

Talk about how Luisa and her teammates had to rethink their ideas during the scavenger hunt. **ESSENTIAL QUESTION**

In this story, each team member suggested answers to the clues. Why is it important to listen to others’ ideas when working as a team? **TEXT TO WORLD**

Character
Setting
Problem
Events
Solution

Shin (2018) advocates EFL teachers using the balanced literacy approach to help learners with challenges from the differences between L1 and L2 writing systems, text structure, and

culture. Moreover, *Wonders* encourages students to be active learners, thinking beyond the text and drawing relevance to the world beyond the classroom (see Figure 4 for a sample page from *Wonders* level 5). Not many other textbooks or readers can take students up to this cognitive level, which makes *Wonders* a delight and a challenge to implement in an ELT setting. Despite perceivable challenges in using such a textbook, it has become a most sought-after textbook on the China market in the forefront of increasing demand for more U.S. literacy programs.

ELT Textbook Users

There are three types of customers in China who would adopt foreign textbooks: private language schools (PLS) or after-school tutoring centers, EduTech companies, and private international schools (full-time day schools). See Table 1 for an overview of the textbook users at each of the three stages.

Type 1: Private Language Schools (PLS)

PLSs offer classes on weekday evenings and during the weekends. They were the first ones to experiment with phonics instruction and thus the first adopters of phonics readers. As they moved to Stage 2, they gradually replaced four-skills ELT textbooks with reading-focused programs. Well-known brands such as [New Oriental Education](#) and [EF Education First](#) have led the way in this movement.

Very few PLSs moved to the third stage, except for one PLS chain, [Best Learning English](#), which offers only courses aligned with the U.S. common core state standards (CCSS). They were the first PLS in Asia to adopt the *Wonders* program. Two factors contributed to their success: hiring only certified English teachers from the U.S. and localizing the teaching plan.

Type 2: EduTech Companies

EduTech companies deliver classes online. They followed a similar path in choosing textbooks, although they were later players in the market. However, there are differences in how EduTech companies use a textbook. They need to turn a static book into interactive courseware, so textbook presentations look vastly different on the screen, although content stays the same.

Similar to PLS, very few EduTech companies arrived at stage 3. [VIPKIDS](#) is an exception. Founded in 2013 with the vision to enable Chinese students to experience the American elementary classrooms through one-to-one online tutoring, VIPKIDS recruits elementary-school teachers in the U.S. to teach Chinese students the same content as what they teach in their classrooms, thanks to the internet.

Type 3: Private International Schools

Private international schools were established as a response to the demand for studying abroad, so their goal is to prepare students academically for studying in a foreign country. Schools following U.S. elementary curricula generally adopt textbooks, such as *Wonders*, as the primary materials for their English courses. However, it did not take them long to acknowledge challenges with implementation, especially at lower levels. One response has been to integrate a phonics program in the first year or use other English Language Learning (ELL) textbooks for the first few years before switching over to literacy programs.

Table 1
Overview of the Three Stages and the Textbook Users

	Key features	Textbooks	Textbook Users
Stage 1 Learning to read	Phonics instruction	Decodable readers (local publishers)	PLS and EduTech (stand-alone course or integrated with other courses), private international schools (integrate with main programs)
Stage 2 Reading to learn	Explicitly teaching reading skills and strategies, balance in fiction and non-fiction content	<i>Reading Explorer</i> (National Geographic Learning), <i>Oxford Reading Tree</i> (Oxford University Press)	Main programs in PLS, EduTech, and private international schools
Stage 3 Reading to think	Balanced literacy approaches, thinking beyond the text	U.S. literacy programs: <i>Wonders</i> (McGraw Hill), <i>Journeys</i> (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)	Mainly private international schools, few PLS and EduTech

Final Thoughts

Although this article has depicted a three-stage development progression for ELT textbooks in China, this does not mean that all users have followed the same path. Traditional four-skill ELT textbooks are still popular among teachers and students, especially in smaller cities. However, more attention is being paid to literacy in addition to the language. Textbooks provide windows into the changing ELT landscape but can only contribute to desired outcomes when combined with well-designed curricula and sound pedagogies. There is currently no consensus about the “right” approach to literacy instruction in China, and much of what is happening needs to be constantly tested for effectiveness.

I would suggest that although it would be wise to learn from literacy practices from English-speaking countries as a starting point, we will eventually have to carve out a way that applies to our own local contexts and needs. Similar movements are also happening in other countries where English is taught as a foreign language, so more international dialogues and practice-sharing would benefit everyone. As textbooks continue to play pivotal roles in English classrooms, material developers at publishing companies also need to keep up with such changes and help lead the way in advancing English teaching and learning into the future.

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Zheng “Amanda” Zhang (MA TESOL) has nearly ten years of work experience in the textbook publishing industry. She has worked for one of the world’s leading textbook publishers as their first-ever in-house academic consultant in China and later covered the Asia region. Over the past few years, she has worked with hundreds of schools and private language institutions to deliver teacher training and curriculum design programs for language and literacy development. Career highlights so far include adapting *Wonders*, a U.S. K-6 literacy program, into a China edition that caters to the linguistic needs of China’s English language learners.