

USING TEXTBOOK TASKS: EFL SCHOOL TEACHERS' CHALLENGES AND HANDLING STRATEGIES

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Abstract. This study explores the challenges and handling strategies of EFL teachers in implementing textbook tasks in their classroom practice. Based on data collected from six participants with varying levels of teaching experience, this study identifies key challenges in using textbook tasks, including the need for professional development needs, pedagogical limitations, cultural mismatches, time constraints as well as student-related challenges. However, the teachers use different strategies to accommodate for the textbook limitations, like modifying tasks, simplifying content, reordering activities, and incorporating supplementary materials. The study also reveals the need for effective teacher development programs, professional development activities, and support systems for teachers in order to overcome these challenges. The results of the study indicate that the process of professional development of teachers, the availability of the systems that facilitating the learning process are crucial in supporting the teachers to overcome the limitations of the textbooks and provide the students with meaningful and appropriate learning experiences.

Keywords: EFL teachers, textbook tasks, challenges, handling strategies, task adaptation.

1. Introduction

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL), textbooks contribute significantly to the teaching and learning process by organizing the context and pedagogical tasks, which are the most effective means of delivering language skills [1]. Not only this, these tasks promote engagement and effectiveness in teaching, and when these activities resonate with learners' context and needs, they contribute to motivation and better proficiency [2, 3]. Studies show that textbooks with real-world tasks offer students opportunities for learning that plays an equally meaningful role in producing students who are more interested in language [4]. Allowing for flexibility in textbook tasks is important for meeting the needs of individuals in a classroom teaching/learning context because teachers often adapt activities to suit their students' cultural backgrounds, academic and educational backgrounds, and specific learning preferences [5]. The additional interactive features that digital textbooks offer greatly promote the engagement method for their usability [6]. Moreover, EFL teachers often encounter obstacles when faced with implementing textbook tasks, especially with regards to cultural relevance and the degree of context in their execution, which can result in their lack of engagement and make the class feel less dynamic [7, 8]. As Weninger and Kiss [9] maintain, the rigid nature of many textbook tasks hinders adaptations and thus limits

the potential for creativity and student-student interaction. As a result, you should adapt or supplement the textbook tasks to effectively address the diverse linguistic and cultural needs of your students [10]. Investigating these challenges and solutions will support EFL educators in their efforts to refine teaching and learning practices that can lead to improved teaching quality, motivating learning atmosphere, and high student success rates, which is vital in an evolving globalized world [11].

Textbook tasks are central in EFL contexts, shaping both teaching and student engagement. In Vietnam, their design must be continually evaluated and adapted to meet evolving needs. This study aims to investigate the challenges faced by EFL high school teachers when using textbook tasks and explore strategies they apply to adapt them. It seeks answers to the following questions:

1. *What challenges do EFL high school teachers encounter in using textbook tasks?*
2. *What strategies do EFL high school teachers use to adapt textbook tasks?*

2. Content

2.1. Literature review

2.1.1. The Role of Textbook Tasks in EFL Teaching

Textbook tasks are instructional activities in EFL that are intended to facilitate language learning and enhance linguistic proficiency. They are designed to accomplish different pedagogical tasks such as communicative, collaborative, and production activities. When organised under communicative tasks, learners are involved in genuine or scaled language use activities aiming at meaningful communication [12, 4]. Collaborative tasks promote peer learning and working as a group, fostering community and shared knowledge [4]; production tasks involve learners in spoken or written outputs, and can facilitate fluency and creativity [13, 14]. The various types of task strategically target various learning objectives, for example, the construction of intercultural communicative competence for sociocultural, linguistic and discourse components [13]. This diversity allows teachers to adjust exercises to instructional objectives, learner demands, and teaching and learning situations, which supports textbooks as flexible and invaluable teaching materials [15].

2.1.2. Challenges Faced by EFL Teachers in Using Textbook Tasks

In the global context, textbook task implementation in EFL classrooms wrestles with these unshakable challenges: inflexible prescribed curricula, limited teacher professional preparation, and dependence on outdated approaches [16, 17]. This cuts any chance for real-world practice of communication [18, 19] further under exam-focused systems. Textbook mismatches for the globalized world, particularly in non-Western cultural circumstances [20, 21]. These challenges are compounded by resource constraints and lack of infrastructure, and donor-funded digital tools are underutilized with limited teacher training and support [22, 23].

In Vietnam, these global challenges are particularly pronounced. One major challenge is that teachers struggle to align textbook tasks with their instructional approaches and students' needs [24]. In Vietnam, most teachers lack training in task modification, as noted by Pham [25], and they often rely on the Grammar-Translation Method, which is inconsistent with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The exam-oriented pedagogical model emphasizes theory over practice and communication [26, 27], thereby limiting students' opportunities for interaction and real-life language use.

Additionally, cultural gaps in international textbooks make them unappealing to Vietnamese students, as the content may feel irrelevant or disconnected from their own experiences [28, 29]. The rote-learning system further discourages students from actively participating in communicative tasks [30]. Rural areas face additional obstacles, such as large class sizes, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of essential learning resources, including audio equipment [31, 32, 33].

A key issue is the discrepancy between textbook tasks and assessment tasks, leading to a misalignment between classroom learning and exam expectations [34, 35]. Teacher training programs also tend to emphasize theoretical aspects while neglecting practical concerns like task adaptation [36, 37]. Rural teachers, in particular, face difficulties in accessing professional development opportunities [38]. Additionally, student-related factors such as motivation, skills, and prior knowledge play a role in task effectiveness. Mixed-ability classes pose another challenge, as high-achieving students may find the tasks unchallenging, whereas lower-level students struggle [25]. Large class sizes further hinder communicative participation [32].

2.1.3. Teachers' Strategies for Handling Challenges

Adapting materials in EFL teaching involves strategies such as adding, deleting, modifying, simplifying, reordering, and substituting content to enhance learning effectiveness [39, 40, 25, 41]. Adding culturally relevant examples increases engagement, while deleting or modifying tasks ensures alignment with students' proficiency levels [41]. Simplification improves accessibility, reordering enhances lesson flow, and substitution boosts motivation by tailoring tasks to students' interests [42, 43].

Collaborative professional development plays a crucial role in enhancing teaching practices and fostering a supportive learning community. The sharing of experiences, resources, and best practices improves instructional quality and student outcomes [44]. Lesson study and peer collaboration further refine pedagogical and problem-solving skills, making professional development more practical and relevant to teachers' needs.

Flexible assessments cater to different learners while maintaining alignment with textbook objectives. Alternative approaches such as project-based assessments and take-home assignments promote active participation and individualized learning [45]. Research also supports non-timed assessments, which allow students to demonstrate their understanding in a way that suits their learning styles, thus enhancing productivity [26]. Professional development programs increase teachers' confidence in using digital resources [46, 47], and implementing these initiatives not only improves technology usage but also addresses resource and training gaps [48].

Teacher support networks play a significant role in sharing materials, engaging in continuous learning, and advancing the profession. Their impact on teaching quality and job satisfaction has been well documented by Pham [49], Do [50], and Bui [44]. Such networks help teachers build stronger professional relationships and self-efficacy, thereby fostering a culture of professional development [51].

2.1.4. Theoretical Framework: Activity Theory

2.1.4.1. Overview of Activity Theory

Based on the work of Vygotsky and later expanded by Engeström (1987), Activity Theory sees human activities as cultural-embedded systems mediated by tools and situated in social settings [52, 53]. Engeström's framework consists of seven components: subject (teachers), object (learning goals), tools (textbooks, pedagogical practices), rules (curriculum policies), community (students, peers, administrators), division of labor (roles), and outcome (results). This framework elucidates challenges that EFL teachers face regarding textbook tasks, such as navigating the competing demands of communicative and exam-oriented teaching programs [24]. Teachers use peer group and professional network rationale to adapt tasks [54], yet misaligned administrative input can limit how a task is implemented [55]. Exploitational contradictions as a lack of cultural context that textbooks provide lead teachers to adapt tasks to support their own professional growth and pedagogical innovation [47].

2.1.5. Previous Studies

Findings in regards to the execution of textbook tasks in EFL settings demonstrate continuing problems which teachers need to address. In Vietnam, Nguyen et al. [56] focused on teachers'

attention to social, affective, and content relevance, and the limited access to training and resources for rural teachers largely preventing effective task adaptation from Do and Phan [57]. Similar observations are made elsewhere: Iranian textbooks for example were found to forsake cross-cultural aspects, forcing teachers to make up for these deficiencies [58] and Indonesian textbooks were found to be heavily focused on communicative skills, but being almost bereft of socio-cultural aspects, necessitating teacher intervention [59]. Collectively, these studies emphasize the importance of greater training and resources in the facilitation of task adaptation across different contexts.

2.2. Methodology

2.2.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design utilizing semi-structured interviews to explore the challenges that EFL teachers encounter in utilizing textbook tasks, as well as the strategies they use to address these challenges. Through qualitative insights gained from these interviews, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how teachers navigate and adapt textbook tasks to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. This exploration is framed within the principles of Activity Theory, which allows for an examination of the interactions between teachers, the educational tools they use, and the context in which they operate.

2.2.2. Participants

This study involved six Vietnamese high school EFL teachers experienced with the *Tiếng Anh Global Success* textbook series, introduced under the new English curriculum reform to enhance communicative competence and align with international standards. Teachers were chosen from both the urban and rural high schools thus giving a sample that reflects the diversity of contexts in which the Tiếng Anh Global Success series is used. This diversity enabled the research to include the specific difficulties and measures used in implementing the textbook in different locations and contexts. The demographics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Selected EFL High School Teachers

Demographic Category	Subcategory	Number of Teachers
Years of Teaching Experience	Less than 5 years	2
	5-10 years	2
	More than 10 years	2
Geographic Location of Schools	Urban	3
	Rural	3
Familiarity with Tiếng Anh Global Success Textbooks	Extensively familiar	2
	Moderately familiar	4

2.2.3. Description of the Textbook Tasks in the Tiếng Anh Global Success Textbook Series

The Global Success textbooks for high school English in Vietnam incorporate a structured sequence of textbook tasks designed to develop students' linguistic competence, communicative skills, and critical thinking. Each unit follows a task-based learning approach, integrating cognitive tasks (e.g., comprehension and analysis), communicative tasks (e.g., discussions and role-plays), and practice-based tasks (e.g., grammar drills and vocabulary exercises). Tasks are sequenced in three phases as pre-task (preparation), while-task (engagement), and post-task (application) to ensure progressive skill development. While tasks are gradually devised, their efficacy in serving the needs of a wide spectrum of learners and sustaining their participation over time is still a major concern to be explored.

2.2.3. Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted over three weeks to investigate EFL teachers' experiences using *Tieng Anh Global Success* textbook tasks with each interview lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Interviews explored challenges, including professional development needs, pedagogical limitations, cultural mismatches, time constraints, and student-related difficulties, as well as teachers' adaptation strategies. The authors analyzed the data thematically, using transcripts coded against Activity Theory [52] to examine student engagement with textbook materials (tools), institutional policies (rules), and peer/administrative support (community). The framework highlighted key challenges and adaptive strategies, offering an insightful analysis of textbook tasks that made them functional within the wider educational system.

2.3. Results and Discussion

2.3.1. Challenges in Implementing Textbook Tasks in EFL Classrooms

These challenges include professional development needs, pedagogical limitations, cultural mismatches, time constraints as well as student-related challenges.

Professional Development Needs

Teacher 5 emphasized the significant lack of workshops or conferences specifically aimed at helping teachers adapt textbook tasks effectively. They expressed:

Technology is changing so fast, and new teaching methods emerge regularly. I'd appreciate more professional development focused on integrating these new resources with textbook tasks [...] (Teacher 5)

Their comment is insightful, pointing to gaps in targeted training needed for effectively adapting textbook activities. Teacher 5's experience further illustrates how the absence of workshops on textbook adaptation limits professional development.

Pedagogical Limitations

The teacher, being a novice, stressed on the difficulty of determining the appropriate level of task complexity for the students. He pointed out:

When the tasks are too easy, the students don't engage, and when they're too complex, the students feel overwhelmed or boring with the tasks. I'm still figuring out how to modify the tasks to make them just right for my class [...] (Teacher 1)

Teachers struggle to adapt tasks for mixed-ability students, with novices finding it hard to balance complexity and maintain engagement.

Teacher 6, with extensive experience, reflected on the ongoing methodological challenges of using textbooks, particularly regarding cultural relevance and the need for contextual adaptation:

[...]I've gotten better at replacing or modifying them, but it's a constant effort to make the content feel meaningful to my students [...] (Teacher 6)

In spite of their experience, veteran teachers still struggle to adapt textbook materials to students' cultural contexts. This indicates that cultural relevance remains an ongoing challenge, even for highly experienced teachers.

Cultural Mismatches

Teacher 1 highlighted the cultural misalignment in textbooks, noting:

Many of the examples in the textbook come from Western culture, and my students don't always connect with them. For example, the reading materials often reference holidays or traditions that they've never experienced, and it's hard for me to explain these things[...] (Teacher 1)

Novice teachers often struggle with cultural relevance. This reflects the broader challenge of adapting textbooks developed from a Western perspective to local contexts.

Time Constraints

The teacher reflected on the challenge of time management despite their extensive experience:

[...]I often end up rushing through tasks, which means I can't spend as much time on areas that students really need more practice with [...] (Teacher 5)

The teacher notes time constraints as a persistent challenge, forcing even experienced teachers to prioritize syllabus coverage over student needs, which often results in superficial learning.

Student-Related Challenges

Teacher 4 addressed the issue of student engagement with textbook tasks:

Some of my students just don't seem motivated by the textbook tasks. I try to make the lessons interesting, but it's difficult when the tasks don't match their interests or needs[...] (Teacher 4)

Consistent with previous studies, this study supports continued professional development, pedagogical flexibility, cultural sensitivity, and textbook modifications for textbook use. Challenges of training for teachers The concerns teachers reported to have about training are consistent with the results obtained by Do and Phan [57] on the relatively little exposure of rural teachers to opportunities, whereas Nguyen et al. [56] focus on the adaptive role of teacher agency. Task complexity mirrors the finding of Wahyuni [59] that both novice and experienced teachers experience difficulty with sociocultural inclusion. Cultural discrepancies impede engagement [58], and the inflexible curriculum attenuates adaptation [56]. Teachers also have to complete tasks quickly because of time constraints and when they rush it is done less effectively [59]. Focused professional development, adaptable materials, and curricular support are necessary to overcome these challenges and facilitate better task enactment of the textbook across various EFL settings.

2.3.2. Strategies for handling challenges

The results compile detailed insights from six EFL high school teachers on strategies they employ to overcome challenges in using textbook tasks.

Task adaptation

Task adaptation emerged as a vital strategy to ensure textbook tasks meet the diverse needs of students. Teachers employ a range of methods, including adding, deleting, modifying, simplifying, reordering, and substituting content.

Adding

Expanding or extending tasks is commonly used to deepen engagement and comprehension.

I often expand on textbook tasks by adding creative elements. For instance, if the textbook provides a dialogue, I create follow-up role-play activities where students can practice similar conversations in different contexts. [...] (Teacher 1)

Modifying

Rewriting or restructuring tasks is a frequent approach to better align them with students' proficiency levels or interests.

[...]For example, instead of using a task about an unfamiliar topic, I reframe it to involve something they are passionate about, like local sports or popular music [...] (Teacher 2)

Simplifying

Breaking tasks into smaller steps or reducing linguistic complexity helps beginner-level students.

[...]For instance, if the textbook has a long reading passage, I break it into smaller sections and add simpler vocabulary exercises to support comprehension [...] (Teacher 6)

Reordering

Rearranging the sequence of tasks ensures a logical progression of learning.

Sometimes the textbook's sequence doesn't make sense for my students, so I teach vocabulary and context first before tackling a complex reading or writing task [...] (Teacher 4)

The task adaptation is vital to fill the gaps that exist in the textbook with activities that are suitable for the learners, their needs, level of proficiency and cultural background. Teachers at all levels have stressed the importance of altering and completing textbook tasks in order to improve the achievement of learners.

Collaborative Teacher Development Programs

The collaborative programs make a teacher get to meet other teachers who he or she can share ideas with and work on improving his or her teaching skills. This is because the programs are very useful for new teachers but they can also be of great value to mid-level and even senior teachers. The teacher said

[...] I actively participate in collaborative programs within my school, where we review textbook challenges together. These discussions often lead to innovative solutions, such as co-creating supplementary materials tailored to our students' needs. (Teacher 3)

Collaborative teacher development programs create an environment for sharing strategies, refining teaching practices, and fostering mutual learning. They are invaluable for all levels of experience.

Establishing Teacher Support Networks

Teacher support networks are invaluable for sharing resources, ideas, and solutions to common challenges faced in the classroom.

For example, I've shared culturally adapted materials with younger teachers while learning about newer technologies from them [...] (Teacher 6)

The results revealed the necessary strategies that EFL teachers use to deal with the challenges arising from the textbook tasks: task adaptation, collaborative development, and teacher support networks. The teachers modify, simplify, or reorder tasks to better suit students' needs, which confirms the role of the teacher as an active subject, as suggested by Nguyen [56]. Teacher development programs that involve collaboration between teachers also help encourage teachers to teach and develop materials together in order to meet the needs of the students, as pointed out by Do and Phan [57]. These programs enrich teaching practices by enabling teachers to share techniques and innovations. Teacher support networks are also very important as they provide encouragement and collaboration. These networks help teachers share resources and ideas and, at the same time, promote learning, as highlighted by Derakhshan [58]. Altogether, these strategies contribute to developing a more engaging, sensitive, and efficient learning environment.

3. Conclusions

This paper aims at exploring the difficulties that EFL teachers encounter when using textbook tasks and how they deal with them. Teachers at all levels of experience teach within a pedagogical, cultural, temporal, and technological context, and new teachers are particularly challenged by task adaptation. Despite the experience, even the most experienced teachers have their challenges, from cultural sensitivity to time management. In order to overcome these challenges, teachers alter, simplify or rearrange tasks to make them more appropriate for the learners. Collaborative teacher development programs and support networks also assist by offering professional and emotional support. However, there are some limitations of the study.

Due to the small size of the participants in this study, the findings of the study cannot be generalized to other populations. The research method used in this study is a qualitative method, which provides an in-depth understanding of the challenges, but the results may not be comprehensive to capture the various challenges that exist in different educational settings, i.e., urban and rural schools. Furthermore, the cultural and technological factors may differ according to the socio-economic status, which may limit the transfer of the findings to other contexts.

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