

## **Focus on Forms or Focus on Meaning: Analysing Communicativeness in College English Textbooks in China**

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### **Introduction**

The debate over focus-on-forms or focus-on-meaning has been a prominent theme in studies on second language acquisition during the last few decades. While some scholars argue that vocabulary and grammar should be taught separately, others insist that language is more effectively acquired through exposure to meaningful language use (e.g., Krashen, 1985; Long, 1991). These two views capture the paradigm shift in English language teaching (ELT) in China, at least at the policy level. Before the 1990s, ELT in China was dominated by teacher-centred and memorisation-based grammar-translation method or audiolingual method (i.e., focus on forms), with little attention to the development of students' communicative competence (e.g., Hu, 2004; Zheng & Borg, 2014). Since the 1990s, particularly after China joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001, communicating effectively in English has become a pressing need for China to engage in international cooperation and to benefit from the globalisation process. In order to increase the population's communicative proficiency in English, the Chinese government has implemented a range of top-down reforms at primary, secondary and tertiary levels, including revamping the national English curriculum, compiling new textbooks and revising the syllabi (Adamson, 2001; Hu, 2004). The national curricula have shifted to focussing on meaning and communicative competence, guided by principles of communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT).

To ensure that university graduates are competent users of English, the Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE) promulgated the National English Curriculum Standard in 2001 (MoE, 2001), the hallmark of which is the advocacy of a student-centred, TBLT approach. To further keep up with the language needs of the society in the new era, MoE proposed the revised College English Curriculum Requirement (the Requirement hereafter) in 2007 (MoE, 2007). Aside from continuing to prioritise communicative competence and recommend a student-centred approach, the Requirement emphasises the use of modern information technology, so that English learning could be free from the limitation of time or place, and allow "individualised and autonomous learning" (MoE, 2007, p. 26). It requires that college ELT should prepare students for effective communication in their future studies and careers with an integrated teaching of English language, learning strategies and intercultural communication.

To implement the new Requirement (MoE, 2007), new college English textbooks have been compiled and old textbooks have been updated. At least a dozen versions of textbooks have been published during the past decade, all of which claim to be

following the Requirement (MoE, 2007). For example, the New College English published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (Ying, 2012) declares that it adopts a student-centred approach, emphasises autonomous learning, provides authentic contexts, and aims at raising students' competence in language use. The New College English by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press (Li & Wang, 2013), while also emphasising autonomous learning and communicative competence, explicitly states that it adopts an eclectic approach. However, many studies on college English textbooks in China are sceptical about whether they are effectively designed to achieve their pedagogical goals. Researchers criticise that the materials are boring and the approach is examination-oriented, which fail to cater to students' professional needs (e.g., Cai, 2014; Guo & Zhan, 2011). It is therefore important to evaluate through systematic analysis whether the textbooks are designed to teach grammar and vocabulary or to enhance students' communicative competence. To this end, the present study analyses the communicativeness of five versions of widely used college English textbooks in China. In what follows, I will first review relevant studies on college English textbooks. Then the analytical framework will be presented, followed by analysis and results. Finally, the findings will be critically discussed in relation to the contextual factors in contemporary China.

### **Studies on college English textbooks in China**

College English textbooks in China since the 1960s can be classified into five generations, and the general trend of evolution is from a grammar-centred approach to a communication-oriented approach (Cai & Tang, 2008). The textbooks under investigation generally belong to the fifth generation, but some are new editions of the fourth-generation textbooks. Cai and Tang (2008) suggest that the fifth-generation textbooks should focus on cultivating students' comprehensive competence in language use. They further propose several criteria of evaluation, for example, the textbooks should be practical (i.e., catering for students' practical needs), theme-based (i.e., integrating skills of reading, listening, speaking and writing in different topics or themes), content-based (i.e., students should learn content knowledge aside from language skills), student-centred, and task-based. Many studies have been done to evaluate the content of the textbooks from various perspectives, such as authenticity, culture awareness, and multimodal design, while other studies are concerned with the perception and attitudes of students and teachers. In this section, I will briefly review these studies and identify the gaps which point to the need for the present study.

Previous studies are mainly concerned with whether college English textbooks are indeed communication oriented. Researchers are mostly critical in this regard, suggesting that current textbooks are examination-oriented (Cai, 2011), that the exercises are boring and cannot stimulate students' interest in speaking (Wang, 2014), and that there is limited authentic material (Meng, 2011). For example, Cai (2011) asserts that all the integrated English coursebooks are strongly examination-oriented, and the exercises are used to prepare the student for college English tests (CET). Guo and Zhan (2011) find that in many textbooks, materials are outdated,

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authentic contexts are missing and group activities are scarce. Meng's (2011) analysis of New Horizon college English textbooks shows that they contain virtually no authentic material such as news reports, advertisements, instructions, and so on. She concludes that the materials are remote from students' real life, which make them feel that English is useless and therefore cannot motivate them to learn.

The second line of research focuses on the representation of culture in college English textbooks. The main problems researchers find include the lack of intercultural communication, the predominance of Anglo-American culture, the superficial understanding of culture (e.g., holidays and celebrities), and the paucity of Chinese culture. For example, Feng and Byram (2002) examine authenticity of college English textbooks from an intercultural perspective. They point out that the textbooks neglected intercultural representations of the contemporary cultures and contemporaneity, and the textbooks included many texts that described negative aspects of western societies. Meng's (2011) analysis of New Horizon college English textbooks shows that they exhibit a serious Anglo-American cultural tendency, and that the cultural content is narrow and unauthentic. Kang and Xu (2018) find that Chinese culture is missing in the textbooks, which results in students' inability of talking about Chinese culture in English.

The third line of research focusses on the perception of college English textbooks. The findings shared by many studies are that students consider the textbook boring and irrelevant. For example, the survey conducted by Zhao, Lei, and Zhang (2009) on 283 students from 12 Chinese universities shows that half of the students are not interested in the textbook materials. Guo and Xu's (2013) questionnaire survey on 607 students in 7 universities from 4 cities in China shows that most students consider the textbooks and teaching materials as exam-oriented, unable to support autonomous learning, and insufficient in content related to students' majors and general academic activities.

While these studies have provided useful insights into college English textbooks, their findings are rarely based on systematic analysis of textbook content. It follows that many criticisms are merely general comments without quantitative empirical evidence (cf. Yang & Chen, 2013). Meanwhile, most studies are concerned with single textbooks or consider the textbooks as a homogeneous whole, and there has been no comparison of textbooks from different publishers. To address these issues, this study provides an empirical analysis of five widely used college English textbooks in China, with the aim to understand their degrees of communicativeness.

### **Data and analytical framework**

The college English textbooks from four prestigious publishers are selected for this study. They are all designed according to the Requirement (MoE, 2007), and are widely used in Chinese universities. Details of the textbooks are shown in Table 5.1. Two textbooks are selected from each version and it can be argued that an analysis of

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the ten textbooks can capture the overall landscape of college English textbooks in China.


Table 5.1 Textbook information

Name	Publisher	Year	Quantity
New College English – Integrated Course	Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press (SFLEP)	2013 (2 <sup>nd</sup> edition)	2
College English Top Notch – Integrated Course	Higher Education Press (HEP)	2007 (1 <sup>st</sup> edition)	2
New College English – An Integrated Course	Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP I)	2012 (3 <sup>rd</sup> edition)	2
New Era Interactive English	Tsinghua University Press (TUP)	2011 (4 <sup>th</sup> edition)	2
New Standard College English – Real Communication	Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP II)	2008 (1 <sup>st</sup> edition)	2

The analytical framework arises from the long-standing discussion on focus-on-forms and focus-on-meaning. Focus-on-forms refers to an approach in which different aspects of grammar are taught as discrete learning points, in order of their level of difficulty. This is the traditional approach to grammar teaching, which is often teacher-centred and does not involve the use of language in context. In contrast, the focus-on-meaning approach emphasises the exposure to rich input and the meaningful use of language in context, which can lead to incidental acquisition (Norris & Ortega, 2001, p. 160). Researchers generally agree that neither approach is effective for learning a second language if used alone. In practice, they need to be combined for students to achieve linguistic and communicative competence. For example, Long (1991) argues that both focus-on-forms and focus-on-meaning instructions are valuable, and should complement each other. Focus-on-form instruction is therefore proposed to maintain a balance between the two by drawing learners' attention to form when necessary, yet within a meaningful communicative context. Interesting as the distinction between focus-on-forms and focus-on-meaning is, it cannot really be rigorously defined and easily operationalised in classifying specific learning activities (Ellis, 2012, p. 275). A useful categorisation is Nunan's (2004) distinction between language exercise, communicative activity and pedagogical task. Language exercises roughly correspond to focus-on-forms activities, in which learners focus on practising lexical, phonological or grammatical knowledge. In contrast to language exercises, pedagogical tasks "involve communicative language use in which the user's attention is focused on meaning rather than grammatical form" (Nunan, 2004, p. 4), corresponding to focus-on-meaning activities. To capture the indeterminate areas between these two categories, Nunan (2004) uses communicative activities to refer to those activities which provide manipulative practice of language items and involve meaningful communication at the same time.

Similar to Nunan (2004), Littlewood (2004) conceptualises the complementary role of focus-on-forms and focus-on-meaning teaching by proposing a continuum to differentiate different types of tasks. The continuum consists of five categories, namely, non-communicative learning, pre-communicative language practice, communicative language practice, structured communication and authentic communication, as shown in Table 5.2. This framework allows us to evaluate the degree of communicativeness in a more explicit and nuanced way than the simple forms/meaning distinction. The framework was used to code the ten textbooks by the author and a research assistant. Initial coding suggests that it is difficult to distinguish between structured communication and authentic communication in most cases, as all tasks are structured or controlled to some extent. Many tasks can be considered as authentic as they do correspond to “situations found in the real world” (Ellis, 2003), for example, a bargaining task at service counter, writing a complaint letter, discussing where to eat with friends and so on. However, they are also “structured” as they are parts of themes on shopping or eating at a restaurant where relevant knowledge has been learnt before proceeding to the tasks. They are therefore termed “structured authentic” activities in analysis.

Table 5.2 Continuum from focus on forms to focus on meaning (adapted from Littlewood, 2004: 322)

Non-communicative learning	Focusing on the structures of language, how they are formed and what they mean	<div style="display: flex; align-items: center; justify-content: center;"> <div style="text-align: right; margin-right: 10px;"><b>Focus on forms</b></div> <div style="text-align: center;">  </div> <div style="text-align: left; margin-left: 10px;"><b>Focus on meaning</b></div> </div>
Pre-communicative language practice	Practising language with some attention to meaning but not communicating new messages to others	
Communicative language practice	practicing pre-taught language in a context where it communicates new information	
Structured communication	Using language to communicate in situations with elicit pre-learnt language, but with some unpredictability	
Authentic communication	Using language to communicate in situations where the meanings are unpredictable	

## Analysis

### *Overall distribution of learning activities*

The distribution of learning activities in the five versions of textbooks is shown in Table 5.3. Among the four categories, non-communicative activities appear the most frequently (N = 880), accounting for 34.3% of all activities. Pre-communicative activities have a similar percentage of 33.2%. Together, these two types of form-focussed activities account for more than two-thirds of all learning activities in the five textbooks, which suggests that the textbooks are in general concerned with the explicit teaching of vocabulary and grammar. In terms of meaning-oriented activities, they tend to use controlled or structured authentic communication to practice certain

knowledge points, rather than authentic communication with high unpredictability. Table 5.3 also shows that different textbooks vary dramatically in their preference for the types of learning activities. Form-focussed activities, that is, non-communicative and pre-communicative activities, are the most preferred in the SFLEP textbooks, accounting for over 80% of all learning activities. In the HEP textbooks, the most frequent learning activity is pre-communicative practice, accounting for 33.9% of all learning activities. In contrast to SFLEP textbooks, HEP textbooks have a much higher ratio of meaning-focussed activities (i.e., communicative and structured authentic activities), making it the highest in communicativeness. The other three textbooks fall between the two extremes of SFLEP and HEP textbooks, with around 70% formed-focussed activities and 30% meaning-focussed activities.

Table 5.3. Distribution of learning activities in the textbooks

Textbooks	Non-communicative		Pre-communicative		Communicative		Structured authentic		Total
SFLEP	188	51.2%	111	30.2%	15	4.1%	53	14.4%	367
HEP	168	23.7%	240	33.9%	109	15.4%	191	27.0%	708
FLTRP I	189	39.5%	138	28.8%	22	4.6%	130	27.1%	479
TUP	140	36.9%	138	36.4%	15	4.0%	86	22.7%	379
FLTRP II	195	30.8%	225	35.5%	28	4.4%	185	29.2%	633
Total	880	34.3%	852	33.2%	189	7.4%	645	25.1%	2566

To show the degrees of communicativeness of the five versions of textbooks in a straightforward way, a hypothetical scale from one to four is used to differentiate the four types of learning activities, with one standing for the lowest communicativeness (non-communicative learning practice) and four standing for the highest communicativeness (authentic structured communication). By multiplying the proportion of each category in different textbooks with the corresponding score as coefficient, we get a total score which can represent the communicativeness of the five versions of textbooks. As shown in Table 5.4, the overall score is below three (i.e., the score assigned for communicative activities) which further indicates that the textbooks are dominated by form-focussed teaching. The HEP textbooks have the highest level of communicativeness (2.46), followed by FLTRP II textbooks (2.32). The SFLEP textbooks have the lowest level of communicativeness (1.82). These scores are consistent with previous interpretation based on the numbers of different types of activities. It is interesting to note that the HEP textbooks are adapted from the American textbook *Top Notch*, while the editorial team of the FLTRP II textbooks is composed of three British and three Chinese. This is probably because CLT is more widely accepted and practised in Western countries. The SFLEP textbooks are most form-focussed because an important purpose of the textbooks is to prepare students for CET. They are the only

textbooks that explicitly state in their Forward that they cater to students' needs of taking CET, with exercises designed according to CET requirement.

Table 5.4 Degree of communicativeness of the textbooks

	Non-communicative	Pre-communicative	Communicative	Structured authentic	Total
HEP	23.7% x 1	33.9% x 2	15.4% x 3	27.0% x 4	2.46
FLTRP					
II	30.8% x 1	35.5% x 2	4.4% x 3	29.2% x 4	2.32
FLTRP I	39.5% x 1	28.8% x 2	4.6% x 3	27.1% x 4	2.19
TUP	36.9% x 1	36.4% x 2	4.0% x 3	22.7% x 4	2.12
SFLEP	51.2% x 1	30.2% x 2	4.1% x 3	14.4% x 4	1.82

To measure the statistical significance of the variations among the textbooks in terms of their preference for different types of learning activities, a Chi-square test of goodness of fit was performed. The result in Table 5.5 shows that the frequencies of the four activities in the five textbooks are significantly different. Non-communicative learning activities are significantly more preferred in the SFLEP textbooks ( $N = 367$ ,  $\chi^2 = 185.578$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the FLTRP I textbook ( $N = 479$ ,  $\chi^2 = 123.497$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .001$ ); pre-communicative activities have a significantly higher frequency in the HEP textbooks ( $N = 708$ ,  $\chi^2 = 50.113$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the FLTRP II textbook ( $N = 633$ ,  $\chi^2 = 148.415$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .001$ ); the TUP textbooks have an equal preference for non-communicative and pre-communicative activities ( $N = 379$ ,  $\chi^2 = 109.285$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This result corroborates the previous findings on the overall form-focussed design and the different degrees of communicativeness across the five textbooks.

The quantitative analysis gives us an overall measurement of the text-books' varying degrees of communicativeness. However, quantity alone may not be able to reflect the degree of communicativeness accurately as some activities take considerably longer time than others. For example, there may be five pre-communicative activities that altogether take 10 minutes of the teaching time, and one role-play or writing task that takes 20 minutes of the teaching time. In this case, if we count the numbers, we would conclude that the class is form-focussed, but if we look at the distribution of class time, it is actually meaning-focussed. Acknowledging the inadequacy of the quantitative analysis, in what follows, I will provide a qualitative analysis of the nature of different types of activities. As non-communicative and pre-communicative activities are both form-focussed exercises, and very often an activity involves both types simultaneously, I will discuss them within one section. I will also skip communicative language practices for the reasons that they have a very low proportion in the textbooks and that their realisation is very simple, typically straightforward personalised questions, such as finding out each other's hometown, hobbies, or favourite food.

### ***Non-communicative and pre-communicative activities***

As shown in previous quantitative analysis, non-communicative and pre-communicative learning activities account for two-thirds of all activities in the textbooks. These “language exercises” (Nunan, 2004) or form-focussed activities (Ellis, 2012) direct learners’ attention to certain knowledge points and require their “intentional learning”. The dominance of these activities may suggest that the textbooks are more concerned with the explicit instruction of grammatical rules, vocabulary, intonation and other aspects of the English language to improve students’ knowledge and understanding, rather than using the knowledge in communication. In this section, I will provide a more detailed analysis of the forms of language exercises. The five textbooks under investigation, which are “integrated coursebooks”, are highly structured, with each unit generally composed of listening comprehension, reading activities, discussion (speaking) activities and writing activities. Among them, reading activities usually spread across 10 to 20 pages and occupy over two-thirds of the space of a unit. As most language exercises, in particular non-communicative activities, are found in the reading part, I will focus on the activities in this part in analysis. The reading part is generally the same as the intensive reading textbooks described by Cortazzi and Jin (1996) more than two decades ago. A typical unit begins with a 2–3 pages of text, with a list of new words (and phrases) beside or after the text. The new words are accompanied by pronunciation, explanation in English and Chinese translations. However, the two textbooks of HEP and FLTRP II do not have such word lists, reflecting findings from the quantitative analysis above that they are comparatively more communicative. The texts are followed by various forms of language exercises, such as multiple-choice questions, fill-in-the-blank exercises (including cloze passages), sentences for translation and general discussion questions. These exercises can be classified into pronunciation-focussed activities, vocabulary-focussed activities, grammar-focussed activities, sentence-focussed activities and text-focussed activities, which are distributed on a cline from non-communicative to pre-communicative.

Non-communicative activities contain the strongest degree of focus on language forms. It includes learning activities such as pronunciation practices, vocabulary drills and grammar exercises that are uncontextualised (Littlewood, 2004). HEP and TUP both contain pronunciation-focussed activities, reflecting their audiolingual approach. HEP contains “rhythm and intonation practice” in every unit in which students are asked to listen to a model conversation and imitate, with attention to the stress pattern. TUP has a reciting task, in which students are asked to mark the words or phrases with a rising tone or a falling tone, and then practise the reading until they can recite it. Vocabulary drills are typically in the forms of matching exercises, giving synonyms of individual words, etc. An example is shown in Excerpt 1, which requires students to match the definitions in column B with the corresponding words in column A. A more frequent form of vocabulary-focussed activity that is found in all textbooks in every unit is listing the target words in a box and asking students to choose appropriate words with the right forms to complete sentences. A typical ex-



ample is shown in Excerpt 2. Although they are considered as a non-communicative activity in analysis, they are slightly more meaningful as students have to work with word meanings in the context of the sentences. Similar to vocabulary exercises, grammar-focussed activities also have different degrees of non-communicativeness. In the least communicative exercises, students are asked to change individual words from nouns to adjectives, change voice or structure of sentences based on a model, etc. These extreme cases are not common in the textbooks. More often, the grammar points are practised within sentences. For example, grammatical forms are also practised in Excerpt 2. These exercises adopt a deductive approach and are often preceded by instructions on grammatical rules in English or in Chinese. For example, in FLTRP II-2, in an exercise on word formation by adding *-ment* and *-ism*, there is an explanation of the knowledge before students are asked to complete sentences using words with the right suffixes, which reads “The suffixes *-ment* and *-ism* are often added to existing words to make new words. Typically, *-ment* is added to a verb, and describes an example or action of the process referred to in the verb ... The ending *-ism* is typically added to an adjective and refers to an ideology or movement” (p. 10).

Match the definitions in Column B with the words or phrases in Column A.

A	B
___ 1) on demand	a. definitely, surely
___ 2) protest	b. allow (food or drink) to go down one’s throat
___ 3) resource	c. break into pieces
___ 4) fall apart	d. the act of permitting
___ 5) deposit	e. supply of money, labor, equipment, land, etc
___ 6) undoubtedly	f. put (money) into a bank account

Excerpt 1. Non-communicative exercise (SFLEP-2, p. 25)

Complete the following sentences with appropriate words or phrase from the box.

Change the form if necessary.

embarrass	bother	coordinate	subject	adjust
participate in	urge	complain	kid	see to it that

1. The people were \_\_\_ to do their very best to save their nation.
2. I am sorry to \_\_\_ you, but could you direct me to the station?
3. She was \_\_\_ to hear her husband talking so loudly at the party.

Excerpt 2. Non-communicative exercise with meaningful sentences (FLTRP I-2, p. 10)

Pre-communicative activities mainly include sentence-focussed and text-focussed exercises, which are oriented towards meaning, but do not involve communicating new messages to others (Littlewood, 2004). Sentence-focussed activities mainly include paraphrasing and translation, which function to improve students’ understanding of the meanings of whole sentences. Text-focussed activities are designed to improve students’ understanding of the content and structure of the

reading texts. Learning activities include WH-questions, cloze passages, filling in blanks for paragraph headings, dividing texts into different parts and summarising the main ideas of each part. Excerpt 3 shows a typical pre-communicative activity in the TUP textbook, which requires students to answer meaningful questions after reading the given text. Aside from reading activities, listening activities are also text-focussed and generally pre-communicative, using true-or-false questions, multiple choices and/or blank fillings to enhance understanding of the text. The last type of pre-communicative activity is grammar-focussed exercises. While most grammar exercises are deductive and non-communicative, the HEP textbooks adopt an inductive approach (cf. Hu, 2004). In every unit, there is an activity with five sentences and students are asked to “analyse the sentences carefully and find out a specific grammatical structure contained in them”.

### ***Structured authentic communication***

The activities discussed in this section largely fall under Littlewood’s (2004) category of structured communication, which refers to the communication of meanings with some unpredictability in structured situations (Littlewood, 2004). As explained previously, structured and authentic are combined in analysis because there are virtually no completely authentic communication activities in the textbooks and all activities are both structured and authentic to different degrees. The analysis in this section sheds light on the varying degrees of structuredness and authenticity of the activities. Structured authentic communication activities mainly appear in the speaking and writing parts of a unit. The writing tasks often provide detailed guidelines, tips, or writing strategies, which aim to enhance students’ writing skills through explicit instruction. For example, in HEP textbooks, four or five questions are provided before a writing task, and students are asked to use the questions as a guide of their writing. In the SFLEP and TUP textbooks, there are detailed “writing strategies” where students are taught about the format of a business letter, how to write an expository essay, etc., as well as sample writings before the writing tasks. Highly structured writing activities are also found in FLTRP II textbooks, which provide very explicit instruction on how an essay should be written, as illustrated in Excerpt 4. In cases where the writing task is not so controlled, it is still structured communication (though to a lesser extent) in the sense that it is connected to the preceding reading activities and it forms a component of the theme of the unit it belongs to.

Answer each of the following questions in the fewest possible words based on the text you’ve just read.

- 1) According to the text, what exercise possibilities does a gym provide?
- 2) What benefits can people get by practicing yoga and Pilates?
- 3) How do people do exercises in an aerobics class?
- 4) How is indoor rock climbing different from rock climbing outdoors according to the text?
- 5) What is the author’s purpose in using Zoe as an example?

Excerpt 3. Text-focused pre-communicative exercise (TUP-1, p. 52)

Write a short passage about the early years of your college or university.

- Set the context. *My university dates from...*
- Introduce the main focus. *It soon became...*
- Expand the information in the previous sentence. *It had...*
- Add an interesting detail. *The most interesting thing about my university...*
- Say what happened in the university's history. *At that time, my university...*
- Write a conclusion. *Today my university is one of the...*

Excerpt 4. Guided writing task (FLTRP II-2, p.13)

Structured authentic communication most often happens in speaking activities, which typically involve group or pair discussion. SFLEP textbooks contain the fewest discussion tasks, generally one per unit. HEP textbooks contain the most discussion tasks. They do not just include a speaking part with several discussion tasks, but also “Warm-up”, “Critical Thinking”, “Pair Work” and “Discussion” sections that contain questions with different degrees of unpredictability. FLTRP II textbooks also contain two “Talking Points”, two “Developing Critical Thinking” and a “Unit Task”, which involve group/pair discussions. It can be argued that these are sound pedagogical designs, which provide opportunities for students not only to enhance their speaking skills, but also to learn knowledge in a more communicative context. Structured authentic communication is realised through various types of pedagogical tasks which can be analysed using Prabhu's (1987) classification of information-gap activity, opinion-gap activity and reasoning-gap activity.

Information-gap activity typically involves the transfer of information from one student to another. It can be communicative language practice if the language used is highly predictable (e.g., exchanging information about each other's name, hometown, or hobbies), or authentic communication if the language used has some unpredictability. Most of the information-gap tasks in the textbooks are simple questions for students to exchange in-formation with each other. However, some tasks ask students to share their experience with more unpredictable linguistic resources. A typical example is from FLTRP I-2 (p. 235) that states “college students may experience stress in one or another form, be it academic, financial or emotional. Share with your partner your experience about the stress you are subjected to and the possible solutions to it”. Such tasks involve relatively simple encoding and decoding of information, with one student encoding his/her experience into language and the other student decoding the information.

Opinion-gap activities refer to tasks that require the identification and articulation of individual attitude or opinion towards a given situation (Prabhu, 1987, p. 47).

Compared with information-gap activities which involve sharing factual information, opinion-gap activities require higher-order thinking and are slightly more demanding. Amongst the three types of tasks, opinion-gap activities are the most frequently used in all textbooks. The design of opinion-gap activities is rather simple, which usually requires students to work in pairs and express their opinions on several questions related to the topic of the unit. Excerpt 5 is a typical example. Opinion-gap questions are arguably the most convenient to design and the most effective to get students to talk. However, most of the questions are shallow and straightforward, and students can often complete the task in one sentence without more in-depth thinking. There are sections of “Critical Thinking” in HEP and FLTRP II textbooks, but most of the questions simply elicit students’ opinions, with little attention paid to analytical skills and critical thinking.

Work in pairs and discuss the questions.

1. Do you think it’s sometimes better to remain innocent, or should we always try every possible experience in life?
2. Which experiences do you think people from other cultures should try when they’re in China?

Excerpt 5. Opinion-gap activity (Adapted from FLTRP II-1, p. 19)

Reasoning-gap activities involve deriving some new information from given information through processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning or perception of relationships or patterns (Prabhu, 1987, p. 47). Reasoning as a high-order thinking is fundamental in problem-solving and decision-making tasks. Reasoning-gap activities are the least frequent among the three types of tasks. They mainly appear in the “Unit Task” section in the FLTRP II textbooks, and the “Project-Leading Activities” section in the HEP textbooks. These tasks are usually more demanding, more time-consuming and sometimes infeasible, which may be the reason why they are absent in some textbooks. Typical examples include asking students to “make a survey about the most common problems that people encounter in personal care and appearance, and then invite some students to report the result of their survey and offer solutions to these problems” (HEP-2, p. 108), or to produce the front page of a local newspaper, including deciding on news items to include, write the news, produce the page and publish the page (FLTRP II-2, p. 56). Reasoning-gap activities such as complicated discussion/debate, problem solving and decision making that represent authentic communication are scarce in the textbooks.

## Discussion

The analysis reveals the dominance of form-focussed language exercises in college English textbooks. This finding echoes Hu’s (2004) assertion that “the dominant goals of ELT are helping students grasp the linguistic code of English, transmitting the grammar and vocabulary knowledge that they need to pass various English tests, developing their ability to read in the target language” (p. 44). However, we also see about 20–40% meaning-focussed activities that mainly serve to improve students’

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speaking and writing skills. Another key finding is that the five textbooks vary significantly in terms of their preference for learning activities and hence their level of communicativeness. In this section, I will provide a contextual explanation of the design choices of the textbooks. The textbooks have generally taken an eclectic approach (Hu, 2004), reflecting divergent or even conflicting contextual forces in contemporary China. First, the textbooks are shaped by centralised national curriculum guide and the socio-economic diversity in different regions in China. Second, their design is also constrained by the national requirement of college English test, and reflect students' divergent needs for professional communication in English in their future careers and for passing CET (which is also important in their job hunting). Problems and inadequacies of the textbooks will also be discussed.

The national curriculum reform in the first decade of the 21st century, which resulted in the Requirement (MoE, 2007), was motivated by the increasing demand for talents with comprehensive communication skills in English in the globalised world. Against this backdrop, the main objective of college English education in China is repositioned as “developing students’ ability to use English in an all-round way, especially in listening and speaking, so that they will be able to communicate effectively in their future studies and careers ... and enhancing their general cultural awareness so as to meet the needs of China’s social development and international exchanges” (MoE, 2007, p. 5). As a result, compared with previous curriculum guides which emphasise reading and translation, the Requirement (MoE, 2007) prioritises listening and speaking skills. The second remarkable feature is the high degree of freedom it gives to individual universities. It is the first time that the term “curriculum” rather than “syllabus” is used to name a national guideline for college English education (Han & Yin, 2016). It fully acknowledges the differences among different regions and universities, and repeatedly emphasises that different universities should develop their syllabi according to their teaching resources, students’ level of English upon entering university, and the social demands they may face. Third, in terms of teaching method, it advocates a student-centred approach, which caters to students’ individual learning needs. However, it also emphasises the advantages of traditional approach and the leading role of teachers.

The curriculum guidelines are a major influencing force on the textbooks. An important finding of the empirical analysis is the significant variation of communicativeness among the five textbooks. I argue that this is sound design to cater to the different learning needs for students in different regions and different universities, as clearly stated in the Requirement (Ministry of Education, 2007). The high degree of freedom in the national curriculum allows textbook writers to adopt an eclectic approach and emphasise different aspects of language skills. As Cortazzi and Jin (1996) remarked, in such a huge country with an enormous population, we cannot expect all learners to be the same and all textbooks to be homogeneous. The variation echoes Cai and Tang’s (2008) proposal that the new generation of textbooks should follow the principle of diversity. They have even gone so far to argue that the

“national project” textbooks which universities are required to use should be abolished, and universities, or even individual teachers should choose and develop their own reference materials. Countering this argument, I contend that the current landscape of integrated textbook, with over a dozen different versions, is sufficient for general purpose college English education. Different departments and individual teachers should be given the freedom to choose appropriate textbooks based on their unique needs, and the findings of the present study provide useful references for making more informed choices. The government (MoE) can coordinate the major publishers to avoid overlap and to make sure that their textbooks have different emphasises and can serve different student needs.

Aside from curriculum requirement, the textbooks are also closely tied to the national exam system of CET administered by MoE, which is required for undergraduate students in most universities. This study generally confirms criticisms that college English textbooks are exam-oriented (e.g., Cai, 2011; Guo & Xu, 2013). It provides empirical supports to previous comments which tend to be impressionistic or based on the analysis of one set of textbooks. More importantly, the study shows that the textbooks cannot be treated as a homogeneous whole; rather, there are significant internal differences. For example, without vocabulary lists accompanying the reading texts, the HEP textbooks are probably not ideal for preparing students for CET. Nonetheless, we do see commonality in the importance all the textbooks attach to reading comprehension and in the explicit teaching of basic linguistic knowledge such as vocabulary, grammar and translation. However, it seems unfair to blame the textbook writers for serving students’ need of taking exams. As Hu (2004) commented, effective change is unlikely to happen unless the exam system changes. Fortunately, we do see positive changes in the exam system over the years, for example, the exclusion of cloze tests, the inclusion of speaking tests and so on. A more recent development is the implementation of China’s Standards of English Language in 2018 (Liu, 2019). The standard takes into consideration learners’ pragmatic ability, cognitive ability and encourages student-centred language teaching and formative assessment. It can be foreseen that new textbooks reflecting the new standard will be compiled.

Finally, while the textbooks under investigation can be justified in terms of serving students’ needs for CET, they seem to be insufficient in preparing students for their future studies and careers. Regardless of the level of communicativeness, the textbooks are all oriented toward improving students’ general English proficiency (i.e., English for general purposes). Most of the themes in the selected textbook series are related to daily life, such as greetings, small talk, campus life, food and habits. The FLTRP II textbooks are an exception, which include a variety of topics such as crimes, news, science, international relation and so on. Some practical writing tasks are designed in TUP textbooks, such as filling in forms, writing a note and writing a self-introduction. Nonetheless, most of the learning activities found in the textbooks are designed for general communication purposes. As reported in Cai (2014), around

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80% of college students consider English as a tool to access professional knowledge in English and to enhance their ability for international communication in their professional field. The textbooks fail to meet students' needs in this regard, confirming previous studies (e.g., Guo & Xu, 2013). Addressing this problem, there has been argument among Chinese scholars to re-orient college English education towards English for specific and academic purposes in the last decade (e.g., Cai, 2011, 2014). The new version of curriculum guide published in 2017 reflects this re-orientation by including academic English and vocational English. English textbooks for various specific purposes have been published during the last few years. It is expected that new integrated coursebooks will contain more academic and vocational English that is crucial for students' postgraduate studies or professional communication.

## **Conclusion**

This study sets out to evaluate the communicativeness of five versions of commonly used college English textbooks in China. The findings suggest that the textbooks are generally more form-focussed, with the main aim of helping students command grammar and vocabulary knowledge that they need to pass CET. Meaning-focussed (structured) authentic communicative activities are less emphasised. It is also found that the textbooks vary significantly in the level of communicativeness. The findings are explained in relation to the contextual factors of the national curriculum requirement, the college English test system and students' needs. I argue that the design of the textbooks is on the whole appropriate given the complex contextual constraints. However, this does not mean that they are effective in serving students' needs. Inadequacies are apparent, which requires top-down changes in the curriculum and assessment system. The analysis does not aim to suggest which textbook is superior or more effective; rather, the value of the findings is more in terms of the awareness and explicit understanding of the differences so that teachers can make more informed selections of textbooks based on their specific needs.

Against the backdrop of the ongoing reform of the college English education in China, the empirical understanding of communicativeness based on quantitative and qualitative analysis of several textbooks is valuable for further evaluation and design of English textbooks in China. Beyond general comments and student feedbacks that treat college English textbooks as a homogeneous whole or focus on one version of textbooks, we need rigorous comparative analysis of all current textbooks as demonstrated in this study to move forward. Notwithstanding the significance of this study, an obvious limitation is that only communicativeness is analysed, while there are many other important dimensions that require comparative empirical analysis, such as cultural or social values, types of pedagogical tasks and the use of multimodal resources.

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