Consciousness-raising and practice in ELT coursebooks

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Most general ELT coursebooks currently include grammar tasks, suggesting a common view in ELT that learners benefit from form-focused tasks to improve their L2 accuracy. To investigate the nature of such tasks, we developed a framework of consciousness-raising and practice task types, applied it to nine contemporary ELT coursebooks, and thus identified a number of current trends. Despite notable differences among the nine coursebooks, each one is essentially based on a Presentation-Practice approach to grammar teaching. Both inductive and deductive approaches are seen in the presentation stages, followed by two types of practising task. There is little evidence to date of focused communication tasks. These findings are discussed, and should be useful for teachers wishing to evaluate their own selection of grammar tasks and coursebooks.

Consciousness-raising vs. practice

Our main discussion focuses on two theoretical perspectives on grammar teaching: consciousness-raising (C-R) and practice. After the ‘anti-grammar movement’ of the 1980s, the role of grammar in language teaching was reformulated from habit formation into grammar awareness activities (Celce-Murcia 1991) and there was a major theoretical shift from ‘how teachers teach grammar’ to ‘how learners learn grammar’. Following Ellis (1991: 235–7), the popularity of grammar practice is generally supported by the belief that more practice leads to greater proficiency; his criticism is that practice does not necessarily contribute to autonomous ability to use the structure, due to psycholinguistic constraints. Thus he argues against the conventional wisdom that ‘practice makes perfect’ in favour of a series of C-R tasks: grammar consciousness-raising tasks, interpretation tasks, and focused communication tasks (Ellis 1993).

In response to Ellis, Hopkins and Nettle (1994), as teachers, suggest two counter-arguments:

1 Ellis’s proposal to replace practice activities with consciousness-raising activities does not meet the practical demands of classroom teaching, such as learner expectations.

2 His alternative consciousness-raising approaches are already used by many teachers and material writers.
If these points are accepted, it can be hypothesized (1) that aspects of grammar practice are still regularly exploited in ELT materials, notwithstanding the current unpopularity of practising in the research field. Moreover, (2) independent of developments in the SLA research field, consciousness-raising techniques have been widely used among ELT practitioners. It can be of considerable value to develop this debate, a decade later, so as to understand the current practical situation of grammar teaching by examining contemporary ELT materials, and also to gain specific insights into the connections between research and practice.

Contemporary ELT materials

Nine intermediate-level, multi-course textbooks available in bookshops in Britain provide an otherwise random selection of recent publications from four major international publishing houses (Table 1). The research focuses on three grammatical items—present perfect, second conditional, and reported speech—which are often problematic for L2 learners with different L1 notions (e.g. present perfect) or different L1 structures (e.g. second conditional). On the practical side, these grammar points are all included in the selected materials, and probably most published course materials.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intermediate coursebooks</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clockwise</td>
<td>W. Forsyth</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Oxford University Press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landmark</td>
<td>S. Haines and B. Stewart</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Oxford University Press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inside Out</td>
<td>S. Kay and V. Jones</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Macmillan Heinemann</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward</td>
<td>S. Greenall</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Macmillan Heinemann</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matters</td>
<td>J. Bell and R. Gower</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Longman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cutting Edge: A practical approach to task-based learning</td>
<td>S. Cunningham and P. Moor</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Longman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True to Life</td>
<td>R. Gairns and S. Redman</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Cambridge University Press</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 1
Materials analysed

Five types of form-focused task

In this study, we identify five types of form-focused task: grammar consciousness-raising tasks, interpretation tasks, focused communication tasks, grammar exercises, and grammar practice activities. The first three types, as proposed by Ellis, are based on the concept of C-R, taking into account the nature of language development as ‘an organic process characterized by backsliding, leaps in competence, interaction between grammatical elements, etc.’ (Nunan 1991: 148). We call the fourth, a traditional type of grammar task, ‘grammar exercises’. The last type, as exemplified by Ur (1988), is communicative grammar practice. In contrast to C-R features in the first three tasks, these last two types are categorized as practising tasks. We shall now describe each type of task in more detail, with reference to examples of reported speech (for ease of comparison) from the selected coursebooks.
Consciousness-raising tasks

Ellis (1997: 160) defines grammar consciousness-raising tasks as ‘a pedagogic activity where the learners are provided with L2 data in some form and required to perform some operation on or with it, the purpose of which is to arrive at an explicit understanding of some linguistic properties of the target language’. Very straightforward examples of this task are found in ‘Grammar Questions’ in *New Headway English Course* (Extract 1). In order to build an explicit understanding of the targeted rule, this task has a relatively ‘direct’ link to the grammar points. The task provides metalanguage (e.g. *tenses, reported speech*), and it is highly likely that learners will use metalanguage for describing the rule. In other words, learners realize that they are truly absorbed in ‘grammar’ tasks.

Read the sentences and answer the questions.

‘I’m with my husband,’ she said.
She said (that) she was with her husband.
‘I was …

What is the basic rule about the use of tenses in reported speech?
What is the difference in the way ‘say’ and ‘tell’ are used?

‘Are you on your own?’ he asked.
He asked if I was on my own.
‘How do you …

What differences are there between direct questions and indirect questions?
When is *if* used?

*Extract 1: New Headway Student’s Book, p. 117*

Interpretation tasks

Among C-R tasks, those that particularly emphasize an aspect of interpretation are called interpretation tasks. Ellis (1997: 152–3) proposes three goals of such tasks: to help learners identify a form-function mapping; to enhance input in order that learners are induced to notice a target structure; and to compare similar items. One clear example of interpretation tasks is found in *Clockwise* (Extract 2) which, like many interpretation tasks, uses pictures to present meaningful contrasts. Additionally, in contrast to grammar consciousness-raising tasks, because the task focus here is on matching meaning to form, formulating explicit knowledge about the target grammar is not required. Accordingly, metalanguage is minimal or non-existent.
Match the pictures to sentences 1 to 4.

1 I told them that Jane was in France.
2 I told them that Jane had been to France.
3 I said she was going to have a baby.
4 I said she had a baby.

Extract 2: Clockwise Classbook, p. 78

Focused communication tasks

Focused communication tasks share a common feature with the previous tasks in terms of drawing learners’ attention to problematic linguistic forms, but differ significantly from them in that this attention is elicited during on-going communication (Nobuyoshi and Ellis 1993). In contrast to interpretation-based tasks, focused communication tasks encourage learners to produce the target language. An example of this is ‘Mini-task’ in Cutting Edge, which is introduced at the beginning of the grammar section in every unit (Extract 3). It functions in Cutting Edge as significant preparation for the presentation of grammar by promoting ‘noticing’ of the linguistic feature.

Discuss the following questions in groups.

- Do you spend much time talking on the phone?
- Have you ever spoken in English on the phone? Did you have any problems?

Think of a phone conversation you have had in which there was a problem or misunderstanding. What did you say to each other? What happened in the end?

Extract 3: Cutting Edge Student’s Book, p. 102

Grammar exercises

Whereas the three C-R tasks above typically introduce the target grammar item, practising tasks focus on the consolidation of learnt grammatical knowledge. Ur (1988: 7) suggests three types of grammar practice: mechanical practice, meaningful practice, and communicative practice. In our study, the first two types (mechanical and meaningful practice) are defined as grammar exercises, which are familiar to many traditional language classrooms. They are controlled and characterized by rather ‘emotionless’ effort, such as gap filling, matching, completion, and rewriting as below.

Rewrite these sentences in reported speech.

1 ‘I’m going to call him this afternoon,’ she said.
2 ‘I’ll write to you next week,’ he said.
3 ‘He rang me from the airport yesterday,’ she said.

Extract 4: Reward Student’s Book, p. 55

Grammar practice activities

In Ur’s classification, ‘grammar practice activities’ are of the third, communicative, type. Hence, they are frequently established to create interaction and develop fluent use of form. Extract 5 provides an example designed to encourage communicative practice.
Write to somebody in your class.

a Take three pieces of paper and write the name of a different student in your class at the top of each sheet. On each piece of paper write a different question to each person.

b Give your questions to each of the three students, who should write a reply and return the sheet to you.

c Tell another person about each of the questions you asked and the replies you received.

Example:
'I asked Carmen what she was doing tonight and she told me that she was washing her hair.'

Extract 5: Matters Student’s Book, p. 120

Trends observed

Presentation-Practice approach

In the overall structure of the grammar section, every coursebook examined basically follows a Presentation-Practice approach to grammar teaching (where Practice extends from controlled to freer practice or production). Thus learners are given opportunities to examine and then apply the target grammar rules. For example, True to Life usually starts with non-grammar tasks, where learners are exposed to the target structure(s); subsequent tasks require learners’ induction of the rule(s) with reference to the previous non-grammar task; finally there are traditional practice tasks. Thus the presentation of grammar is inductive, but the overall structure of the grammar section is deductive in its progression from presentation to practice. Appendix 1 outlines the typical nature and sequence of tasks in several coursebooks.

Inductive presentation

Both inductive and deductive approaches to grammar presentation are identified in the materials (Table 2). Inductive approaches are characterized by developing an understanding of the target grammar through manipulating tasks, while deductive approaches are realized through grammar explanation (see Appendix 2). Although both approaches are found among the analysed materials, the results show a marked preference for inductive presentation. This is consistent with the recent increase in inductive activities attributed partly to the influence of C-R (e.g. Fortune 1998: 68–9), but in contrast to Ellis’s analysis of grammar teaching materials where direct (deductive) presentation was prevalent (2002: 160).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Presentation stage</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>New Headway</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clockwise</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Landmark</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inside Out</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reward</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Matters</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cutting Edge</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activate</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>True to Life</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 2**
Types of presentation
Table 3 shows the distribution of task types employed in the Presentation and Practice stages. This analysis used a framework of criterial features (e.g., task focus, use of metalanguage, nature of interaction) to be elaborated elsewhere.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Presentation</th>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>GCR IT FCT GEx GPA O</td>
<td>GCR IT FCT GEx GPA O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Headway</td>
<td>9 8</td>
<td>2 6 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clockwise</td>
<td>3 4 1</td>
<td>6 1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landmark</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inside Out</td>
<td>4 5</td>
<td>1 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward</td>
<td>4 12 1</td>
<td>4 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matters</td>
<td>15 2 1 3</td>
<td>1 5 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cutting Edge</td>
<td>3 5 2</td>
<td>6 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activate</td>
<td>5 2 1 2</td>
<td>4 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True to Life</td>
<td>5 2 1 3</td>
<td>7 1 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (n=176)</td>
<td>26 4 2 4 4</td>
<td>7 0 0 47 30 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of all tasks</td>
<td>27 15 3 3</td>
<td>4 0 0 27 17 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key:** GCR—Grammar consciousness-raising tasks; IT—Interpretation tasks; FCT—Focused communication tasks; GEx—Grammar exercises; GPA—Grammar practice activities; O—Other tasks (e.g., Unfocused communication tasks).

As Table 3 significantly suggests, both C-R and practice are employed in most materials. Only focused communication tasks (FCT) do not recurrently appear. Closer examination reveals that grammar consciousness-raising tasks (GCR) and interpretation tasks (IT) are frequently used in the presentation stage, with grammar exercises (GEx) and grammar practice activities (GPA) in the practice stage. This suggests that the relationships between stages and interpretation-vs.-production steps are worth analysing.

### Interpretation and production

In our analysis, a production-step does not mean that the learners simply produce language, but rather that they *create* in the language. Thus Yes/No responses and repetitions are classed as interpretation. So too are very limited responses to demonstrate interpretation, as in Extract 6.

Look at these two sentences and answer the questions.

1. Kathy and Tom had an e-mail relationship for six months.
2. Joel and Lisa have been together for one year.
   a. Do Kathy and Tom still communicate by e-mail?
   b. Are Joel and Lisa still together?
   c. Which tenses are the two sentences in?

   **Extract 6:** *Inside Out Student’s Book, p. 25*

   In contrast, Extract 7 illustrates a production-step.

   Work in a group of four or six. Ask each about the first time you did things. Use this list and add more activities. When did you first:

   drive a car? fall in love? have a cigarette? …
Examples

When I was 12. Ten years ago. I’ve never . . .

Write a list about your group’s activities.

*Extract 7: Activate Your English Coursebook, p. 16*

The results of this analysis are shown on Table 4, which suggests that overall two thirds of presentation steps require interpretation, and two thirds of practice steps require production.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Presentation</th>
<th>Production</th>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Production</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Headway</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clockwise</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landmark</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inside Out</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matters</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cutting Edge</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True to Life</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (n=187)*</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of all steps**</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Some tasks include more than one step, so there are more steps (187) than tasks (176).

**Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

In integrating these points, a typical procedure of the materials examined shifts from interpretation-based C-R tasks to production-based practising tasks, with a view to lessening the learners’ burden. In this context, it is conceivable that, against the usual assumption of materials writers, one reason for the infrequent use of focused communication tasks lies in its being a production-based step in the early presentation part of the unit.

**Consciousness-raising or practice?**

Having analysed the trends in grammar tasks in the nine coursebooks, we now return to the original *ELT Journal* discussion between Ellis (1993) and Hopkins and Nettle (1994). While recent SLA research continues to provide arguments against the efficacy of practising tasks, the evidence from our analysis suggests that they still occupy an essential place in general ELT materials. Differences in the treatment of grammar across the coursebooks are characterized in Appendix 1, but the similarities are striking: Each coursebook provides a practice stage after presentation; moreover, many suggest using workbooks for further practice. Ellis’s (2002: 160) analysis of grammar teaching books suggests that they too are characterized by explicit presentation followed by controlled practice exercises. Judging from these elements, practising tasks still dominate grammar teaching. Hopkins and Nettle suggest that it is ‘the practical necessities of classroom teaching, [such as learner expectations], which sometimes prevent teachers from following the demands of theorists’ (1994: 158).
Notwithstanding the continued emphasis on practice, our findings have revealed that contemporary coursebooks usually juxtapose C-R tasks with practising tasks. Rather than exclusively selecting one approach, material writers tactfully design grammar syllabuses building on both C-R and practice. Accordingly, although researchers insist on the effectiveness of C-R rather than practice in theory—and rationally their arguments are convincing—ELT practitioners may not be prepared to abandon the familiar, tried and true ‘practice’ exercises. This tension is well recognized by those writing about methodology. For example, Thornbury, under the heading A Compromise? suggests ways of ‘slotting noticing activities into the practice stage of the traditional presentation-practice model of instruction’ (2001: 79), but it is clearly not his preferred approach. Similarly, Hedge observes that ‘practice can contribute to implicit grammatical knowledge by providing frequent occurrence of a particular form for students to notice’ (2000: 167). Such arguments, combined with our evidence, add support to Hopkins and Nettle’s point that ‘teachers are linking consciousness-raising and practice, often within the same lesson’ (1994: 158). One issue this raises is whether this hybrid is more effective than either of the two approaches used more consistently.

To fully respond to questions of whether teachers were already using C-R approaches would require an examination of earlier coursebooks and classroom data, which were beyond the scope of our study. What we have found, however, is that a C-R approach seems to be reflected in many contemporary coursebooks (Table 3), particularly in terms of grammar consciousness-raising tasks (the most popular of all task types, employed by eight of the nine coursebooks), but also in terms of interpretation tasks (employed to a lesser extent and by only six of the nine coursebooks). The lesser use of focused communication tasks can, we suggest, be explained by perceived difficulties of integrating tasks which require ‘presentation through production’ into a traditional paradigm that progresses essentially from ‘presentation through interpretation’ to ‘practice through production’. Thus, while Hopkins and Nettle’s claim is supported by our study to the extent that there are some C-R tasks in the coursebooks, our analysis suggests materials that have not radically shifted to a full C-R approach to learning grammar.

Conclusions and implications for teachers

Inspired by the discussion between researchers and teachers, the main purpose of this paper was to investigate the occurrence of C-R and practice form-focused tasks in current ELT coursebooks. Our study is naturally limited by the selection of a small number of British intermediate level coursebooks, and it is important to stress here that we are making no claims about the relative quality of the coursebooks. Rather, our aim is to highlight differences in the nature of form-focused tasks. These differences have been illustrated with reference to reported speech, and presented in a descriptive and quantitative manner. Further analysis would be needed to make comparisons of features such as task length or task involvement, or indeed task effectiveness. Further research would also be needed to investigate differences that emerge in relation to a wider range of grammar points. It appears that most coursebook
writers have a framework of task types that remains relatively constant irrespective of the grammar point—a notable exception being Matters—but further detailed analysis would be needed to support this, or indeed to evaluate its appropriacy.

Despite such limitations, we believe that our paper serves to raise awareness of differences among task types and their distribution in coursebooks. It should be easy for readers to find further examples in coursebooks they currently use, as well as the analysed ones, to expand such understandings. There are related implications for materials evaluation, adaptation, and selection. Appendix 1, for instance, might be useful in matching the learning styles in a group to the typical nature and sequence of tasks.

Moreover, our paper shows the bias of different coursebooks in a way that is potentially useful for teaching. It allows teachers to identify gaps, and consider whether to include additional task types. For instance, teachers might wish to experiment with more focused communication tasks. It also allows ELT professionals to compare ‘what works’ with particular groups of learners, perhaps as an action research project, or simply as part of ongoing teaching. A comparison of the effectiveness of tasks in Reward and Inside Out would provide insights into the effectiveness of an inductive (task-based) versus deductive (explanation-based) presentation of grammar (Table 2). Alternatively, a comparison of Landmark and New Headway English Course could raise awareness of the effectiveness of interpretation tasks in that the former uses no interpretation tasks, whereas the latter uses them regularly (Table 3). Indeed, we would welcome feedback from ELT professionals making such comparisons.

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References


Appendix 1

Nature and sequence of form-focused tasks in coursebooks

*New Headway English Course* starts with noticing-driven tasks (‘Test your grammar’), induces learners to explicitly understand the target rule (‘Presentation’), and then moves to practising stage(s).

In *Landmark*, the central grammar sections are ‘Exploring concepts’ and ‘Exploitation’. Simply, learners are invited to discover target grammar rules in the former section, and to practise them in the latter. Usually freer production follows controlled practice in ‘Exploitation’.

The grammar learning section in *Inside Out* (‘Close up’) always follows a three-stage approach: ‘language analysis’, ‘practice’, and ‘personalization’. This structure is analogous to the PPP model, but as the authors (pp. 3–4 in the Teacher’s Book) point out, the personalization is not simply a conventional free practice.

In *Reward*, a grammar explanation box is always presented before the practice stage. However, before the grammar section, learners are sometimes exposed to the target structure (input-flooding), and/or provided with tasks identifying target items (e.g. ‘underline present perfect’) in reading or listening tasks. Thus *Reward* sometimes adopts an ‘exposure-presentation-practice’ structure.

*Cutting Edge* grammar sections start with a ‘Mini-task’ which not only provides opportunities to notice target grammar use, but also allows ‘the teacher to monitor students’ existing knowledge and the errors they make’ (p. 5 in the Teacher’s Book). Then ‘Language Awareness Activities’ focus on the meaning and use of the target structure, followed by ‘Analysis’, which elicits explicit rules that can be checked in the ‘Language Summary’ at the end of the book.

Appendix 2

Examples of inductive and deductive presentation

1 Underline the verbs in these conditional sentences.
   a The neighbours would complain if we didn’t invite them.
   b The police would laugh if someone complained about a party.
   c ...

2 Answer these questions about sentences 1a–e. a In 1a do you think the speaker will invite the neighbours? b In 1b do you think many people call to complain about parties? c In 1c …
a Look at the sentences again. Which refer to
1 an improbable future event or situation?
2 an impossible present situation?

b Sentences 1a–e include the second conditional. How is it formed?

(From Landmark Student’s Book, p. 87)

**Deductive presentation**

**Second conditional**

You use the second conditional to talk about an imaginary or unlikely situation in the present or future and to describe its result. You talk about the imaginary or unlikely situation with if + past simple. You describe the result with would or wouldn’t.

*If I left my fiancée, she would be very upset.*
*If they got married, it wouldn’t last long.*

...  

**Giving advice**

You can use the following expressions to give advice.

*If I were you, I wouldn’t let it spoil the relationship.*
*I think you should/ought to talk about your feelings.*

...

Write sentences saying what you would do if:
a friend lied to you
you fell out with a friend

...

(From Reward Student’s Book, p. 87)