

Teaching a standard-based communicative English textbook series to secondary school students in Egypt: Investigating teachers' practices and beliefs

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ABSTRACT: Since any standards-based reform is made to bring about an improvement in students' learning, it requires changes in teachers' practices as well. This study examined how a standards-based communicative curricular reform in general secondary school English in Egypt has changed teachers' classroom practices, and the factors influencing such practices. The study depended on data triangulation through administering a questionnaire to 263 teachers, and using classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with 33 teachers. The results indicate that the standards-based curricular reform has not brought about the desired changes in teachers' practices. Teachers were found to allocate much more instructional time and effort to grammar and vocabulary than to the other language skill components. This means that the standards-based communicative textbook series is taught non-communicatively. The interviews and questionnaire showed that five factors influenced teachers' practices: washback, culture of teaching, inadequate time, students' low English level, and lack of equipment and materials. Of all these factors, washback was the most influential. The study suggests that for this standards-based communicative curricular reform to serve as a catalyst for changes in instruction, there has to be another parallel reform in the students' examination system. Additionally, other teacher-related and contextual problems should be addressed.

KEYWORDS: Instructional practices, standards-based curriculum, curriculum reform, washback, teachers' beliefs, pedagogical knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

Due to changing conceptualisations of teachers' roles, language teacher research has recently increased qualitatively and quantitatively. According to Freeman (2002), the 1970s saw a turning point in how research conceptualised language teachers' roles, while the 1980s was a decade which witnessed the emergence of some currently taken-for-granted concepts such as teaching as decision-making, the role of beliefs and assumptions in teaching, and pedagogical content knowledge. In the last two decades, research has deepened the understanding of the way teacher education was reconceptualised in the 1980s. Mainstream language teacher research has explored various issues such as how teachers conceptualise the teaching process (for example, Golombek, 1998; Tsui, 2003), what knowledge and beliefs they have about teaching and learning (for example, Gatbonton, 1999; Peacock, 2001), and how such knowledge and beliefs inform their general teaching practices (for example, Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2004).

An area that has not been given due attention yet in language teacher research is how teachers' work is influenced by standards-based reforms. Standards are believed to result in an improvement in students' language learning by defining what is to be

taught and what expected learning outcomes are (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). The rationale for adopting a standards-based reform in language education is articulating student performance expectations and making learning objectives easier to measure (Menken, 2001). Though a standards-based reform serves as a catalyst for changes in language curriculum, instruction and assessment (Echevarria, Powers & Short, 2006), it is argued that the likelihood of standards to influence instructional practices is overshadowed by a potentially high emphasis on high-stakes testing (Menken, 2001, 2008). Empirically, Menken (2006) found that focusing on test content and strategies has become a *de facto* language policy at US schools despite the efforts made to ensure language learners' attainment of the standards. The question yet to be answered is how teachers respond to standards-based reforms in other worldwide language education contexts. Attempting to answer this question, the present study investigated how using a standards-based communicative English textbook series in Egyptian general secondary schools has influenced teachers' practices and beliefs. Before presenting the study, the next section provides a brief description of the standards movement in Egypt, and of this standards-based textbook series.

STANDARDS-BASED CURRICULAR REFORM OF GENERAL SECONDARY SCHOOL ENGLISH IN EGYPT

The standards movement in Egypt is still in its infancy. It was only at the end of 2002 that the Ministry of Education made a serious attempt at developing standards for education in Egypt. Stimulated by the continuous calls made by the Egyptian government for developing education, the Ministry of Education organised the National Standards of Education Project, which lasted from October 2002 to August 2003. The output of this project was a 3-volume document for educational standards in five areas, one of which was curriculum content and learning outcomes (Ministry of Education Standards Document, 2003). This document was further extended in 2006. A parallel step for fostering the standards movement in Egypt was taken in 2007 by establishing the National Authority for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Education (NAQAAE), which aims at assuring the quality and continuous improvement of Egyptian educational institutions, and of developing a set of standards for all educational areas. With this increasing emphasis on standards, English language textbooks used at Egyptian schools have been reconstructed. The first attempt in this regard was developing a standards-based textbook for primary one pupils (El-Naggar, 2004).

As for the general secondary stage, a new textbook series (*Hello! English for Secondary Schools: Year One, Year Two, and Year Three*) has been introduced since the academic year 2008-2009. The *Hello!* textbook series currently taught to secondary stage students in Egypt uses a standards-based communicative approach and methodology for teaching and learning English. The series aims at fulfilling the standards set out in the 2003 Egyptian Ministry of Education Standards Document, which focuses on communication as a main domain for teaching English as a foreign language. According to the document, "students must use English for social purposes. They need to socialize with peers and teachers, and use English for their enjoyment...The focus of language instruction is on functional, communicative English and all the four language skills are emphasised" (Vol. 2, p. 145).

The document includes several standards emphasising communicative language teaching. For example: learners use English to interact inside the classroom; learners share and elicit personal information from others; learners express facts, opinions and emotions in English; learners work cooperatively with peers to achieve goals and help others in the process of learning. Likewise, the introduction to the *Teacher's Guide of the Hello! English for Secondary Schools* textbook series (Gomm, & Thompson, 2008) draws teachers' attention to the importance of implementing classroom communicative activities and using different strategies for delivering the standards-based curriculum:

Student-to-student interaction in class is necessary. Students need to speak and work together cooperatively when asked, they need to help each other when directed, and they need to develop a sense of independence and responsibility for their own learning. Therefore, they will need to be able to work together in pairs, as well as in groups, and work on their own or as a whole class...Rote learning as a framework for linguistic progress becomes ineffective because it is insufficient to help students to achieve those wider educational standards. When teachers apply standards-based curricula, language learning is more purposeful and practical than in most other forms of curricula. (pp. 1-2)

Each of the three textbooks in the series includes 18 units, arranged into groups of three, with a Review Unit at the end of each group. This makes a total of 24 units, 12 of which are to be covered in the first term and 12 in the second term. Each main unit in the Student's Book has five lessons (Listening, Language Focus, Reading, Critical Thinking, and Communication), and each main unit is complemented by a four-page unit in the Workbook. The Student's Book includes a mixture of listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and dictionary use activities, while the Workbook aims at reinforcing the linguistic and grammatical structures students have already met, and providing them with extra practice in reading, writing and manipulating known language¹.

Despite this standards-based curricular reform, a parallel reform has not been made to the examination system of general secondary school English in Egypt. The written exams students sit for in each of the three years of this stage mainly test their abilities in grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, pragmatics, paragraph or letter writing and translation. These exams completely neglect testing students' listening and speaking abilities.

It is worth mentioning that despite the importance of investigating how such standards-based curricular reform influences teachers' instructional practices, no attention has been paid yet to exploring this research issue. English language teacher research in Egypt is generally of an experimental or interventionist nature, that is, focusing on investigating the effect of some interventional techniques on developing teachers' linguistic or pedagogical skills (for example, Badawi, 2009; El-Dib, 2007). Additionally, the very few local studies of English language teachers' performance (Ismail, 2010) or pedagogical knowledge (Abdelhafez, 2010) neglected to address how teachers implement standards-based curricular reform. The present study, therefore, is an attempt to address this research gap.

¹ Examples of the Student's Book and Workbook activities and lessons are given on <http://www.longmansec.com.eg/>

THE PRESENT STUDY

Given the above-mentioned inconsistency between the standards-based curriculum reform and the examination system for general secondary school English in Egypt, the present study sought to explore how teachers instruct students using this standards-based textbook series, and the factors impacting on their practices. Specifically, the study dealt with the following two research questions: 1. how much instructional effort and time do general secondary school teachers of English in Egypt allocate to the standards-based *Hello!* textbook lessons and activities, and language skill components? and 2. what are the factors influencing the instructional effort and time allocated to textbook lessons and activities, and language skill components?

This study is important for two reasons. First, it can show how language teachers respond to a standards-based curricular reform not aligned with the school examination system. Second, by investigating teachers' classroom practices and beliefs in a standards-based curricular reform setting, the study addresses the previously mentioned gap in both local and international research contexts. Language teaching can, this study suggests, be enriched by research which aims at understanding what influences teachers' instructional practices (Freeman & Richards, 1996).

Participants

A sample of secondary school female and male teachers of English in Egypt took part in the study. They were all working in Greater Cairo general secondary schools at the time of data collection. All of the participants agreed to take part in the study on a voluntary basis, and institutional consent was obtained prior to collecting the data from them. Two hundred and sixty-three teachers from 22 schools responded to the questionnaire, while 24 teachers were observed in their classrooms and interviewed. Additionally, 9 other teachers were interviewed but not observed, bringing the total number of interviewed teachers to 33. The interviewed and observed teachers were selected from 6 schools. All of the teachers were Egyptian native-Arabic speakers. The interviewed teachers had varied teaching experience, ranging from 10 to 30 years. As for their first, higher education qualifications, they had a B.A degree in either English language teaching or English literature and linguistics. Most of the interviewees were teaching the three parts of the textbook series (that is, Year One, Year Two and Year Three), while a few of them were teaching two parts only.

Data collection methods and sources

To obtain comprehensive profiles of teachers' practices and beliefs, the study combined quantitative and qualitative data, using classroom observations, semi-structured interviews and a teacher questionnaire.

Classroom observation.

Classroom observation was mainly used to examine how teachers dealt with the various lessons and activities in the textbook series, and how much time was allocated to teaching language skill components. The study used naturalistic observation, in which "the researcher makes no effort whatsoever to manipulate the variables or to control the activities of individuals, but simply observes and records what happens as things naturally occur" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003, p. 451). Audi-recording of the

observed classes was preferred to video-recording, to which many teachers would be resistant, and which was more likely to change their classroom behaviours. The notes taken by the researcher while observing each class helped him to overcome the problems encountered in identifying the units of data analysis.

Semi-structured interviews.

The study used semi-structured interviews to supplement the data obtained from classroom observation and the teacher questionnaire. While observation and questionnaire data reveals the how of the teaching process, interviews show the why of it more deeply. The semi-structured interview in particular was used as it can reveal the different aspects of the research phenomenon by allowing researchers to ask participants follow-up questions depending on their responses. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1998), semi-structured interviews help researchers get the participants to “freely express their thoughts around particular topics” (p. 3). The structured questions used in the interviews mainly addressed teachers’ views on the textbook series and on the types of activities it included, how they taught lessons in the textbook’s main units, the problems they encountered in teaching each lesson or activity type, and what they focused on more or less in their teaching (see these questions in appendix 1).

Teacher questionnaire.

A two-page, three-part teacher questionnaire was used to access a larger number of teachers and to explore their perceptions of the textbook lessons and activities and their classroom practices (see appendix 2). The first part of the teacher questionnaire asked teachers to rate the main textbook unit lessons in terms of their teaching importance to students; the second part asked them to rate the frequency with which they engaged in different types of textbook activities; and the third part required them to identify the problem(s) related to teaching specific textbook activities. The three parts of the questionnaire were developed after observing and interviewing more than half of the 24 teachers and reaching an initial identification of their classroom practices. Thus, the questionnaire was used to see how generalisable these practices are.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected for three months during the first term of the 2011-2012 academic year. The observation and interview data were collected in the first two months of the data collection period, while the teacher questionnaire was distributed to the teachers during the second and third months. The data collection procedures began with observing and interviewing 24 teachers. Each teacher was observed in two classes, and then was interviewed. The researcher interviewed 9 other teachers who did not wish to be observed in their classes. Due to the multiple observation and interview sessions, the researcher had to visit each school for several days. To avoid biasing instructional practices, the teachers were asked to teach the lessons as normally arranged and not to exceptionally select particular lessons for the observed classes. Each observed class lasted for 45 or 40 minutes depending on the timetables in the 6 schools. Of the 48 classes observed, 17 classes were taught to first-year students, 20 classes were taught to second-year students, and 11 classes were taught to third-year students. In total, the time of the 48 observed classes was 34 hours and 20 minutes. While observing the classes, the researcher took field notes of the units, lessons, and activities taught, as well as teachers’ main instructional behaviours. These notes

helped the researcher analyse the audio-recorded data accurately while listening to it at a later stage, and to ask the teachers about some observed behaviours. Following classroom observation, each teacher was interviewed in Arabic for 25-30 minutes on average.

The data analysis stage started by counting the raw and percentage frequencies of teachers' responses to questionnaire items. Following this, the interviews were translated from Arabic into English, transcribed and analysed. The researcher listened to each recorded interview several times and compared it against what had been transcribed to make sure the transcribed data were accurate. The interviews were analysed using the grounded analysis approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). First, the interview protocols were read several times to identify the emerging themes or categories. These emerging themes were subjected to further cycles of analysis so that tentative interview analysis findings could be "substantiated, revised, and reconfigured" (Merriam, 1998, p. 181). The analysis of the observation data focused on identifying the instructional time distribution by calculating the time allocated to teaching the language skill components (that is, reading, listening, speaking, grammar, vocabulary, writing, translation, and pronunciation) in seconds. The instructional time devoted to a language skill component was defined as the time during which a teacher-led classroom activity focused solely on the component and involved teacher talk/behaviour (for example, explaining a grammatical rule, providing oral feedback, writing on the board), and/or student talk/behaviour (for example, answering teacher questions, doing textbook activities, reading silently). The instructional time distribution was analysed by listening to each audio-recorded class several times along with examining the notes taken and the textbook materials used during the class. Time allocated to classroom management was excluded from the analysis.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The results of the data analysis are presented in the following two subsections in light of the two research questions of the study.

Instructional effort and time allocated to textbook lessons and activities, and language skill components

The study depended on the first two parts in the teacher questionnaire and on the observation data to identify the effort and time the teachers allocated to the lessons and activities in the textbook series, and to language skill components. Figures 1 and 2 show how the teachers responding to the questionnaire (n = 263) rated the importance of teaching each main unit lesson to their students, and the reported frequencies of teaching the types of textbook activities, respectively. Figure 1 indicates that the importance of the five lessons (Listening, Language Focus, Reading, Critical Thinking, and Communication) in each main unit as perceived by the teachers varied considerably. The horizontal axis in the figure shows the lessons in each main unit, and the vertical axis refers to the percentages of the teachers' ratings of the teaching importance of each lesson.

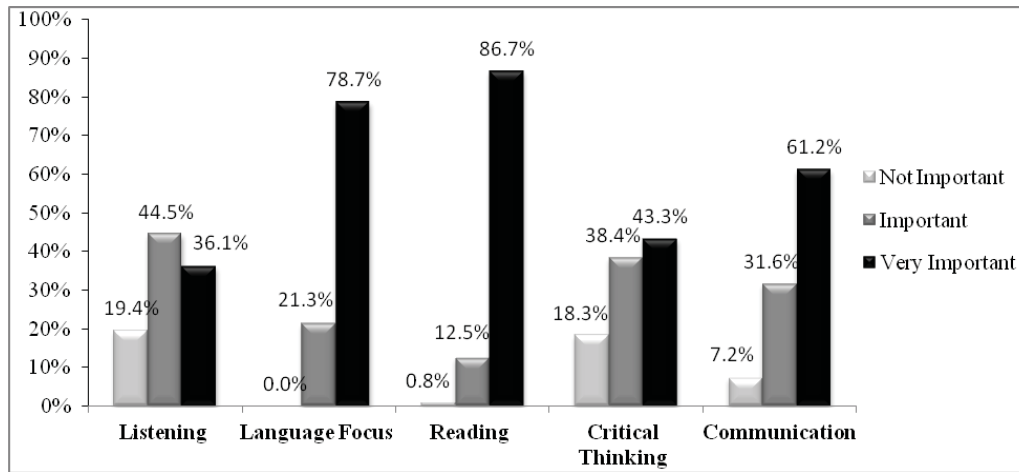


Figure 1. Teachers' ratings of the importance of teaching each main unit's separate lessons to students

As the figure shows, the teachers viewed Reading and Language Focus (the grammatical content of the unit) as the two most important lessons, and rated Listening and Critical Thinking (a lesson encouraging students to think about the topic and express their ideas) as the two least important lessons. The Communication lesson, which included speaking and writing activities, was viewed as moderately important. Given that the importance teachers assigned to each lesson reflects their attitudes to teaching it, the data in figure 1 suggest that that they paid much more attention to Reading and Language Focus lessons than to Listening, Critical Thinking, and Communication lessons.

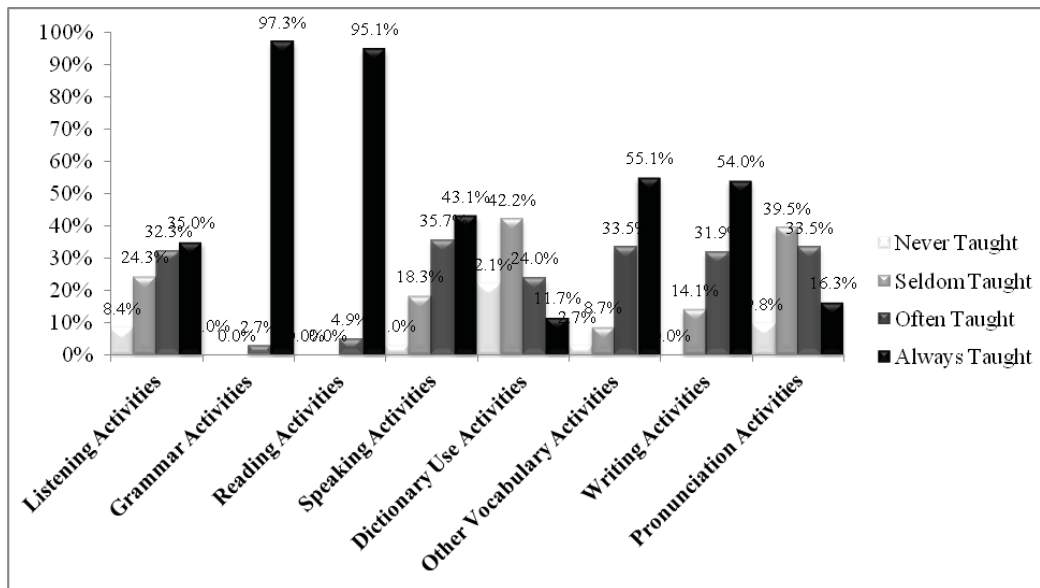


Figure 2. Reported frequencies of teaching the various language activities in the textbook series

Teachers' responses to the second part of the questionnaire related to frequencies of teaching the types of textbook activities, and provide evidence supporting the above

conclusion. The horizontal axis in figure 2 shows the types of activities in the textbook series, and the vertical axis refers to percentages of the reported frequencies of teaching these activities. As shown in figure 2, the types of textbook activities can be arranged from the most to the least frequently taught as follows: grammar, reading, vocabulary, writing, speaking, listening, pronunciation and dictionary use. Specifically, the figure indicates that grammar and reading activities were given much more instructional attention than all other activity types, and that teachers pay roughly equal attention to teaching vocabulary and writing activities, on which they focus more than speaking and listening activities. On the other hand, teachers' reported practices suggest that most of them neglected dictionary use and pronunciation activities. It is worth noting that dictionary use activities differ from the other vocabulary activities included in the textbook series in that they are mainly language learning strategies.

Teachers' responses to the second part of the questionnaire were almost consistent with the way they rated the importance of each main unit lessons. The only slight difference in teachers' responses to the two parts was rating Reading lessons as more important than Language Focus or grammar lessons in the first part, while reporting teaching grammar activities more frequently than reading activities in the second part. This slight difference may be ascribed to the inclusion of vocabulary instruction in Reading lessons. A more accurate and realistic picture of the effort allocated to the various language skill knowledge components was revealed by analysing the observation data. Table 1 provides the results of analysing the instructional time distribution in the 48 audio-recorded classes.

Language skill component	% Time allocated to skill	Language skill component	% Time allocated to skill
Grammar	44.42 %	Speaking	3.41 %
Vocabulary	25.66 %	Writing	1.47 %
Reading	12.15 %	Pronunciation	1.25 %
Listening	7.32 %	Dictionary use	0.62 %
Translation	3.70 %		

Table 1. Percentages of the instructional time allocated to language skill components in observed classes

Though the general trends in the above observation data are in line with the reported practices in the teacher questionnaire, table 1 indicates that teachers' actual classroom practices far exceeded expectations. Social desirability bias, that is, the tendency of participants to respond to the questionnaire in a way that may be viewed favourably by others, may have caused some teachers to exaggerate in reporting the effort allocated to some textbook activities. As can be noted in the table, 82.23% of classroom instructional time was allocated to grammar, vocabulary and reading only, while 17.77% of it was devoted to the other language skill components.

Grammar and vocabulary were allocated more than two thirds of the instructional time (70.08%). In the observed classes, teachers were found to frequently focus on grammar and/or vocabulary regardless of the lesson type. The strategies they adopted for this purpose included: a) putting the textbook inductive grammar activities aside and spending most class time explaining grammatical rules deductively using the

board; b) focusing solely on grammar and vocabulary in the warm-up stage; c) transforming Reading lessons into vocabulary lessons; d) transforming Listening and Critical Thinking lessons into grammar and/or vocabulary lessons; e) teaching Reading and Listening lessons in a normal way but frequently switching to check the students' grammar and vocabulary knowledge, or to explain a grammatical rule or the meaning of new words and their derivatives, synonyms and antonyms. Some of these strategies may explain why teachers reported focusing more on textbook reading activities than on vocabulary ones in the questionnaire. In other words, they transformed Reading lessons into vocabulary lessons, on the one hand, and taught vocabulary more often by using the board and questioning strategies rather than using textbook vocabulary activities.

The observation data also show that the teachers paid little attention to listening (7.32%) and speaking (3.41%). It was noted that the teachers and students made an extensive use of Arabic (their L1) during the few listening and speaking activities taught; thus these were not pure English communication activities. On the other hand, the teachers were more interested in teaching translation (3.70%) than writing (1.47%). The students performed no single paragraph or letter writing task in the 48 classroom observed. Rather, this short instructional time was allocated to getting students to perform other writing tasks such as making notes or filling in application forms. Pronunciation and dictionary use activities were neglected in the majority of the 48 observed classes. Only 4 pronunciation and 2 dictionary use activities were taught in these classes.

Given the questionnaire data suggesting that the teachers did not pay equal attention to the various textbook lessons and activities, along with the observation data proving that classroom instructional practices focused mainly on grammar and vocabulary, it can be concluded that the standards-based communicative textbook series currently used at Egyptian general secondary schools is not taught communicatively. Despite the curricular reform introduced, the grammar-translation method still largely dominates English classes at these schools. Thus, the curricular reform has failed to bring about any concrete changes in teachers' classroom practices. The next section provides detailed descriptions of the factors leading to this failure.

The factors influencing classroom instructional practices

To identify the factors influencing the instructional effort and time allocated to textbook lessons and activities, and language skill components, the study depended on the third part of the questionnaire and the interview data, and partly on the notes taken during classroom observation. As has been mentioned above, the teacher questionnaire was developed after initially identifying, through classroom observation, the main textbook activities neglected. Speaking, listening, writing and dictionary-use activities were the four main activity types identified at this stage. Table 2 shows the problems associated with teaching these activities as perceived by the teachers. While responding to this part of the questionnaire, the teachers were asked to tick one or more problems they encountered in teaching each activity type, or skip ticking the boxes if they did not have any of them.

As can be noted in the table, some factors are more associated with teaching one activity type than the other. For example, inadequate time hindered teaching writing

and dictionary-use activities more than speaking and listening activities. Lack of equipment (for example, CD player) and learning materials (audio materials, dictionaries) was a major obstacle to teaching listening and dictionary-use activities. This problem also applied to pronunciation activities involving listening to audio-recorded materials. The teachers also viewed students' low English levels as inhibiting them from implementing speaking, writing and listening activities in particular, but most of them thought that teaching speaking, writing and dictionary-use activities was not much influenced by prioritising students' learning needs, that is, the needs teachers thought students had in regards to testing. Besides, in their attempts to teach writing, speaking and dictionary-use activities, they encountered student resistance to taking part in such activities. Lack of time was the problem with the highest frequency in teachers' total responses ($n = 410$), while students' needs was the one with the lowest frequency ($n = 157$). Student resistance, their low English levels, and material/equipment needed had roughly similar frequencies ($n = 369$, 334 and 344 respectively).

	Inadequate Time	Material/ Equipment Needed	Students' Low Level	Students' Needs	Students' Resistance
Speaking Activities	94	28	122	24	127
Listening Activities	45	204	75	59	14
Writing Activities	148	15	88	33	136
Dictionary Use Activities	123	97	49	41	92
Total responses	410	344	334	157	369

Table 2. Teachers' identification of the factors hindering teaching textbook activity types

On the other hand, analysis of the interview protocols and the notes taken during classroom observation provided a detailed description of five main factors and problems, including the above ones, influencing the instructional effort and time allocated to the types of textbook activities and language skill components. These factors and problems were: washback, culture of teaching, inadequate time, students' low English levels, and material/equipment needed.

Washback.

Washback refers to the influence of testing on teaching and learning. Since many teachers were not expected to fully understand what "washback" is, the term was neither used in the questionnaire nor in the interviews. Instead, the role of washback was identified through the interview questions and the questionnaire's third part, that asked teachers to describe what accounted for their classroom practices. In the questionnaire data, prioritising students' learning needs, and students' resistance were two aspects of washback. Though the questionnaire data suggests that these two washback aspects influenced teaching textbook lessons and activities less than or in a similar way to the other factors (that is, inadequate time, lack of equipment and materials, and students' low level), the interviews indicated that washback played the most influential role in teachers' instructional practices. This difference may be attributed to the way some teachers understood the phrases of the questionnaire,

and/or to their social desirability. All of the teachers interviewed confirmed that the exam paper specifications drove them to focus on some language areas and neglect others. The following two exemplary interview excerpts summarise teachers' reasons for adopting washback strategies:

Teacher 16: There is a wide gap between the exam paper specifications and the content of the syllabus. I only focus on the parts in which students are tested. The main concern related to teaching the *Hello!* series is how to help students answer the final year exam. That is why we direct our teaching towards that end. I skip listening and speaking activities so as not to waste my students' time. The exam doesn't include an oral section. It should include an oral section because in this case only we'll be interested in teaching communicative activities.

Teacher 25: When teaching any part of the textbook, I have to think about how it is included in the exam. This is a double-edged weapon indeed because by doing so I help students how to score higher on the exam but meanwhile I neglect teaching them communicative language skills such as listening, speaking and writing.

Interviewer: Given that you teach to the exam, what do you focus on more or think students should learn in order to score higher on the exam?

Teacher 25: Well, I have to help them learn as much vocabulary as they can because answering all exam questions, such as language functions, mini-dialogues and reading comprehension, depends on vocabulary knowledge.

What has contributed more to teachers' negligence of communicative activities is the mismatch between the Student's Book and Workbook contents. While the Student's Book includes listening, speaking and pronunciation activities, the Workbook focuses mainly on providing students with extra practice in grammar, reading and writing. "The Workbook is important because it familiarises students with exam questions and specifications," said one teacher.

Teachers' washback practices were also found to be influenced by students' resistance to taking part in activities not covered in the exam. Many teachers reported that their decisions to prioritise some language areas mainly resulted from students' continuous resistance to teaching these activities. In the following interview segments, two teachers narrate how students reacted to their attempts to teach speaking and listening, respectively:

Teacher 22: With this exam system, students are very resistant to taking part in speaking activities. The speaking activities in Critical Thinking lessons are interesting and complement Reading lessons but students are resistant to teaching them. If I ask students to discuss in pairs the points raised in Critical Thinking lessons, I won't be able to manage the class, because students respond to them by laughter. Students usually regard speaking and pronunciation activities as supplementary rather than basic ones. They care more for the exam-related activities.

Teacher 15: Students are more interested in passing the exam or scoring higher on it rather than acquiring the language. For example, when I try to teach a listening activity, they say to me, "It's not important." They do not respond to listening activities properly. Some of them interrupt me by saying "Do we have to answer an exam question similar to this activity?!"

A few teachers reported that only first-year students do not show much resistance to oral communication and dictionary use activities. Because coursework marks added to

their exam marks, first-year students were more responsive to these activities than second- and third-year students, whose total marks are given based on their performance in final-year, high-stakes exams:

Interviewer: I noted that you summarised the unit by giving the students key vocabulary and grammatical structures?

Teacher 2: Yes, that is what students need, particularly second- and third-year students. They won't be responsive if I focus on other points not related to the exam. First year students only respond actively to listening and speaking activities because they have coursework marks. If I focus on these activities in second and third year classes, I'll be regarded as an unsuccessful teacher. Due to this, I don't teach pronunciation and dictionary use activities either.

As can be noted above, what matters more for many teachers and most students is how to answer the exam questions, particularly the high-stakes exams second- and third-year students take to secure university admission. In fact, this attitude is so deeply rooted in the educational culture in Egypt that the vast majority of secondary school students cannot do without commercial exam preparation materials and private tutoring sessions available outside school settings.

Culture of teaching

The interviews revealed that teachers' instructional practices were also influenced by their conceptions of good English teaching or their teaching culture. As has been mentioned above, the teachers taking part in the present study had taught English for a long time, ranging from 10 to 30 years. Because teaching this standards-based communicative textbook series was a new experience for the majority of these teachers, it was expected that they would have attitudinal obstacles to it. These attitudinal obstacles were evident in the conceptions of the good English textbook and good English teaching most interviewed teachers had. Though many teachers generally agreed that the *Hello!* textbook series was more advanced and better than the textbooks they had previously taught, they still thought that it did not present grammar and vocabulary appropriately. The following interview excerpts exemplify the views of teachers on the series:

Teacher 1: This textbook series is far better than the ones I have taught before. It is good for students because most of its activities are student-centred. As always explained in the Teacher's Guide instructions, "students read, students answer, etc." This is indeed great for students, but as a teacher, it inhibits me from playing an active role, and from providing students with detailed grammatical rules and vocabulary. It doesn't include many grammatical activities, and the vocabulary is not well presented either. The only thing I enjoy teaching in this series is the reading part.

Teacher 14: The main problem in this book is the way it deals with grammar. Of course I realise it targets students' conversational skills, but this is at the expense of grammar which is marginalised.

Interviewer: Do you suffer from marginalising grammar in this textbook series, I mean does this make you allocate more efforts to explaining grammar to students?

Teacher 14: Sure, because the series doesn't provide me with the appropriate materials for teaching grammar. If I don't explain a specific point related to a grammatical rule, this will mean that students will be unable to understand it well from the textbook.

The teachers reported that the only training programme they had in how to teach the textbook series prior to introducing it in 2008 lasted for two weeks. Besides this, they reported receiving no training in standards-based instruction. Partly due to the brevity of their training, the majority of teachers were still unable to change their beliefs about good English teaching. The interviews indicate that teachers' inability to change such beliefs was strongly associated with the length of their experience. As one teacher summed it up:

Teacher 18: I have been teaching English since the mid-1980s, and we were brought up in using the grammar-translation method. Therefore, I find it the most appropriate method to our students, even with using this textbook series.

Likewise, another teacher pointed out that neglect of the listening activities was caused by lack of emphasis on the listening component in their pre-service education programmes:

Teacher 31: Teaching listening activities is problematic indeed. We as teachers of English were not taught listening in our pre-service preparation programmes. That's why many of us are not good listeners.

Besides long experience in teaching non-communicative textbooks and lack of training, teachers' oral fluency also appears to have negatively influenced their ability to cope with the new communicative textbook series. It was noted in the observed classes that most teachers were not fluent enough to manage communicative activities. Overall, they switched extensively to Arabic and frequently paused while speaking in English. It may be argued that their low oral fluency level mainly stemmed from long experiences in teaching non-communicative textbooks and using the grammar-translation method. With these teacher-related and contextual factors, it was not surprising to find that most teachers still firmly believed that good English teaching should focus only on grammar and vocabulary.

Teacher 4: In our educational society, when people say someone is a successful teacher, this generally means they teach students about 20 words in one class, and help them understand grammar perfectly. People don't need a successful teacher who uses communicative activities.

Inadequate time

Five classes a week were given to teaching English to general, secondary-school students in Egypt, one of which was allocated to teaching the Reader. In other words, teachers had four 40-45-minute classes a week to teach the *Hello!* textbook. All the teachers interviewed agreed that the weekly time allocated to teaching the series was inadequate. This inadequate time led them to be selective in choosing the activities to be taught, and to not follow the instructions in the Teacher's Guide:

Teacher 33: I don't teach all activities in Reading or Critical Thinking lessons. It all depends on the time available, and therefore I have to select some of these activities. Likewise, I can't follow all the Teacher's Guide instructions. If I follow these instructions step by step, it may take me three classes instead of one class to teach one lesson to students because their language level is low.

Teacher 22: If you look at this lesson, it includes 5 pair-work activities. If I want to teach these activities in one class, this won't be possible. Time is a main problem when teaching speaking activities. If I have time to get students do pair or group work activities, I won't have time to evaluate or correct each student's oral performance.

According to many teachers, writing activities were particularly negatively influenced by inadequate time. Due to lack of time, the teachers reported they could only get students do writing notes, filling in application forms, and translation activities in the classroom. As for paragraph and letter-writing activities, they assigned them as homework tasks:

Teacher 11: We can't teach writing activities completely in the class. For example, when teaching students paragraph writing, I only explain the main rules of writing a paragraph, then assign them a topic to write on as a homework task. My main role is teaching students how to write a correct sentence. We are supposed to get students to write paragraphs or letters in the classroom but there is not adequate time.

Students' low English level

The interviewees reported that students' low English levels hindered them from teaching speaking and writing activities in particular. Students' accumulated English learning experiences and the non-communicative textbooks they had previously studied may have contributed to their low levels. It can be argued that students' resistance to taking part in communicative activities was not only caused by washback, but also by their low English levels. Due to such low levels, most teachers interviewed said it was very difficult to get students do pair- and group-work speaking activities:

Teacher 12: It is difficult to teach pair-work speaking activities because there are differences in students' speaking abilities. For example, if I need to teach a pair-work speaking activity, this will require finding 15 pairs of students in a 30-student class. But I'll be lucky enough to find 4 pairs of students to take part in these activities. What can I do in this case? Will I work with the 4 pairs of students or manage other students' behaviours? Most students usually respond to these activities by laughing, which causes much noise. Simply, they are not used to teaching speaking activities.

Teacher 3: I can't teach communicative activities in all classes. Students' levels don't help me to implement these activities. Sometimes I have to do pair-work activities between myself and one good student. Group-work activities are more difficult to implement than pair-work ones. All in all, speaking activities can only work out if students' level is good, if not they are useless.

Similarly, students' low English levels, along with the inadequate time problem highlighted above, caused teachers neither to be able to adopt the process approach to teaching writing, nor to teach paragraph and letter-writing activities properly:

Teacher 10: If I want to teach students paragraph writing, I begin by teaching them sentence structure. When coming to generating ideas, this becomes an exhausting task because students are not used to generating writing ideas in the class. Each student can generate only two or three Arabic ideas about the topic, but the nightmare occurs when translating these ideas into English. That's why it is better if I assign them paragraph writing activities as homework tasks.

The interviews also seemed to reveal that many students did not care about improving their English writing. As reported by their teachers, students prepared for final year exams by merely studying model paragraphs and letters found in commercial exam preparation materials.

Lack of equipment and materials

The interview and observation data showed that lack of learning materials inhibited many teachers from implementing listening and dictionary use activities. The majority of the teachers interviewed said that what mainly hindered teaching dictionary-use activities was that students did not bring their hard-copy dictionaries to the classroom. Only two teachers reported that they solved this problem by asking students to take turns in bringing their dictionaries to the classroom.

The learning material problem was greater when it came to teaching listening activities. Most school districts did not provide teachers with audio listening materials. Meanwhile, teachers were not interested in downloading these materials from the above-mentioned website because classrooms were not provided with CD players. Four teachers from one school reported that they used the learning resource room in teaching listening activities, but this room was accessible only once a month for each teacher. All of the observed and interviewed teachers interested in teaching listening were found to cope with this problem by reading the tapescript from the Teacher's Guide. In the observed classes in which some listening activities were taught, it was noted that the process of reading the tapescript to students, instead of getting them listen to audio materials, was problematic. This process took much longer than it took to listen to audio material, and was marred by teachers' pronunciation errors and interrupted by teachers' explanations of vocabulary meaning and grammatical structures. As one teacher summarised:

Teacher 19: In fact, teaching the listening activities by reading the tapescript is a so time-consuming task. If I read the tapescript with good pronunciation and accent, I may have to pause unconsciously while reading it. I'm a human being and can't simulate an audio-recorded material; I mean my reading speed, rhythm, and pauses won't be like it.

Encountering this problem and prioritising students' preparation for the exam, most teachers tended to neglect listening activities and opt to focus on grammar and vocabulary instead; while the other few teachers paying some attention to listening activities mainly made use of them to familiarise students with key vocabulary and grammatical structures.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results given above clearly indicate that the standards-based curricular reform in general secondary school English in Egypt has not been successfully implemented with regard to teachers' classroom practices. The questionnaire data show that teachers rate Reading and Language Focus lessons as more important than Listening, Critical Thinking, and Communication lessons, and that they teach grammar and reading activities much more frequently than other activity types. On the other hand, the observation data showing that 82.23 % of classroom instructional time was allocated to grammar, vocabulary and reading suggests that teaching the other

language skill components such as listening, speaking and writing was almost neglected. The interviews and questionnaire data indicate that these instructional practices were influenced by five factors: washback, culture of teaching, inadequate time, students' low English levels, and lack of equipment and materials. Overall, the study indicated strongly that the standards-based communicative textbook series was taught non-communicatively and that the grammar-translation method is still very dominant in Egyptian secondary school English classes. Accordingly, the curricular reform has hardly influenced teachers' instructional practices or beliefs, and has not served as a catalyst for changes in instruction or assessment yet.

The case of general secondary English curricular reform in Egypt is very similar to the case of Botswana, where a communicative teaching syllabus does not match the examination system (Nkosana, 2008). This type of reform is likely to encounter attitudinal obstacles because learners and teachers attend more to what is tested than to what is not, and classroom practices are expected to remain unchanged as long as the assessment procedures are not changed to test communicative skills (Kellaghan & Greaney, 1992; Weir, 1993). While the present study aligns with the study reported by Watanabe (1996) in showing the roles of educational background, personal beliefs and teaching experience in shaping teachers' practices, the results shared here differ by emphasising that washback outweighs the influence of other factors. Though the other four factors (culture of teaching, inadequate time, students' low English levels, and lack of equipment and materials) exerted extra influence on teachers' practices, washback was found to be the most decisive one. As one interviewed teacher put it, "This is a unique textbook series but it needs an ideal student, an ideal classroom environment, an ideal teacher and above all a comprehensive exam."

It is believed that, had the exam matched the content of the textbook series, teachers could have managed to change their instructional practices and their teaching culture, and cope with the contextual obstacles encountered. Accordingly, changing the examination system is the most powerful way to promote teachers' practices and beliefs in response to this communicative standards-based textbook series. When assessment is used as a vehicle for driving instructional practices, teaching and testing become essentially synonymous (Menken; 2008; Qi, 2005; Shohamy, 2001). Meanwhile, overcoming other obstacles to the successful implementation of curriculum reform is necessary because the examination system cannot be singled out as the only determinant of classroom practices (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Wall, 2000). Preparing students to deal with the standards-based communicative textbook series requires bringing out a reform in both the curriculum and examination system of previous grades. To facilitate the teaching of communicative language activities not only at the secondary stage but also at the primary and prep ones, classrooms should be equipped with the audio facilities and materials needed. Additionally, the Ministry of Education should allocate more time to teaching English at the secondary stage. Finally, changing teachers' instructional beliefs and promoting their oral fluency is a prerequisite for the effective implementation of communicative activities. This can be accomplished by providing teachers with continuous pedagogical and linguistic training, and by constantly evaluating their classroom practices in order to identify their training needs.

This study shows that the standards-based reform of the general, secondary-school English curriculum in Egypt has not brought about the desired teaching practices.

While the teachers' views generally suggest that such reform may not have positively influenced students' desired learning outcomes, this remains a testable hypothesis. Future research making use of quantitative and qualitative data can deal with this important issue. Further longitudinal studies are particularly needed as they can trace any potential effects of the curricular reform on students' language attainment over a period of time. Needed also are studies evaluating any future governmental efforts to improve this standards-based curricular reform.

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APPENDIX 1

Guiding Questions for the Semi-Structured Interviews

1. Tell me about your teaching experience: your qualifications, how long have you been teaching English? How long have you been teaching the *Hello!* textbook series? What kind of training did you receive to teach this series?
2. Compared to the previous textbooks you have used when teaching secondary school students, what is your opinion on the *Hello* textbook series?
3. Tell me about how you teach the lessons in each main unit. Let's discuss this by having a look at some lessons.
4. Which lessons do you think are more or less important to teach? And why?
5. Which language skills or language knowledge components do you focus on more or less in your classes: listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation? And why?
6. Do you have difficulties in teaching some lessons or activities in the textbook series? If so, what are these difficulties? Let's talk about each lesson and type of activities.
7. The textbook series includes various types of oral communicative activities (for example, pair work, group work). Which activity type(s) can you teach more successfully?
8. There are different types of writing activities in the textbook series. Do you focus on teaching them equally?
9. Do you find yourself able to follow all of the instructions of the Teacher's Guide while teaching textbook lessons and activities?
10. What are the characteristics of a good textbook you can teach successfully? And how might you describe a good teacher of English?

APPENDIX 2

Teacher Questionnaire

Dear teacher,

The purpose of this questionnaire is to explore the way you use the *Hello!* textbook series in secondary school classes, the lessons and activities on which you focus more or less, and the problems you encounter in teaching them. I would be grateful if you would take a few minutes to complete the questionnaire. Please note that the questionnaire does not ask you about what should be done in your English classes but what is actually done in them. Your answers will be dealt with confidentially so that no one can identify who you are or where you work. Thank you for your help.

1. In the *Hello* series taught to secondary school students, each main unit includes the five lessons given in the table below. Please rate these lessons in terms of their teaching importance to your students.

	Not Important	Important	Very Important
Listening			
Language Focus			
Reading			
Critical Thinking			
Communication			

2. The *Hello* series includes the following types of activities. Please rate these activities in terms of the frequency of teaching them in your English classes at the secondary stage.

	Never Taught	Seldom Taught	Often Taught	Always Taught
Listening Activities				
Grammar Activities				
Reading Activities				
Speaking Activities				
Dictionary Use Activities				
Other Vocabulary Activities				
Writing Activities				
Pronunciation Activities				

3. If you have any problems related to teaching any of the following activities in your English classes, please tick one or more boxes as appropriate. If you do not, please skip this part.

	Inade-quate Time	Material/ Equipment Needed	Students' Low Level	Students' Needs	Students' Resistance
Speaking Activities					
Listening Activities					
Writing Activities					
Dictionary Use Activities					