Changing Authenticity in English Language Textbooks in Hong Kong: An Ontogenetic Analysis

Dezheng (William) Feng
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Article Received: 24th August, 2020
Article Accepted: 1st July, 2022

Abstract: This study investigates the selection and design of authentic material in EFL textbooks from primary to secondary school years in Hong Kong. The analysis of authenticity included three aspects of content choice, namely, choice of topics, text types, and types of interaction. Analysis of the 19 textbooks from Primary 1 to Secondary 4-6 showed that topic choices shift from family to school life at the primary level, then from the school to local society, and finally to global issues at the secondary level. The change in domains of experience is co-instantiated by the change in text types from describing things to recounting experiences, and then to expressing opinions, as well as by the increase of authentic photos and incomplete speech bubbles in simulated interactions. The textbooks were considered well designed in this regard as the ontogenetic changes are generally in accordance with students’ cognitive abilities and contribute to their acquisition of knowledge. However, the analysis also showed several points that arguably need further consideration, such as the inadequacy of non-local themes throughout the school years, and the high ratio of opinion texts and the limited number of visual characters at the primary level.

Keywords: authenticity, English textbooks, Hong Kong, ontogenetic analysis
Introduction

Since the introduction of communicative learning and teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) in the 1980s, the debate over the role and definition of authenticity has caught considerable scholarly attention (e.g., Gilmore, 2007). However, there have been few ontogenetic studies of how authentic materials are selected and designed in textbooks at different levels of education, particularly in the context of Hong Kong. A notable exception is Guo and Feng’s (2015) study of the visual construction of knowledge in English textbooks from the senior primary (P4–6) to the secondary (S1–4) levels in Hong Kong. Their analysis showed that illustrations in the textbooks changed from narrative to conceptual representations in terms of the process, from specific to generic in terms of the participant, and from local to global in terms of the setting. Along this line of research, this study integrates different theoretical frameworks to analyze the ontogenetic development of authentic materials in textbooks from the primary to the secondary levels in Hong Kong.

Textbooks in Hong Kong, as in most other English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) contexts, have long been considered the ‘primary resource’ for English language education (Morris, 1995, p. 126). The central role of textbooks is also supported by studies from the perspectives of both teachers and students (e.g., Chow, 2004; McGrath, 2006). Hong Kong students learn English in the classroom setting, and English teachers depend heavily on textbooks for teaching and organizing classroom instructions and activities. It is therefore important to investigate how English textbooks in Hong Kong make use of authentic materials to achieve their pedagogical aims at different levels.

For this purpose, firstly, the theme generator (Estaire & Zanon, 1994) is adopted to investigate how topics of authentic materials in the textbooks change for different age groups of students. Secondly, Brown and Yule’s (1983) model is drawn upon to examine the distribution of the text types of description, reporting/recounting, and opinion expressing across the school years. Finally, the changing interactional authenticity between the textbooks and students is examined by looking at the visual representation of characters and speech bubbles. In what follows, I will first give a brief overview of ESL/EFL textbook research, with a particular focus on the notion of authenticity in textbooks. Then the methodology will be introduced, and findings will be reported. I finally discuss the findings of ontogenetic changes in terms of how they contribute to students’ acquisition of knowledge that is concrete and simple in primary years to that which is more abstract and complex in secondary years.
Background

Studies of ESL/EFL textbooks

School textbooks, as an important instrument of education in children’s schooling, have been a subject of education research internationally for quite a long time (Nicholls, 2003). Published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research, *UNESCO Guidebook on Textbook Research and Textbook Revision* (Pingel, 2010) reflects such a long-standing recognition of textbook research. The Guidebook provides many useful methods of textbook research and has become an authoritative reference book for educational experts who are involved in analyzing, comparing and developing educational media across the world. In the Guidebook, Pingel (2010) gives an overview of key methodologies for textbook studies, which broadly include quantitative and qualitative analysis. Quantitative methods, such as frequency counting and space analysis, are used to analyze the selection criteria and emphasis of a textbook. For qualitative methods, he discusses methods such as hermeneutic analysis which is used to unearth hidden meanings and messages in textbooks, linguistic analysis which involves the examination of words and terminology with controversial meanings, and cross-cultural analysis where all sides in a bilateral or multilateral study examine each other’s textbooks to identify bias.

Among the wide range of textbooks that are analyzed, ESL/EFL textbooks have arguably caught the most attention due to the importance of English as a lingua franca worldwide. Researchers have addressed a wide range of issues, such as textbook compilation, textbook evaluation, and critical analysis of cultures and values in textbooks. Of particular relevance is the evaluation of textbooks. Different frameworks for textbook evaluation have been proposed during the last five decades (e.g., Byrd, 2001; Cunningsworth, 1995; Ellis, 1997; Gamaru & Batang, 2019; Mede & Yalçın, 2019; Tomlinson, 2001; Vedyanto, 2017). It is generally acknowledged that textbooks should follow principles of language acquisition (e.g., Chan, 2001; Tomlinson, 2001). Chan (2001) investigated the approaches and theoretical bases adopted in three EFL composition textbooks for advanced students by calculating the frequencies and proportions of four variables (linguistic skills, textual organization skills, writing strategies and types of exercises). Rubdy’s (2003) framework stipulated a wide range of principles, including those related to the psychological validity of learners’ self-development, the pedagogical validity of the usefulness of teachers’ guidance, and the content validity of materials authenticity.

Despite the scholarly interest in ESL/EFL textbooks, not many studies have been
carried out in the Hong Kong context. Poon (2009) reviewed 108 papers on English language education in Hong Kong spanning over 25 years and none of them was concerned with textbook analysis. Among the limited number of studies, the majority are concerned with analyzing culture, social values or gender stereotypes (e.g., Feng, 2019; Lee & Collins, 2008; Yuen, 2011). For example, Lee and Collins (2008) found that recent improvement in the status of women in Hong Kong was reflected in patterns of gender representation in secondary English textbooks in the region. Yuen (2011) analyzed the representation of foreign cultures in EFL textbooks and found that cultures of English-speaking countries were favored while cultures of Africa were underrepresented. Aside from this imbalance, he also argued that the cultures were often shallowly represented from a ‘tourist’s perspective’. Yang (2012) analyzed the content and language of a currently published Hong Kong English language textbook series for Grade 1 students and found that males and females were almost equally represented and were portrayed in a similar range of activities.

There have been few studies from an ontogenetic perspective, with the notable exception of Feng (2019) and Guo (2014). Feng (2019) investigated the representation of social values and their ontogenetic development in English textbooks in Hong Kong textbooks from Primary 1 to Secondary 4–6 and found that the social values changed from the personal domain (e.g., good hygiene and healthy lifestyle), through the interpersonal domain (e.g., politeness and respect), to altruistic concern for all humankind. More relevant to the present study, Guo (2014) provided a comprehensive social semiotic analysis of EFL textbooks in Hong Kong from an ontological perspective, revealing changes in terms of socio-semiotic activities, syntactic complexity and visual image design. Along this line, this research aims to provide additional insights from the perspective of authenticity.

**Authenticity in EFL textbooks**

Since the advent of communicative language teaching, textbooks have used increasingly authentic materials (Richards, 2006). Reading passages are printed to look like magazine articles and cover designs are similar to popular real-world magazines. This practice is based on the idea that authentic materials are more interesting and effective for learning a second language. However, empirical data show that learners usually find authentic materials less interesting than contrived materials (Peacock, 1997). There are several reasons for the low level of interest in authentic materials. One reason is that learners generally find authentic texts “too complex to understand because real-world readers are assumed to have a reasonably high level of reading ability and a fairly substantial recognition vocabulary” (Richards, 2006, p. 17).
Another reason is that information in authentic texts, especially that in spoken discourse, is only intended for participants, but not for overhearers (Brown & Yule, 1983). Therefore, learners usually do not have the contextual knowledge to understand it. Aside from the above, contextual constraints, such as curriculum requirements, examinations and administrative pressure, are also concerns for many teachers (e.g., Rehman & Perveen, 2021).

However, authentic materials still have the potential to be exploited in different ways and on different levels to develop learners’ communicative competence (Gilmore, 2007). It is believed that all levels of learners can cope with authentic materials if texts and tasks are carefully selected. Hammond and Gibbons (2005) argue that with careful planning, selection and sequencing of materials and tasks, authentic materials can be rich input which better caters to different stages of development and individual differences within many classroom populations. Leow (1993) also argues that using authentic texts is more practical than using simplified texts in second language teaching. Therefore, if selected carefully and modified appropriately, authentic materials may have a higher value than simplified or unauthentic materials for communicative language learning.

It follows that the selection and design of authentic content is a key element in CLT and TBLT (Ellis, 2003). Belcher (2006) suggests that texts in classroom materials can range from clearly authentic materials found in the target community to semi-authentic materials produced by practitioners in specific contexts, and then to obviously inauthentic textbooks created by textbook writers. Texts in many commercial EFL textbook series belong to the latter two. It is because “real-life authentic materials lack real control over the language learning goals and the curriculum is only randomly shaped by whatever features happen to occur in the texts selected” (Willis, 2003, p. 223). Therefore, texts might need to be modified, restructured, recreated and/or contextualized to serve certain pedagogical needs or simply to cater to students’ language proficiency.

In this regard, two types of authenticity have been identified by Ellis (2003), namely situational authenticity and interactional authenticity. Situational authenticity concerns whether a task corresponds to “a situation found in the real world” (Ellis, 2003, p. 339). Although it is claimed that real-world, authentic materials are difficult to understand, the difficulty of an authentic text can be controlled by arranging different genres on a cline of increasing inherent difficulty (description < instruction < storytelling < opinion-expressing), depending on whether they represent static, dynamic or abstract concepts (Brown & Yule, 1983). The second way to control the difficulty of authentic materials is to vary the task rather than the text (Nunan, 1989; Prabhu, 1987; Willis, 1996). Difficulty slightly beyond learners’
capacity is considered beneficial for language development (cf. Vygotsky, 1978). This approach allows for only partial understanding of texts by learners on the basis that even native speakers typically operate with less than total comprehension (Guariento & Morley, 2001; Widdowson, 2002; Willis, 1996). Interactional authenticity refers to “patterns of interaction similar to those found in the real world” (Ellis, 2003, p. 339). Widdowson (2003) argues that learners are unable to authenticate real language since the classroom cannot provide the contextual conditions for them to do so. However, real-life interaction patterns can still be achieved and it depends on how authentic materials are exploited in the classroom and how effectively the teacher is able to mediate between the materials and students (Omaggio, 1986; Rings, 1986; Rogers & Medley, 1988). In sum, authentic materials are a valuable resource for language learning if the level of difficulty and interactional situation are modified and mediated appropriately for students’ communicative needs.

Authentic materials can be manipulated to cater to different levels of learners and individual differences that exist within any classroom population. For the situational aspect, authentic materials can be modified into different genres on a cline of increasing inherent difficulty (description < instruction < storytelling < opinion-expressing) for students with different proficiency levels. For the interactional aspect, teachers can mediate between authentic materials and students and jointly construct meaning from those authentic materials (see also Swain, Brooks & Tocalli-Beller, 2002). Apart from genre selection and teachers’ mediation, authentic materials can also be exploited and modified with visual aids (Schiffrin, 1996; Gilmore, 2007). Chen (2010) observed that primary and junior secondary textbooks mainly adopt cartoons for teaching purposes, but such images are gradually replaced by serious style images (i.e., portraits and photographs) in senior secondary textbooks (cf. Guo & Feng, 2015). At the primary level, character voices, that is, utterances of characters in visual images, often realized by speech bubbles with an oblique line, tend to be used to engage students’ interest. Chen (2010) also found that as students advance from the primary to the secondary levels, teaching materials shift gradually from a personal way of expressing emotions to a more institutionalized way of evaluating people’s behaviors and abstract concepts. In another study about authenticity in junior secondary English textbooks, Chan (2013) found that different genres are used to realize the authenticity of textbooks for classroom teaching. Genres chosen by textbook writers are usually popular among teenagers in real life, such as emails, web pages, magazine articles and posters. Tasks on these genres usually come along with serious style images (i.e., portraits and photographs) and focus on expressing attitude and values. This reflects that authentic materials are modified into different genres on a cline of increasing
inherent difficulty (description < instruction < storytelling < opinion-expressing) for students to develop their language proficiency progressively from primary to secondary education.

Compared with the nature of genres and tasks, academic literature on TBLT has paid less attention to the choice of themes, though some theme-related issues have been considered (e.g., Bygate, Skehan & Swain, 2001; Nunan, 1989). The choice of themes was taken into account in Estaire and Zanon’s (1994) framework for developing a task-based unit of work. The guiding principles they proposed in the selection of content include (1) topic familiarity, (2) intrinsic interest, and (3) top relevance in predicting general situations that learners may later find themselves in. This appeal is supported by Zuengler and Bent (1991), who suggest that the kinds of contexts selected for inclusion often mirror those most likely to be encountered by learners in their future lives.

To understand how authentic materials are selected and designed throughout the schooling years, this ontogenetic study will analyze the situational and interactional aspects of authenticity in English textbooks from Primary 1 to Secondary 4-6 in Hong Kong. The specific research questions include:

(a) How are authentic materials selected and designed throughout the schooling period from the primary to secondary levels in Hong Kong?

(b) How is situational authenticity designed in textbooks in terms of genre distribution? Are texts arranged on a cline of increasing inherent difficulty?

(c) How is interactional authenticity realized through tasks and visual resources (cartoons, portraits and photographs) in the textbooks?

Methodology

A total of 19 EFL textbooks published by Pearson Education Asia Ltd in 2007 were selected for analysis. Twelve are primary school textbooks, namely ‘Primary Longman Express’ (1-6A/B), and seven are secondary school textbooks, namely ‘Longman Activate’ (JS1 - 3A/B and New Secondary School Theme Book), which are for Junior 1 to Senior 6 secondary students.

To understand how authentic materials are selected and designed from the primary to the secondary levels, Estaire and Zanon’s (1994) ‘theme generator’ is adopted. The framework organizes thematic content according to the level of closeness to learners, namely Students, Home, School life, the World around us (community) and Fantasy/Imagination. Topics closely related to students are more suitable for beginner learners and remote topics suit more advanced learners. For example, topics relating to Students include birthdays, eating habits and body
parts; Home includes family structure; School life includes classmates, libraries and timetables (Prabhu, 1987). The theme of the World around us includes two aspects. One aspect is topics that students are expected to be familiar with, such as the postal system, transport and other community facilities. The other aspect is topics that students will need to deal with in the future, such as complaint letters, feature articles and emails, or real-world workplace activities, such as writing proposals, reports, memos, speeches and webpages. This aspect also covers topics of moral and civic education, such as showing respect for people from different cultures, commitment to society and the nation, and environmental issues about endangered species or pollution.

The selected authentic materials will also be analyzed in terms of their degree of difficulty on the basis of a cline of increasing inherent difficulty of text types (description < description/instruction < storytelling < opinion-expressing) (Brown & Yule, 1983). The most simple one is the description of things that are both static and concrete (e.g. body parts, things in a park, etc.). The second type is reporting (recounting) texts, which are concerned with events or experiences that are concrete but dynamic. The most difficult text type is opinion texts, which are about making arguments, exchanging attitudes, or debating certain issues.

Finally, in terms of interactional authenticity, we investigate how the textbooks facilitate (simulated) interactions with students by modifying and restructuring texts. Our analysis of interactional modifications will be based on Chen’s (2010) model, which focuses on pictures in the forms of cartoons, photos and speech bubbles. Characters are put together with speech bubbles, which creates space for students to participate in simulated interactions. Meanwhile, some speech bubbles are intentionally left unfinished, so as to involve readers in the ultimate completion of the interaction.

Findings

Thematic choice of authentic materials

Both close and remote topics are found in all the textbooks. Close topics include students’ particulars, family/home and school life. Topics of students’ particulars in primary school textbooks include body parts, behaviors, feelings, food, habits, toys and pets, which are personal in nature. Topics of students’ particulars in secondary school textbooks include diary, sports, arts, pop culture and music, which are more about peer group identification. Topics of family/home include kinship members, home furniture, housework, birthday celebration, and other memorable family moments, which are only found in primary school textbooks. The last type of close topics is school life which includes classroom, classmates, teachers, discipline,
school events and year plans. These topics are mainly found in primary school textbooks, and school topics in secondary school textbooks only concern new school life and school bullying, which reflect adolescent issues and concerns.

Remote topics can be grouped into two broad categories, namely, real-life context and imaginary world. The former covers community life and global issues, and the latter includes drama, poems and narratives (which are not included in the present analysis of authenticity). The first theme of real-life context is community life, which includes things immediate around the students and those most likely to be encountered by students in their future life. Things immediate around include places in the community, shopping and festivals. Things or experiences most likely to be encountered by students in the future include civil duties and workplace-related matters. The second theme of real-life context is global issues, which usually cover world culture, environment conservation, and animal protection.

In the textbooks, 54 texts are concerned with close topics while 62 are about remote topics. In terms of close topics, student’s particulars have the highest ratio at 64.8%; school life accounts for 22.2%; and the home/family theme just accounts for 13%. In terms of remote topics, themes on community life account for 69.3%, while those on global issues account for 30.6%. These findings seem to suggest that the authenticity of the teaching materials is more oriented towards individuals in close topics and towards the local environment in remote topics. This may reflect the textbook writers’ perception that students have higher topic familiarity and intrinsic interest in individual aspects and the local environment. Meanwhile, it can also be argued that the textbooks are inadequate in representing non-local cultures and events, which are essential for cultivating a global outlook and multicultural awareness.

In terms of ontogenetic development, as shown in Figure 1, close topics tend to appear in authentic materials for the first few years of primary education and gradually diminish in materials for later years. However, the distribution of remote topics does not show a clear increasing pattern from primary to secondary levels. There is only one text on remote topic in P1 textbooks; then from P2 to S4, the figures fluctuate between 5 to 8, except in P5, with a total of 12 texts on remote topics. In terms of the ratio of close and remote topics, Figure 1 shows that from Primary 1 to Primary 4, close topics make up a larger proportion than remote topics. From Primary 5 onwards, the pattern reverses and the proportion of remote topics is higher than that of close topics. This shift of patterns matches students’ personal growth as older children no longer spend most of their time at home or with their family members, but have more independent interactions with others in their social life. They spend more time on public transportation, either going to school when school bus service is not provided for
secondary school students or going out with their friends in their leisure time. This expands their exposure to different places in society and also increases their opportunities to establish relationships with others. For these reasons, authentic materials for secondary school students include remote topics such as places, leisure activities (e.g., shopping), relationship building (e.g., politeness and helping others), teenage problems, social services and civic duties. Meanwhile, it is also necessary for teenagers to consider their future, so topics most likely to be encountered after leaving school are also included, such as future careers, job interviews, workplace communication and successful persons.

![Figure 1. Distribution of close and remote topics in Hong Kong EFL textbooks](image)

**Choice of text types in Hong Kong EFL textbooks**

Teaching materials on different thematic topics are presented in many different text types throughout the school years. The authentic text types are classified into three main genres, i.e., description, reporting (recounting) and opinion expressing. Different forms of texts in textbooks can be classified into different text types. Photo captions, websites and posters generally belong to the description type because they mostly contain factual information, such as a person or an animal in photo captions, a charity organisation or a tourist spot on websites, and details of events in posters. Notes and diaries are classified as recounting/reporting because they mostly record different aspects of an event, such as students’ daily life experience. Opinion texts include text forms such as newspaper columns, online forum threads, letters and articles that express viewpoints on different issues, such as environmental protection, animal conservation, youth problems, future careers, and pop culture. However, it should be noted that
there is no one to one relation between a particular text form and a particular text type. For example, dialogues can be a story, a description, recounting, or opinion expressing. Therefore, the classification of text types is based on the nature of the content in each text.

Findings of the text type analysis are presented in Figure 2. The total number of texts increases from the primary level to the secondary level, with 60 texts for Primary 1 and 170 for senior secondary (S4-6). The number of descriptive texts decreases from 55 for Primary 1 to 14 for Primary 6. However, it increases back to 61 for Secondary 1 due to the larger number of texts in total. In contrast, the number of opinion texts grows significantly from 6 for Primary 1 to 78 for Secondary 4-6. The number of recounting/reporting texts also increases from 0 for Primary 1 to 47 for Secondary 4-6. The change is even more obvious if we look at the proportion of different text types for different grades, as shown in Figure 3. The proportion of descriptive texts drops from 90% for Primary 1 to 10% for Primary 4, but it increases gradually to 35% for Secondary 1 and then decreases to 25% for Secondary S4-6. Opinion texts account for only 10% for Primary 1 but the proportion reaches 70% for Primary 4. It then decreases but remains at a relatively high level at around 50% for the whole secondary education. The proportion of reporting texts remains stable, ranging from 20% to 30%, except for the Primary 1 textbooks which do not contain this type of texts. These ontogenetic changes indicate that the authentic materials are arranged on a cline of increasing difficulty, from the static description of things to the dynamic recounting of events and then to expressing opinions over abstract issues. However, the analysis also shows that the distribution of text types does not follow the cline perfectly. For example, the large proportion of opinion texts for Primary 4 may be challenging for students.

Figure 2. Distribution of text types in Hong Kong EFL textbooks
Interactional authenticity in Hong Kong EFL textbooks

Interactional authenticity concerns patterns of interactions that are similar to those found in the real world. To engage students in interaction, English textbook writers in Hong Kong use various means to facilitate the interaction between students and textbook content. An important way to achieve this is through the visual design of characters, either as cartoon figures or as photos. Two types of visual design can be found, which can be captured using the framework of speech functions (Halliday, 1994). First, characters ‘offer’ real interaction with friends, family members, and so on. Second, through incomplete speech bubbles, characters ‘demand’ students’ participation in the interaction. As shown in Figure 4, the total number of visual characters which simulate real-world interaction increases dramatically from primary to secondary levels. Interaction becomes increasingly real-world oriented when authentic portraits or photos are used instead of cartoon characters. Figure 4 shows that the number of simulated cartoon characters drops from its highest at 130 at the Primary 3 level to its lowest at 11 at the Secondary 4-6 levels. On the contrary, the number of authentic portraits and photos increases from its lowest at 25 in Primary 2 to its highest at 212 in Secondary 4-6. Concerning ratio, the proportion of authentic photos increases from 20% at Primary 2 to 95% at the Secondary 4-6 levels. A similar pattern is found in the distribution of incomplete speech bubbles across the whole education years (Figure 5). The figure stays between 40 and 60 at the primary level but increases dramatically to between 120 and 140 at the secondary level.
Discussion and Conclusion

Aiming to find out how authentic materials in EFL textbooks change ontogenetically from the primary to the secondary levels, this study shows that materials are selected according to students’ familiarity and intrinsic interest. In terms of familiarity, the analysis shows that close topics are gradually replaced by remote topics as students advance from primary to secondary education when their life experiences expand from family to school in primary schools, and then from school to local society and finally to global issues. A close examination of the choice of close topics and remote topics shows that intrinsic interest plays a significant role in the selection since close topics more often surround themes around students themselves.
than those around family and school, and social life themes significantly overtake global themes. While such design is motivated by relevance to students, it can be argued that the textbooks are inadequate in representing non-local cultures and events, which are essential for cultivating a global outlook and multicultural awareness.

Aside from familiarity and relevance of the topics chosen, the degree of difficulty of the textbooks in terms of text types also shows clear patterns of development. Text types of different degrees of inherent difficulty are selected in line with the choice of close and remote topics. At the early stage of education, the less difficult text type of description is dominant when teaching materials focus on close topics. At the secondary level, more difficult opinion texts become dominant when more abstract social or global concepts or issues are selected as the teaching content. The mapping between less difficult text types and close topics on personal aspects, and between more difficult text types and remote topics on abstract ideas is seen to be an appropriate exploitation of authentic materials for different age groups of students at different stages of school education. These ontogenetic changes indicate that authentic materials are arranged on a cline of increasing difficulty, from the static description of things to dynamic recounting of events and then to expressing opinions over abstract issues. However, it is also found that there is a large proportion of opinion texts in Primary 4 textbooks, which may be challenging for students.

The last aspect of the analysis is interactional authenticity realized through visually represented characters and speech bubbles. It creates the space for students to observe and participate in interactions in textbooks. Analysis shows that the total number of visual characters which simulate real-world interactants increases dramatically from the primary to the secondary levels. While it seems to make sense for students to be exposed to a richer variety of characters and activities as they advance in their learning, we cannot underestimate the important role of characters in engaging students in early primary years. To better engage younger learners, cartoon characters are chosen and complete text is used in the speech bubbles. More real-life photos are used at the secondary level to represent the complexity of authentic identities, relations and actions. The number of incomplete speech bubbles also increases significantly at the secondary level. Such design aims to encourage students to express their opinion on more abstract ideas and concepts, which are usually found in texts on the remote topics of social and global contexts. This design seems reasonable as students are asked to ‘observe’ interaction in earlier years but to ‘participate’ more in interaction as their cognitive ability grows.

To conclude, the changes in the domain of experience from close to remote topics are
co-instantiated by the change in text types from describing things, to recounting/reporting events and experiences, and then to expressing opinions, as well as the increase in the number of authentic photos and participatory roles. Such ontogenetic change is in accordance with students’ cognitive abilities and contributes to students’ acquisition of knowledge, which is concrete and simple in childhood, but more abstract and complex in adolescence. We can therefore argue that the textbooks are, on the whole, well designed in the selection of appropriate authentic materials. However, the analysis also reveals several points that arguably need further consideration, such as the inadequacy of non-local themes throughout the school years, the high proportion of opinion texts at the primary level, and the limited number of visual characters at the primary level. Therefore, the findings can inform the design and evaluation of textbooks and are also useful for teachers to select appropriate supplementary learning materials and to provide appropriate pedagogical support for students at different levels of schooling. However, we are not arguing that changes need to be made; the value of the findings is more about the awareness and explicit understanding of the ontogenetic changes. Further studies from the perspectives of teachers and students are needed to understand the optimal design of authentic materials for each stage.

References
Chow, Y. W. F. (2004). Teacher and learner perceptions of EFL textbooks in Hong Kong


