
Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching

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Two decades of research on ELT textbook content: A bibliometric and content analysis

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Abstract

Using high-quality articles obtained from the Web of Science Core Collection, this paper seeks to offer an overview of research on ELT textbook content spanning from 2003 to 2022. We first identify publication trends, prolific journals, highly cited papers, and influential references. Then, we code the collected data across four dimensions: research topics, analytical tools, textbook types, and textbook levels. Key findings reveal that there is growing academic interest in this field, with *vocabulary* and *gender ideology* as prominent themes, alongside emerging topics like *task*, *linguistic complexity*, and *environmental values*; and we find that *corpus-based* and *(critical) content analyses* are widely used methods. Furthermore, the distribution of research efforts appears uneven across primary school, secondary school, and university levels, as well as in the study of general English textbooks and English textbooks for specific purposes. This paper will be valuable for stakeholders involved in ELT textbook development, particularly those new to the field and seeking guidance on current research trends, methodological approaches, and emerging themes in textbook content analysis.

Keywords: ELT textbook content; bibliometric analysis; content analysis; vocabulary; gender ideology

1. Introduction

English language teaching (ELT) involves teaching English to non-native speakers, a practice dependent on systematic strategies and resources for effective classroom outcomes (Harmer, 2015; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). To meet the demand for structured classroom tools, English textbooks have been developed as key materials to support learning. Although the form of English language textbooks has been evolving, printed materials remain the most widely used, especially in countries or regions with limited educational infrastructure. The role of the textbook in language teaching and learning is central and crucial. Textbooks typically form the core of the curriculum, with teachers expected to adhere closely to their content.

This alignment is especially apparent during end-of-course exams (Harwood, 2014b), which often focus primarily on the material presented in the textbooks. Therefore, ELT textbooks appear to “have a magical hold on both teachers and learners most of whom just can not [sic] do without them” (Kumaravadivelu, 2012, p. 21). They not only serve as the main source of language input learners receive in the classroom (Hoang & Crosthwaite, 2024; Le Foll, 2023; Richards, 2006) but also provide learners with essential cultural components (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993; Risager, 2018). For example, these cultural components encompass traditional customs, societal norms, historical events, and everyday practices relevant to the target language. By integrating such elements into the learning materials, textbook authors enable students to gain valuable insights into the cultural nuances and contexts that are essential for effective language comprehension and communication. ELT textbooks are not value-neutral but rather reflect pre-established values and privileged voices (Canale, 2016). They embody a set of values that encompass cultural, social, and linguistic norms, shaping the content and perspectives presented. Moreover, they amplify authorized voices, which represent dominant sources of knowledge and authority in language teaching, determining what is deemed legitimate knowledge and acceptable discourse in educational contexts. To summarize, ELT textbooks encompass a threefold nature as an instructional artifact (tangible resources directly used for teaching and learning), a curriculum artifact (the broader framework of educational planning and implementation), and a cultural artifact (representations of shared values, beliefs, and practices within a society); the quality of ELT textbooks plays a crucial role in facilitating student engagement, willingness to communicate, and ultimately, learning outcomes (Siegel, 2014). However, despite their pivotal role, ELT textbooks are not without flaws. In some contexts, they have been criticized for issues such as containing unrealistic language, outdated content, and a disconnect from second-language acquisition research (Calafato, 2019; Richards, 2006), which can hinder their effectiveness in supporting authentic language learning.

This duality, the centrality and imperfection of ELT textbooks, has sparked a plethora of monographs, edited volumes, and articles (e.g., Bori, 2018; Dahmardeh & Kim, 2020; Foroutan, 2012; Harwood, 2014b; Lam, 2010; Nekrasova-Beker, 2019; Widodo et al., 2018; Xiong et al., 2022). These studies can be broadly categorized into three lines of inquiry (Harwood, 2014a, 2022), namely, research on textbook content, textbook use, and textbook production. Textbook content research typically focuses on analyzing and evaluating the specific teaching content within textbooks. Researchers in this area often examine language knowledge, language skills, cultural background information, and other content-related aspects. They may ask questions related to the effectiveness and quality of textbooks in delivering appropriate knowledge and skills to learners. For example, they may investigate whether the vocabulary in the textbook aligns with students' learning needs, whether there are differences in the use of specific linguistic constructions taught in the textbook compared to those used by native speakers, or which countries' cultures are reflected in the textbook (e.g., Hoang & Crosthwaite, 2024; Keles & Yazan, 2023; Wood & Appel, 2014). The second line of inquiry concerns how materials are actually used or the mediating role they play in or outside the classroom context. For example, Rathert and Cabaroğlu (2021) found that teachers' instructional practices were largely driven by the coursebook, with minor adaptations made to simplify tasks or add examples to better suit learners. The third line of inquiry focuses on the decision-making or the negotiation in the process of textbook compiling between textbook writers and publishers (Atkinson, 2024), examining the pressures from guidelines offered by educational authorities in specific countries and constraints placed upon writers by publishers (Yıldız & Harwood, 2023). The present study primarily focuses on the first line of inquiry for two reasons: (1) it solely relies on access to textbooks, providing a pragmatically feasible starting point for researchers (i.e., the research can be initiated with basic resources, avoiding over-reliance on complex data collection or specialized tools); and (2) due to its relatively mature state, it provides a foundational starting point to further examine the more complex facets of textbook use and production (e.g., insights from content analysis can inform subsequent studies on how textbooks are implemented in classrooms or redesigned for different contexts).

Two reviews have explored textbook research, yet they differ starkly in how they engage with its core: the textbook content central to this study. Tomlinson's (2012) early review, broad in scope, covers all key dimensions of textbook research: content, production, and use, extending beyond textbooks themselves. In contrast, Canale's (2016) more recent review centers solely on this very content, analyzing cultural representation in foreign language textbooks via qualitative synthesis. However, Tomlinson's work, despite its comprehensiveness across textbook

research, may miss recent developments in textbook content research, due to its age. Canale's work, while focused on content, is limited to cultural representation, restricting a broader understanding of this core area.

To address these limitations, the present study combines bibliometrics and content analysis techniques to present a comprehensive picture of the field and provide valuable guidance for scholars interested in exploring research within this domain. Specifically, it examines trends in publication output, the most published journals, highly cited articles, and highly cited references in the field, along with common research methods, frequently studied textbook types, and textbook levels. This integration of methods is rooted in the distinct strengths of each approach. Bibliometric analysis, a technique leveraging bibliographic data to examine research trends within a particular field, has gained traction in applied linguistics (Chong & Plonsky, 2024). Recognized for its convenience and robustness in data analysis, this approach is increasingly utilized in scholarly investigations (Hyland & Jiang, 2021; Plonsky, 2023; Qin & Lei, 2022; Xu et al., 2023; Zhang, 2020). Bibliometric analysis provides an efficient and automated approach to data processing, although it may inadvertently overlook less frequent but potentially significant research topics. Traditional content analysis, in contrast, necessitates manual coding to thoroughly examine the overall distribution of specific items of interest (Krippendorff, 2018). Therefore, the integration of these two methods in this study is advantageous for presenting a fuller picture of textbook content research. Specifically, this study aims to address the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the publication trends, prolific journals, and widely-cited articles/references in the field of ELT textbook content research?

RQ2: What are the most frequently explored topics, commonly used analytical tools, and the most-studied types/levels of ELT textbooks in textbook content research?

2. Methods

2.1. Data collection

The bibliometric data were collected from the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection, an abstract and citation database launched by Clarivate Analytics in 1964. Our data retrieval process focused solely on SSCI and A&HCI-indexed journals, given their reputation for indexing high-quality articles, which can better reflect the state of the art shared by the whole scholarly community. After determining the database, we conducted an advanced search with the following search query:

TI=(material\$ OR textbook\$ or coursebook\$ OR “course book\$”) AND TS=(ELT OR ESL OR EFL OR EAP OR ESP OR ELF OR TESOL OR TESL OR TEFL OR English) AND DT=(Article) AND LA=(English)

We decided to formulate the query in this way for several reasons. First, we performed a title search to restrict the theme of literature to be related to textbooks, because the great majority of textbook studies contain keywords such as *textbook* or *material* in their titles. With this restriction, a considerable number of unrelated records could be sifted out. Second, we paralleled a topic search with the former query to narrow down the literature, while one word *English* was added to avoid missing any relevant literature, such as literature containing *English as a second language* in the title or abstract. Third, we only chose research articles; other document types, such as review articles and book reviews, were eliminated. Fourth, considering our specialization in English language teaching, only focusing on English-language publications ensures the relevance and consistency of the research, and helps avoid language comprehension and translation issues. Our initial screening in WoS identified 2003 as the publication year of the earliest relevant article. We then extended the period to 2022, the year prior to our analysis (conducted in mid-2023). Finally, 579 bibliometric records were obtained and subsequently downloaded as two tab-separated values (TSV) files.

2.2. Data filtering

The two TSV files were merged into a single file and imported into Zotero, a reference management tool, for further filtering of the literature. To speed up this process, we used a third-party Zotero plugin, Zotero Tag,¹ to label the literature as *relevant* or *irrelevant* to textbook studies. It should be noted that, before filtering the literature, all corresponding full texts were downloaded manually as the title and abstract alone may not be sufficient for excluding all irrelevant literature. Specifically, we excluded the publications that met each of the following criteria: (1) studies falling out of the scope of English language teaching; (2) studies not taking English textbooks for non-native speakers as research objects; (3) studies centering on other types of materials rather than textbooks; (4) studies pertinent to textbook use or textbook production rather than textbook content (as mentioned earlier); and (5) studies aimed at developing a textbook evaluation checklist but without using the checklist to analyze textbooks. The two authors independently conducted literature filtering and achieved a

¹ Zotero Tag has been renamed as “Zotero-Action-Tags” for use with the latest version of Zotero. It can be downloaded at <https://github.com/windingwind/zotero-actions-tags>.

high kappa reliability of .95. The main disagreement arose from some studies that not only focused on textbook content research but also included research on textbook use. We decided to include these studies as they do have a significant portion related to textbook content research. Finally, the remaining 153 documents were used in the formal analysis, and their metadata were saved as a comma-separated values (CSV) file.

2.3. Data coding and processing

To encode each article more precisely in the existing Excel file, we added four new columns next to the Title column: *research topics*, *analytical tools*, *textbook levels*, and *textbook types*. Specifically, *research topics* identifies the central theme of the study; *analytical tools* specifies the methods used to analyze textbook content; *textbook levels* indicates the education level for which the textbooks are designed; and *textbook types* refers to the specific purposes of the textbooks, such as English for general purposes (EGP) or English for specific purposes (ESP). Two authors independently reviewed the title and abstract of each publication to select one or two topics that most accurately captured the core theme. For the remaining variables, the authors sometimes needed to review the full text in addition to the title and abstract as the title and abstract did not always contain the necessary information. The inter-rater reliability measured by Cohen's κ was consistently high (research topics, $\kappa = .90$; analytical tools, $\kappa = .95$; textbook levels, $\kappa = 1$; textbook types, $\kappa = 1$). Subsequently, the authors discussed and resolved any inconsistencies, such as merging *gender bias* and *gender representation* under the broader category of *gender ideology*.

After the coding phase, to prevent the loss of essential information, we re-matched the exported CSV file with the original data file. Then, we ranked journals as "prolific" by their total textbook content-related publications. More importantly, we identified highly cited articles and their references with both the raw citation count and normalized citation count. The normalized citation count is a metric that compares the raw citation count of a paper with the average citation count of papers published in the same year (Waltman, 2016). Specifically, supposing a paper published in 2018 was cited 21 times, and there were a total of 11 papers published in 2018, with these 11 papers receiving a total of 104 citations. The average citation count is then $104/11 \approx 9.45$. Thus, the normalized citation frequency of this paper would be $21/9.45 \approx 2.22$. For the remainder of the data analysis, we calculated the frequency of each coding item and its relative frequency.

All the data analyses were performed in R (R Core Team, 2024) using RStudio. The *tidyverse* (Wickham et al., 2019) package was used for data wrangling

and visualization, and the *crosstable* (Chaltiel, 2023) package for computing descriptive statistics on datasets.

3. Results and discussion

In this section, we report findings regarding the foregoing research questions, with the first four parts based on bibliometric analysis (addressing RQ1) and the remaining three parts based on content analysis (addressing RQ2).

3.1. Publication trends

Figure 1 depicts the annual publication trend of research on ELT textbook content from 2003 to 2022. Overall, the number of publications shows a rising trend, with initial slow growth, fluctuations in the middle period, and a rapid increase toward the end. The quadratic polynomial fitting yields an R^2 of 0.79, indicating the model accounts for 79% of the variance in publication numbers and thus demonstrates a reasonably good fit. With $p < .001$, the result exhibits high statistical significance, suggesting the observed growth trend is not attributable to random chance. Collectively, these findings reflect that research on ELT textbook content has increasingly gained academic traction over these years.

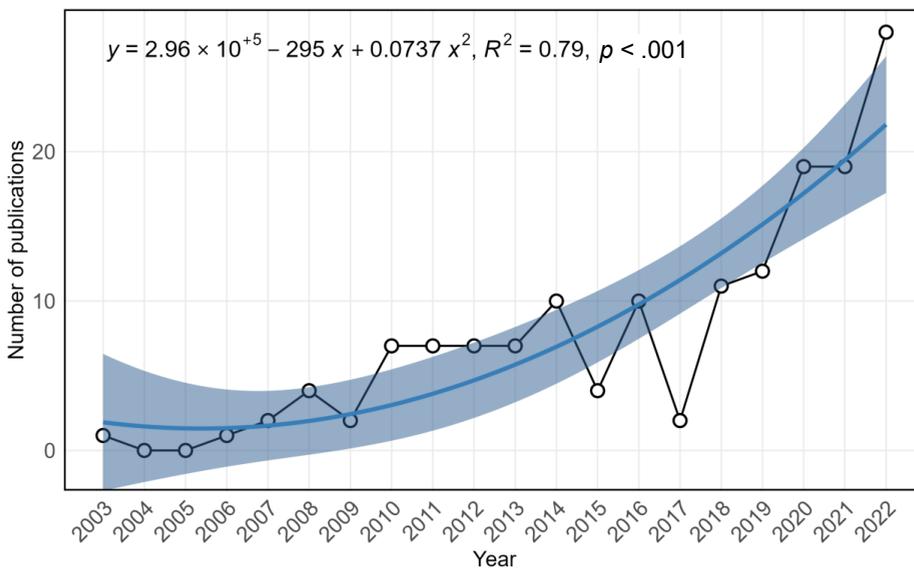


Figure 1 Annual publication trend of research on ELT textbook content

3.2. Profiling journals

Journals that have published at least four articles on ELT textbook study are presented in Table 1. All journals are SSCI-indexed journals except for one, *Revista Española de Lingüística Aplicada*, an A&HCI-indexed journal affiliated with the Spanish Association of Applied Linguistics. Leading the field are *ELT Journal* ($N = 11$) and *Language Teaching Research* ($N = 11$). While the former focuses primarily on research related to English language teaching, the latter covers a broader range of topics in language education. Owing to their expansive scope, *System* ($N = 7$) and *RELC Journal* ($N = 4$) have long intrigued language educators. Two flagship journals feature prominently in this list: *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* ($N = 7$), which focuses on academic English instruction, and *English for Specific Purposes* ($N = 6$), an international peer-reviewed journal devoted to research with direct implications for teaching discourse in specialized contexts. In addition, *TESOL Quarterly* ($N = 5$), the American counterpart of *ELT Journal* (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004), also finds its place in this ranking. Furthermore, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* ($N = 4$) and *Language, Culture and Curriculum* ($N = 7$), with their special focus on cultural diversity, are favored by researchers exploring textbook content. *Sage Open* ($N = 5$) is a multidisciplinary journal spanning various humanities and social science disciplines. Since textbook research has a certain interdisciplinary nature (Fuchs & Bock, 2018), it publishes some articles related to textbook research. Complementing these journals focused on ELT textbook content research, *Linguistics and Education* ($N = 4$) attracts textbook researchers by centering on language and semiotics in global learning, offering insights into how textbooks mediate learning opportunities.

Table 1 Journals with a publication count of 4 or higher

Source	Number of publications	Average citation
<i>ELT Journal</i>	11	14.45
<i>Language Teaching Research</i>	11	11.45
<i>Language, Culture and Curriculum</i>	7	22.86
<i>Journal of English for Academic Purposes</i>	7	13.29
<i>System</i>	7	7.29
<i>English for Specific Purposes</i>	6	20.00
<i>TESOL Quarterly</i>	5	32.40
<i>Revista Española de Lingüística Aplicada</i>	5	8.40
<i>Sage Open</i>	5	1.20
<i>Linguistics and Education</i>	4	11.50
<i>RELC Journal</i>	4	9.75
<i>Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development</i>	4	5.25

Note. Average citation is calculated as the total citations received by a journal divided by the number of articles it published.

3.3. Most highly cited articles

Citations serve as a standard method for authors to acknowledge their indebtedness to previous research and highlight its relevance to their own studies, ultimately showcasing the impact of that work; citation-based metrics appear to be the most convenient way to recognize the most influential publications (Hyland & Jiang, 2024). As such, the most highly cited articles related to ELT textbook research are indexed in Table 2 alongside their raw citations and normalized citations. Liu et al. (2022) topped the list with their work on cultural representation in university English textbooks in China. Although this article was recently published, it has achieved a raw citation count of 18 and a normalized count of 10.08, which is an impressive result. One of the main reasons for potentially achieving such high citations in a relatively short period of time is its innovative methodology, namely, the use of corpus linguistics to examine the distribution of different national cultures in English textbooks, which may be one of the first studies of its kind. The second most cited article (Yang & Coxhead, 2022) also utilizes the corpus-based approach but focuses on a different research topic, which is the vocabulary coverage of the *New Concept English* textbook series.

Table 2 Most highly cited articles ranked by normalized citation

Article	Title	Raw citation	Normalized citation
Liu et al. (2022)	Dominance of Anglo-American cultural representations in university English textbooks in China: A corpus linguistics analysis	18	10.08
Yang and Coxhead (2022)	A corpus-based study of vocabulary in the <i>New Concept English</i> textbook series	9	5.04
Lee (2019)	In the pursuit of a gender-equal society: Do Japanese EFL textbooks play a role?	22	4.26
Keles and Yazan (2023)	Representation of cultures and communities in a global ELT textbook: A diachronic content analysis	26	3.83
Syairofi et al. (2023)	Emancipating SLA findings to inform EFL textbooks: A look at Indonesian school English textbooks	6	3.36
Weninger and Kiss (2013)	Culture in English as a foreign language (EFL) textbooks: A semiotic approach	66	3.32
Ren and Han (2016)	The representation of pragmatic knowledge in recent ELT textbooks	34	2.98
Calafato and Gudim (2022)	Literature in contemporary foreign language school textbooks in Russia: Content, approaches, and readability	5	2.80
Babaii and Sheikhi (2018)	Traces of neoliberalism in English teaching materials: A critical discourse analysis	26	2.75
Weninger (2021)	Multimodality in critical language textbook analysis	10	2.64

Notably, Lee's (2019) research on gender bias in textbooks records a high citation rate, indicative of scholarly engagement with this concept. Keles and Yazan's (2023) work is a rare diachronic study that examined cultural representation in *New Headway* Elementary Level textbooks, drawing on Yuen's (2011) four dimensions: persons, perspectives, products, and practices. Syairofi et al. (2023) found that *Bahasa Inggris, When English Rings a Bell*, a widely used Indonesian EFL textbook, offers ample linguistic input and intentional learning opportunities but lacks sufficient interactive activities for implicit knowledge development. Upon closer inspection, one might question why two prior studies are dated 2023, given that our search criteria were confined to 2022. Notably, these works were accessible on WoS in 2022 but were formally published in 2023, thereby aligning with our search parameters. Therefore, when calculating the citation frequency, the publication dates of these two articles are based on their online publication dates. The remaining highly cited articles also cover topics such as *pragmatic knowledge* (Ren & Han, 2016), *literary knowledge* (Calafato & Gudim, 2022), and *neoliberalism* (Babaii & Sheikhi, 2018) in textbooks.

3.4. Most highly cited references

By extracting references from 153 articles, we can uncover influential yet overlooked or neglected literature in this field. According to Table 3, among the top 10 highly cited references, there are seven journal articles, one book chapter, and two monographs. For instance, Porreca's (1984) work may be one of the earliest studies published in a prestigious journal on how sexism is manifested in ELT textbooks and with what consequences. Coxhead's (2000) new academic list provides a useful basis for further research into the academic vocabulary of EAP textbooks. It is noteworthy to mention two monographs in particular. These are Biber et al.'s (1999) *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* and Kramsch's (1993) *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. The former stands out by describing the patterns of language use for varied grammatical features, based on empirical analyses of grammatical patterns in a 40-million-word corpus of spoken and written registers, which can be considered as one of the sources of inspiration for scholars who are interested in the linguistic features of instructional materials. The latter emphasizes that "[c]ulture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing" (1993, p. 1). This statement underscores that culture in language learning is no mere add-on to the four core skills but an integral part, with implications for English textbook research.

A closer examination of Tables 2 and 3 reveals that only one publication appears in both as a highly cited article and a highly cited reference, demonstrating its important role in this research field. Specifically, Weninger’s (2021) article “Multimodality in critical language textbook analysis” proposes a dual framework for analyzing textbook content: meaning as representation (focusing on curricular knowledge) and meaning as interaction (emphasizing pedagogical engagement).

Table 3 Most highly cited references

Work	Title	Raw citation	Normalized citation
Shin et al. (2011)	Presentation of local and international culture in current international English-language teaching textbooks	16	11.75
Cortazzi and Jin (1999)	Cultural mirrors: Materials and methods in the EFL classroom	14	10.52
Weninger (2021)	Multimodality in critical language textbook analysis	13	10.13
Matsuda (2002)	Representation of users and uses of English in beginning Japanese EFL textbooks	14	9.75
Biber et al. (1999)	Longman grammar of spoken and written English	13	9.77
Kramersch (1993)	Context and culture in language teaching	13	9.57
Yuen (2011)	The representation of foreign cultures in English textbooks	13	9.54
Tomlinson (2012)	Materials development for language learning and teaching	12	9.50
Porreca (1984)	Sexism in current ESL textbooks	15	8.88
Coxhead (2000)	A new academic word list	12	8.94

3.5. Research topics

Although the research topics in the textbooks are diverse, they can generally be classified into three major categories² as shown in Table 4: *language input* ($N = 68$), *cultural representation* ($N = 77$), and *miscellaneous* ($N = 12$). We will primarily focus on the first two categories, as the third category covers a wide range of research topics and can be quite broad in scope. *Language input* is typically examined through analyses of the quantity and quality of language exposure that learners receive in various contexts. This includes looking at factors such as frequency of input, types of input (e.g., spoken or written), and the complexity of language structures presented to learners. *Cultural representation* in ELT textbooks focuses on how cultural elements are depicted and incorporated. Researchers examine how cultural norms, values, traditions, and practices are presented in the materials, and explore the impact of these portrayals on language learning and intercultural understanding.

² Harwood (2014a) broke down textbook content research into language, culture, and pragmatics. But in our study, we put pragmatics under the umbrella of “language input.” The reason is that pragmatics is mostly discussed in terms of language activities in the textbooks.

course should start with some most common lexical items surrounding several “general interest topics” and expand them to higher levels in a progressive order. Nguyen (2021) conducted a survey to identify the effectiveness of the reading passages in a new series of English-language textbooks used by Vietnamese high schools with the following factors taken into account: number of novel words, the importance of these words for text comprehension, embedding clues for lexical inferring, and word repetition. The second notable topic is *pragmatics* ($N = 9$), which typically focuses on speech acts, such as requests, apologies, compliments, and refusals. The third prominent topic is *multi-word units* ($N = 8$), also known as formulaic language (Hsu, 2014; Northbrook & Conklin, 2018). It usually consists of sequences of two or more words, such as lexical bundles (*and as a result of*), collocations (*make a decision*), phrasal verbs (*turn down*), etc.

One typical type of research in this area is to compare the frequency and functions of lexical bundles in ELT textbooks with reference corpora (typically native English corpora), in order to uncover potential deficiencies in language input provided by these textbooks (Nekrasova-Beker, 2019). Among the subtopics within the broader category of language input, the topic of *task* ($N = 5$) has gained popularity in recent years. The emphasis on tasks stems from the prevalence of task-based teaching methodology (Barrot, 2019; Butler et al., 2018), where a task is defined as a “workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed” (Ellis, 2003, p. 16). In addition to the aforementioned topics, *linguistic complexity* ($N = 3$) has also started to attract the interest of textbook researchers, who typically use these indicators as the basis for grading textbooks.

Unlike the primary category (*language input*), which prioritizes learners’ mastery of language skills, the secondary category (*cultural representation*) focuses on integrating essential cultural knowledge and concepts into textbooks. When analyzing cultural representation in ELT textbooks, this domain can be divided into two subcategories: *concentric circles* and *ideologies and values*.

The former subcategory is inspired by Kachru’s (1992) three concentric circles, a model that significantly shifted how we understand the global role of English. This framework groups languages according to their relationship with English: the Inner Circle (where English is the primary native language), the Outer Circle (where English is an official language alongside others, often evolving nativized forms), and the Expanding Circle (where English is learned as a foreign language, mainly for international communication). In textbook analysis, this framework is particularly useful for examining the cultural affiliations embedded in teaching materials, which refer to which cultural contexts (Inner, Outer, or Expanding Circle) are prioritized or marginalized in content. For instance, Liu et al. (2022) found that

the Anglo-American culture was prevalent in Chinese mainstream university textbooks, while little interest was shown in local or Chinese culture.

The latter subcategory centers on core cultural aspects: *ideologies and values*. Here, we juxtapose these two not because they are indistinguishable, but because textbook research rarely requires strict differentiation. Specifically, ideology, which is more than a collection of beliefs, represents the dominant political, educational, or cultural value system (Dijk, 1998) that gains legitimacy through institutionally disseminated discourses and their influence on audiences (Curdt-Christiansen, 2015). The most prominent research in this area focuses on *gender ideology* ($N = 22$), which commonly examines, in educational materials, the frequency of personal pronoun usage and the representation of male and female occupations that manifest in both textual and visual elements (Dahmardeh & Kim, 2020; Lee & Collins, 2010). Recent research has also expanded to focus on environmental or ecological values in textbooks. For example, Zahoor and Janjua (2020) combined Gaard's (2008) eco-pedagogical framework (developed for children's texts) with Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) transitivity analysis model to evaluate Pakistani primary-level English textbooks. Their findings revealed that depictions of nature and the human-nature relationship predominantly propagated an anthropocentric worldview, lacking substantial eco-pedagogical value. This line of inquiry aligns with Lei and Liu's (2019) bibliometric analysis of applied linguistics research trends (2005-2016), which identified *language ideology* as a significant emerging focus.

3.6. Analytical tools

In this subsection, we report the distribution of research tools used in 153 articles. As can be seen from Table 5, the most common research method used is *manual content analysis* ($N = 87$), in which researchers develop a coding scheme or a set of categories relevant to their research objectives (just as we did in relation to the coding process conducted in our study). They then manually review the data and assign codes or categories to specific portions of the content based on predefined criteria. This process requires careful reading, interpretation, and categorization of the data. This process leans towards quantitative analysis overall, while incorporating qualitative interpretations of the data. For example, Barrot (2019) conducted a comprehensive investigation of task complexity in ELT coursebooks. He analyzed 30 widely used coursebooks in the Philippines across different grade levels. Using a framework that included dimensions like contextual support, task type, and planning time, he classified tasks into complexity levels. The study found that most tasks were concentrated at moderate complexity levels

(3 to 6), and none of the coursebooks showed a linear progression of task complexity either within each level or across grade levels. This highlighted the need for clearer guidelines in sequencing tasks in ELT textbooks.

Table 5 Distribution of analytical tools used in all the articles

Analytical tools	N	%
Manual content analysis	87	56.86
Corpus-based analysis	36	23.53
Critical discourse analysis	14	9.15
Multimodal discourse analysis	4	2.61
Visual analysis	4	2.61
Two tools combined	2	1.31
Not specified	6	3.92

Corpus-based analysis, the second most-used approach ($N = 36$), has grown popular amid advances in computer technology and more accurate scanning tools, utilizing large text datasets to study language patterns (Baker, 2023). These corpus-based studies (e.g., Le Foll, 2023; Nekrasova-Beker, 2019) mainly focus on examining the distribution and variation of language features in textbooks or differences between textbook English and the English spoken by native speakers. For instance, Jin et al. (2020) presented a large-scale analysis focusing on the quantitative variances in syntactic complexity of ELT textbooks across various grade levels in China. By examining 3,368 English texts from approved primary and secondary grade textbooks, researchers identified significant differences in language features between grade levels. Their findings, which included predictors of grade levels based on logistic regression analysis, have implications for establishing benchmarks in syntactic complexity and guiding future text adaptation practices within the EFL curriculum in China.

Critical discourse analysis ($N = 14$) is a research method that examines power dynamics, social relations, and ideologies embedded within language use (Fairclough, 2010). It aims to uncover hidden meanings, ideologies, and discursive strategies employed in texts or speech. Critical discourse analysis seeks to challenge dominant discourses and reveal how language can perpetuate inequality, oppression, or marginalization. For example, Nizamani and Shah (2022) drew on Fairclough's (2010) three-dimensional model⁴ to examine the traces of neoliberal ideology in English language

⁴ Fairclough's three-dimensional model is a framework in critical discourse analysis that examines language use in terms of three dimensions: text, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice. The model considers how texts are produced, how they are interpreted in social contexts, and how broader societal structures and ideologies influence language use and communication. Critical discourse analysis has multiple analytical methods (see Wodak & Meyer, 2015, for details).

textbooks used in elite private schools in Pakistan. Their findings highlighted the prevalence of neoliberal themes, such as marketization and consumerism, preparing learners for a competitive rather than cooperative world.

In addition, *multimodal discourse analysis* ($N = 4$) is a research method used in coursebook studies to explore communication beyond just language. It incorporates various modes, such as visuals, gestures, sounds, and spatial arrangements (Kress & Leeuwen, 2021) and recognizes that meaning-making in textbooks is not solely dependent on linguistic elements but also on these multimodal resources. Chen (2010) used this approach in EFL textbook research, focusing on multimodal resources fostering dialogic interaction via social semiotics. His studied textbooks had picnic illustrations (vivifying friendship descriptions), dialogue balloons (casual exchanges differing from formal text), and jointly-constructed texts (students' picnic thoughts). These features aided meaning negotiation and showcased diverse expressions, highlighting the role of non-linguistic elements.

Slightly different from multimodal discourse analysis, *visual analysis* ($N = 4$) refers to the examination and interpretation of non-textual elements present in educational materials. It focuses on analyzing and understanding the visual components, such as images, diagrams, charts, graphs, illustrations, and layout design within the textbooks. Guo and Feng's (2015) research clearly illustrates how visual analysis works by explicating the ontogenetic change of the representational meaning of visual images in textbooks. They found that textbook pictures change as students get older. Younger kids see illustrations that tell stories, but older students get pictures that explain ideas. The focus also moves from single people to whole groups, and from local settings to global ones. This change helps students learn to think in more complex ways and get ready for harder subjects.

The last two categories are *two tools combined* and *not specified*. The former, includes two studies, combines quantitative content analysis and corpus-based analysis. An example is Lee's (2019) study: by using gender-neutral vocabulary (e.g., addressing women as "Ms") and balancing male/female speakers' representation, it showcases authors' gender awareness. However, contemporary Japanese textbooks still undervalue women's achievements. The latter, encompassing six studies, includes older publications with inadequately detailed research designs.

3.7. Textbook types and textbook levels

We cross-tabulated the variable of textbook types and textbook levels in Table 6. From the perspective of textbook types, it is evident that research on textbooks for secondary education holds a dominant position, with a raw frequency of 73 and a relative frequency of 48%. The preference for researching textbooks

in secondary education may be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the secondary education stage plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between earlier and later stages of education. Additionally, secondary textbooks directly influence students' preparation for higher education and future careers, making their quality and effectiveness a primary concern for educators and researchers alike. The number of studies conducted on university-level textbooks is comparable to that of primary education, with a raw frequency of 14 and 10, respectively.

When examining different textbook types, it becomes clear that research focused on general English textbooks occupies a prominent position ($N = 131$). It should be clarified that ESP, as defined here, encompasses EAP as the latter has emerged from the broader field of ESP. Although we have not explicitly subdivided ESP textbooks here, it can be inferred that academic English textbooks receive the highest amount of research attention. This is likely due to the widespread availability of specialized English courses in universities, which necessitates a focus on academic language and skills.

When cross-referencing textbook types and levels, we identified ESP textbook research in primary (one publication, 5% of ESP textbooks) and secondary (two publications, 9% of ESP textbooks) education. This aligns with K-12 EMI policies as EMI programs require ESP-aligned specialized resources (e.g., subject-specific vocabulary). While EMI and ELT overlap in language focus, this analysis prioritizes the role of ESP in content-based instruction, so strict differentiation is unnecessary.

Table 6 The matrix of textbook types and textbook levels

Textbook levels	Textbook types		Total
	EGP	ESP	
Primary level	14 (93%/11%)	1 (7%/5%)	15 (10%)
Secondary level	71 (97%/54%)	2 (3%/9%)	73 (48%)
Tertiary level	10 (37%/8%)	17 (63%/77%)	27 (18%)
More than one level	32 (94%/24%)	2 (6%/9%)	34 (22%)
Not specified	4 (100%/3%)	0 (0%/0%)	4 (3%)
Total	131 (86%)	22 (14%)	153 (100%)

4. Conclusion

4.1. Major findings

With the help of bibliometrics and content analysis, this article provides an overview of English textbook research in the past 20 years. The research findings indicate that English textbook research has become interdisciplinary. In addition to attracting attention from linguistics and education, it has also touched upon

the realm of culture studies. At the same time, vocabulary and gender ideology, as two subtopics related to language input and cultural representation in textbooks, have become popular areas of research in this field. Meanwhile, there are several emerging topics that deserve further research attention, such as task, linguistic complexity, and environmental values. Unfortunately, the distribution of relevant research is highly imbalanced in terms of textbook types and textbook levels. Specifically, there is a strong preference among researchers for studying textbooks at the secondary school level and general English textbooks. This article could potentially contribute in three ways. First, it guides stakeholders to less-explored research areas, providing a reference for textbook researchers, especially newcomers, to form a basic outline of textbook content research and attempt feasible studies. Second, it updates textbook writers' knowledge, enabling them to create more effective and engaging ELT resources that better meet learners' needs with a refreshed understanding. Third, it offers methodological guidance for similar research combining bibliometrics and content analysis.

4.2. Directions for future research

To leverage the insights from the findings above, we propose the following focal points for future research aimed at promoting the sustainable development of this field, focusing on textbook types and textbook levels, research topics, research methods and the research timeframe.

First, we recommend increasing research on textbooks for elementary and university levels, emphasizing coherence between levels to ensure smooth learning progression. Simultaneously, prioritizing ESP textbook research is critical. Developing effective ESP materials presents unique challenges (e.g., identifying discipline-specific language needs, curating authentic professional materials, designing real-world simulations like sales negotiations or conference presentations). These challenges directly justify the need for dedicated research: only targeted investigations can address the complexity of aligning ESP materials with specialized instructional goals.

Second, we encourage researchers to thoroughly examine the book by Biber and his colleagues, namely, *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber et al., 1999). This book is a great reference for the study of language input in textbooks. It is not a traditional, rule-based grammar book. Instead, it is rooted in the Longman Corpus Network, a large-scale corpus with 6,000 authentic examples across registers like conversation and academic prose. Grammar rules here derive from actual language use, not artificial prescriptions, so its content reflects real communication, such as spoken-written differences and context-driven structures,

providing targeted, corpus-validated material for language learning. Thus, its language points offer a rich source for textbook content research. For example, Biber et al.'s (1999) book reveals that academic writing overuses nominalizations like "the implementation of strategies." Many textbooks might encourage overuse of nominalizations partly because they associate such structures with "academic formality" and treat them as a marker of sophisticated writing. Such overuse can make texts cumbersome, increasing the difficulty for learners to grasp key information, and this leads students to produce rigid, hard-to-follow academic texts that lack the natural flow of authentic scholarly communication. Textbook studies can check if materials teach their appropriate use.

Regarding the cultural representation of textbooks, a comprehensive exploration can be conducted to assess the appropriateness of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2016) inscribed in the textbook discourse, which is a response to the critical pedagogy aimed at empowering learners to be active citizens and agents of social change (Pennycook, 2022; Sharma, 2020; Widodo, 2018). In addition, we can also compare the differences and similarities in the values represented by textbooks in different countries to confirm whether the values have geographical proximity (Jackson & Medvedev, 2024), that is, whether countries with similar geographical locations tend to have similar values.

Third, methodological refinement is paramount for advancing textbook content analysis. Prior investigations have predominantly utilized manual annotation, a strategy that, while conceptually uncomplicated, often proved unwieldy when scrutinizing large amounts of textbooks. In large-scale research projects, repeated rounds of coding are usually necessary, and this takes a lot of time and effort. Presently, the advent of advanced large language models (LLMs), represented by models like OpenAI o1 and DeepSeek R1, furnishes investigators with innovative instrumentalities to optimize and enrich textbook-based inquiries. These cutting-edge resources exhibit notable proficiencies across salient domains. Their capacity for efficacious processing of voluminous textual datasets facilitates comprehensive content scrutiny, unveiling intricate patterns and thematic interrelations potentially imperceptible to human annotators (Zhao et al., 2023). Besides this, researchers can fine-tune them to achieve better performance on specific research tasks, such as rhetorical move-step analysis (Kim & Lu, 2024), speech acts analysis (Yu et al., 2024), etc. Overall, using these models can save researchers time and effort, and also uncover insights that are difficult to identify with traditional methods.

Lastly, we should not overlook the importance of giving more attention to longitudinal research on English textbooks. Although our paper does not provide information on the temporal span of the 153 studies, we had a strong sense during the coding process that diachronic research was significantly underrepresented. Such research is valuable for understanding how textbook compilation

reflects current social trends, political agendas, or market demands for popular educational content. Textbooks often mirror societal priorities through their content choices. For instance, a growing emphasis on digital literacy may lead to expanded coverage of technology-related skills, which aligns with tech-focused trends. Similarly, political influences can shape historical narratives: when a government prioritizes patriotism, textbooks might emphasize stories of national heroes while minimizing controversial events, such as colonial exploitation or civil wars.

4.3. Limitations

Despite the contributions made by this study, it is not without its limitations. Firstly, while the study made efforts to encompass a wide range of high-quality journal articles, it did not include doctoral theses, book chapters, and other valuable sources. Secondly, by using SSCI and A&HCI as the inclusion criteria, there is a possibility of missing out on articles published before formal indexing. Although these limitations are not expected to impact the study significantly, future research that incorporates a more comprehensive range of sources could undoubtedly enhance the credibility of the findings.

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