

Corpus-based evaluation of pedagogical materials *If*-conditionals in ELT coursebooks and the BNC

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Abstract

This paper aims to contribute to the growing body of what may be termed pedagogy-driven corpus-based research; that is, research which is situated at the intersection of language description, pedagogical grammar, and pedagogical materials evaluation (e.g. Kennedy, 1992; Owen, 1993; Hunston & Francis, 1998; Harwood, 2005; Römer, 2004, 2005).

The paper is based on an ongoing study of conditional sentences in the British National Corpus and examines the representation of the typology used in a number of English language teaching (ELT) coursebooks, with reference to a random sample of 1,000 *if*-sentences from the written sub-corpus of the BNC. The paper reports on the frequency of the ELT types in the sample and outlines the cases that the ELT typology does not cover. It also focuses on the use of modality and modal expressions, as well as what ELT treats as ‘special cases’, such as ‘*if* + Past tense’ with past time reference, and (semi-)fixed expressions (e.g. *if any*, *if not*, *if so*).

Overall, current ELT coursebooks essentially use the typology in Logic (*real*, *counterfactual* and *hypothetical*), which they term *first*, *second* and *third* types respectively, with the addition of two more types, *zero* and *mixed*. In addition, they adopt a restricted (and restricting), if not naïve, approach to modality, in that only central modals feature in the definitions and examples for each type. Normally, ELT materials present specific combinations of verb forms and modals in the two clauses, as well as the time reference and attitude to likelihood that each combination, rather than each clause, expresses. That is, they instruct learners what combinations of tense-aspect marking and modal auxiliaries to use in the protasis and apodosis, as well as what attitude to possibility and time reference each resulting combination expresses. They also outline ‘special cases’ which the ELT typology presumably does not cater for.

A number of studies have reported that the ELT typology fails to account for a large number of attested *if*-conditionals, and provides learners with a narrow and inaccurate view of *if*-conditionals (Hwang, 1979; Maule, 1988; Fulcher, 1991; Wang, 1991; Ferguson, 2001). The study findings corroborate these conclusions, while providing more detailed quantitative information. However, this study differs from those cited above in two respects. It adopts a modular approach to analysis; that is, the *if*-clause and main clause of the conditionals in the

sample were annotated manually for, on the one hand, the tense-aspect marking of the main verb and the modal expressions, and, on the other, the modality marking and time reference. Also, the study examines the ELT typology on its own terms, and distinguishes four levels of inclusion, determined on the basis of the information given in a sample of ten coursebooks for advanced learners.

Previous pilot examinations of ten ELT coursebooks for upper-intermediate and advanced learners published between 1998-2002 (Gabrielatos, 2003a,b, 2004) showed that even if no distinctions were made on the basis of the semantic/pragmatic relation holding between the two clauses, and even if the typologies given in all ten coursebooks were conflated into an inclusive one, this typology would only account some 44% of the cases found in the sample. The introduction of the *mixed* type does not seem to be an educationally sound decision, as this type showed a mere frequency of 1.5% in the sample, and it would become obsolete if a more data-based approach to a pedagogical typology were adopted. The distinction between the traditional *first* type and the newly introduced *zero* type, too, proves to be unnecessary and confusing, as the difference between the two has nothing to do with the presence/absence or nature of modalization in the two clauses. Rather the distinction is one of time reference; specifically, the distinction is between timelessness (*zero*) and future reference (*first*). It seems educationally sound, then, to conflate the two in one category, corresponding to what Quirk et al. (1985) term *open conditionals*. One of the most significant limitations of the ELT typology, arguably inherited from the typology in Logic which it is based on, is that it distinguishes types only in terms of modality marking and time orientation. More specifically, it ignores the category of conditionals termed *indirect conditionals* (Quirk et al., 1985), *speech act conditionals* (Sweetser, 1990), or *pragmatic conditionals* (Athanasiadou & Dirven, 1997).

This paper will examine current editions of the same coursebooks (when applicable) or current coursebooks of the same type and level as those used in the pilot studies. It will report on any adaptations in their treatment of conditionals - thus also examining to what extent ELT coursebooks seem to become informed of corpus findings. It will also provide a more detailed analysis, which also takes account of the semantic/pragmatic relation between the two clauses.

The paper will conclude that the present treatment of *if*-conditionals in the ELT coursebooks examined is characterised by the following basic shortcomings:

- a. It provides learners with an incomplete, and in some cases distorted, picture of *if*-conditionals, in terms, on the one hand, of their morphosyntactic patterns and modality marking, and, on the other, the link between morphosyntax and the semantic/pragmatic relation between the clauses.
- b. It tends to overwhelm learners with long lists of 'special cases' or 'exceptions' (when rules of some description are given), or by offering a piecemeal account of possible combinations without showing how they may fit a coherent framework.
- c. It potentially limits the learners' language production by restricting their repertoire to a small number of pre-fabricated combinations of protasis and apodosis, which, in addition, may not be among the most frequent ones.

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Corpus-based evaluation of pedagogical materials

If-conditionals in ELT coursebooks and the BNC

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Focus

Frequency of the types of *if*-conditionals usually presented in ELT coursebooks.

Relative frequency of the ELT types in the corpus sample.

Frequency of what ELT coursebooks treat as 'special cases'.

Implications for a coherent pedagogical framework.

Structure of the paper

- ❖ Coursebook and learner profile.
- ❖ ELT Typology: approach and description.
- ❖ Corpus sample and annotation.
- ❖ Findings and discussion.
- ❖ Conclusions and recommendations.

Coursebook and learner profile

- ❖ 11 advanced level coursebooks (1999-2004, current editions).
- ❖ 10 prepare learners for the *Advanced* or *Proficiency* Cambridge ESOL exams.
- ❖ Expected learner level at beginning of course: at least CEF level B2 (IELTS 5.0-6.0).
- ❖ Target levels: CEF C1 (IELTS 6.5-7.0)
CEF C2 (IELTS 7.5+).
- ❖ Learners are expected to be aged 16-25+, with average age being around 23.

http://www.ielts.org/library/IELTS_COE%20filer.pdf
http://www.cambridgeesol.org/support/downloads/cae/cae_hb_intro.pdf (p. 4)
http://www.cambridgeesol.org/support/downloads/cpe/cpe_hb_intro.pdf (p. 4)

ELT typology

Verb Forms: tense-aspect marking and modals		Time Reference	Meaning: attitude to likelihood
<i>If</i> -clause	Main Clause		

Zero conditional

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present Simple • Present Perfect • Present Progressive • Modal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present Simple • Imperative • Modal 	<p>always true/ the case</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expresses real situations. • Describes rules and situations where one event always follows the other. • Used to talk about common states/events. • True in the present • Expresses eternal/general truths. • We use it to say what always happens.
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First conditional

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present Simple • Present Perfect • Present Progressive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>will, would, can, could, may, might, should, going to</i> + infinitive • Modal • Imperative 	<p>present or future</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible • Probable • Based on fact in real time • Expresses real / very probable situations • Possible future events that depend on other future events.
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Second conditional

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Past Simple • Past Progressive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>would, could, might, should</i> + infinitive 	<p>present or future</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less probable • Less definite • (Very/highly) unlikely • Improbable • Impossible • Not true • Unreal • Contrary to reality • Imaginary
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Third conditional

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Past Perfect • Past Perfect Progressive • Modal + Perfect Inf. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>would, could, might, should</i> + have + past participle 	<p>past</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Highly) unlikely • Unreal • Impossible • Imaginary • Contrary to past facts • Hypothetical past situation • No longer possible
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Mixed conditionals

Past Perfect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>would, could, might, should</i> + infinitive • Modal 	Links past and present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change in past situation would affect present situation
Past Simple	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>would, could, might, should</i> + have + past participle • Modal 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change in present situation would affect past situation

'Special' cases

- ❖ Modals in the *if*-clause
 - *will* (= insistence, willingness)
 - *would* (= request)
 - *should* (= politeness)
 - *could*
 - *be to*
- ❖ Modal expressions other than central or marginal modals.
- ❖ '*If* + Past tense' with past time reference

The sample

- ❖ Random sample of 1,000 *S-units* containing the word *if* from the written sub-corpus of the BNC.
- ❖ Interface: BNCweb.
- ❖ In case of two or more embedded *if*-conditionals, only the one highlighted by the 'thin' function was taken into account.
- ❖ After certain cases were excluded, the sample was 781 *S-units*.

Excluded

<i>if = whether</i>	He finished his beer sadly, wondered if he would have been better off, after all, among them at the club. [AD1 882]
<i>if = (al)though</i>	The second way in which Hobhouse's work has had a potent, if delayed, influence is through the later elaboration of his notion of "citizenship". [H9F 770]
<i>as if = as though</i>	As if in protest, George uttered a blood-curdling, lunatic-sounding cackle, and fell fractionally forward. [BPA 2144]
<i>even if</i>	It was a 35mm affair even if a rather simplified one with a built-in flash. [HR4 25]
<i>if = even if</i>	She would prove that boorish man wrong, if it was the last thing she did! [HGT 180]
Non textually recoverable ellipsis	What are the key differences between ESAs and Tir Cymen, and which one (if either) should CPRW favour? [GXG 1574]

Annotation

- ❖ Sample annotated for aspects mentioned in ELT typology.
- ❖ Annotator as 'diligent language learner'.
- ❖ Annotation for:
 - Tense and aspect marking
 - Modal expressions
 - Time reference
 - Modality
 - Semantic/pragmatic relation between *if*-clause and main clause
 - Level of conformity to ELT types
- ❖ Sentences had to conform to all formal and semantic criteria stated in the coursebook typology to be annotated for an ELT type.

Annotation: Three levels of conformity

Basic

- ❖ First, second and third (as in logic).

Consensual

- ❖ Elements presented in **all** coursebooks.

Inclusive

- ❖ Elements presented in **any** of the coursebooks

ELT Typology: Levels of coverage

N=781	Basic	Consensual	Inclusive
Zero	NA	99	317
First	41	42	121
Second	48	56	85
Third	19	20	31
Mixed	NA	NA	12
Cumulative Total	108	217	566
Cumulative %	13.8%	27.8%	72.5%

Zero and First: two sides of the same coin

Form	General / Timeless	Specific / Future
Zero	The argument obviously generalises to show that, if there is a non-negative solution of (9.8) with <gap desc=formula>, then any new tableau obtained by pivoting in column j is efficient. [CA4 738]	If Bridges is right, this still does not avoid possible legal argument over the "reasonableness" of the contract between purchaser and provider, nor over how well contracts are complied with. [CR5 693]
First	If a Troll suffers harm his flesh will almost instantly re-grow . [CMC 250]	"If they charge the wrong man, it' ll make a difference to him!" said Melissa dryly. [HNJ 1807]

Indirect/Speech-Act /Pragmatic Conditionals

(Quirk et al., 1985; Sweetser, 1990; Athanasiadou & Dirven, 1997)

- ❖ Out of the corner of his eye he saw Hammond start forward. "But you promised ..." Spatz interrupted Hammond, his face hard. "I **promised nothing, if you recall**." [GUG 121]
- ❖ "Evidence is what the whole system is based on. **If we cannot trust that, where are we?**" [J10 2618]
- ❖ Not treated as a distinct type.
- ❖ Included in the examples in some coursebooks.
- ❖ Frequency in sample: **5%**.
- ❖ Higher frequency expected in spoken sample.

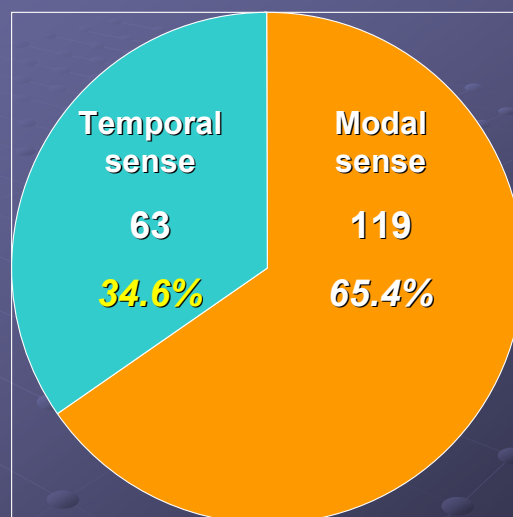
Past tense in *if*-clause with past time reference

The students had no room in which to wait between lectures, but it was suggested to MRCVS that students who lodged near enough might go home **if** they **wanted** to, or more usefully spend their non-lecture time in the dissecting room or in the stables, although the Bell & Crown inn, with a good fire, was close at hand. [B2W 741]

After a decade of being made to feel that you were somehow lacking as a person **if** you **didn't manage** to cram thrice-weekly workouts into your schedule, it was high time that a good reason not to exercise emerged. [AK6 1119]

"That little mistake was corrected when you got my note this morning, as you know very well!" Kate raised her eyebrows. "I received no note from you this morning, or any other time!" "Don't strain my credulity again!" She couldn't help the tinge of pink that flooded her cheeks at his expression as those blue eyes studied her with contempt. "Well, **if** you **didn't put** it under my door yourself, maybe you'd better just check with Reception downstairs." [HGM 461]

Senses of Past tense in *if*-clauses

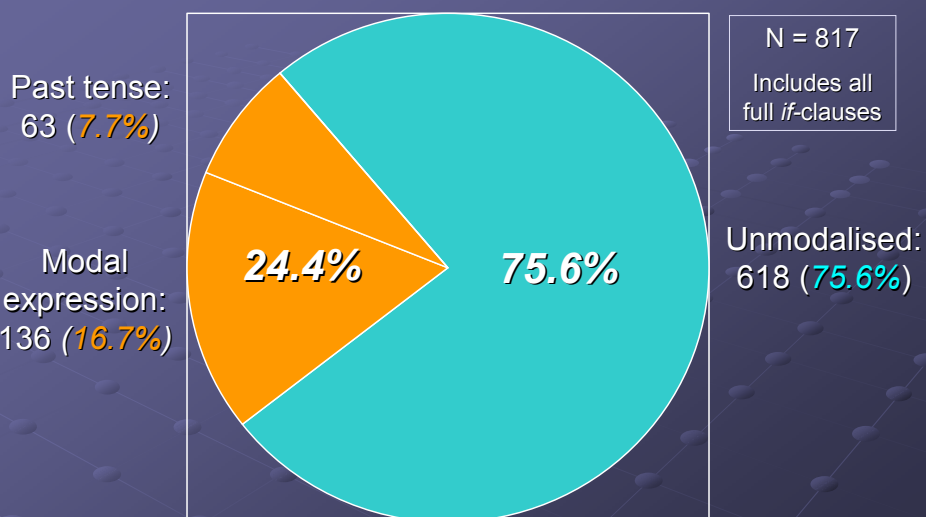


N = 182

Modal expressions in the *if*-clause

<i>be to</i>	8.8% of <i>if</i> -clauses	30
<i>can</i>		27
<i>could</i>	53.7% of modalised <i>if</i> -clauses	15
<i>be going to, want</i>		6
<i>must</i>		5
<i>have to</i>		4
<i>should, happen to, wish, think that/to</i>		3
<i>will, would, would like, would be allowed to, be necessary that</i>		2
<i>may, might, shall, be able to, be willing to, would rather, would be prepared to, be likely to, be liable to, be considered to, be meant to, be ordered to, be prepared to, like (to), proves to be necessary and desirable that, believes that, hope that, comes to be that, it appears that, think it necessary, turns out to</i>		1

Modality in the *if*-clause



Treatment of modality: An example of inconsistency

- ❖ Even those few coursebooks that now include modals in the *if*-clause of *Zero* and *Third* do not do so for *First* and *Second*.
- ❖ I know they're asking more than we want to pay, but **if** we **can** assemble a package of cash, stock options, and newly issued shares as a good inducement, I think we'll convince the key manager and he'll persuade the others to sell. [FPB 108]
- ❖ **If** the West Bank **could** absorb them, these refugees might conceivably settle and call it home. [APD 861]

Treatment of modality and tense-aspect marking in relation to *if*-conditionals

Sequence	Modals	Tense+Aspect
Before	4	3
Together	--	1
In-between	4	4
After	3	4

- ❖ Issues of modality/modals and tense-aspect marking play a central role in the classification of conditionals.
- ❖ These issues would be expected to be treated before tackling conditionals.

Shortcomings of ELT typology

- ❖ There is no significant difference between *Zero* and *First* types.
- ❖ The *Mixed* types are very rare, and are an arbitrary selection of possible combinations.
- ❖ *Speech-Act / Indirect / Pragmatic conditionals* are not covered.
- ❖ Modalised *if*-clauses, and '*if* + Past tense' with past time reference, are too frequent to be treated as 'special cases'.
- ❖ The approach to modality is naïve and restricted - and potentially misleading and restricting.

Suggestions 1: Short-term

- ❖ Collapse *Zero* and *First*.
- ❖ Add equivalent of *Zero/First* with past-time reference.
- ❖ Exclude *Mixed*.
- ❖ Include modalised *if*-clause for all types.

Suggestions 2: Long-term

- ❖ Adopt/adapt existing frameworks in linguistics.
- ❖ Introduce *modality* rather than *modals*.
- ❖ Adopt an inclusive approach to modal markers.
- ❖ Treat issues of modality/modals and tense-aspect marking before dealing with conditionals.