

Conditional Sentences in English Language Teaching

Yulan Dai*

Shenzhen Foreign Languages School Hongzhi High School, Guangming District, Shenzhen, China

yulan.dai@qq.com

*Corresponding author

Keywords: Conditional Sentences, Grammar pedagogy, Classroom instruction

Abstract: This paper aims to investigate conditional sentences in English Language Teaching (ELT) across three main dimensions: synthesis, pedagogical implications, and textbook analysis. It seeks to elucidate the meaning, form, and use of conditional sentences drawing from authoritative grammar sources, while addressing specific challenges faced by target learners. The paper proposes strategies to help students overcome these difficulties and critically evaluates the treatment of conditional sentences in textbooks excerpts. Emphasizing flexibility over rigid adherence to predefined forms, the paper advocates for teaching conditionals in a way that enables students to convey intended meanings effectively in diverse contexts.

1. Introduction

Conditional sentences are universally considered an essential but difficult grammar item in ELT (Celce-Murcia et al., 1999) [1]. Misleading and incomplete course materials and classroom instruction further increase the difficulties (Tuan, 2012) [2]. This essay looks at conditional sentences from the perspective of ELT by presenting a comprehensive synthesis, speculating on informed pedagogical implications, and critically evaluating textbook excerpts from Oxford English.

2. Contextual background of the students

Target learners are fifty 13-year-old Secondary One students in Shenzhen, China. Despite that they have been learning EFL for at least seven years, their achievement is elementary. They can produce simple and common sentence patterns correctly due to the repetitive drillings of audiolingual teaching methods in the past learning experience but seldom use advanced clauses. Elementary textbooks expose students to basic sentence structures in dialogues, short stories, chants, and songs rather than explicitly presenting grammar items. Students start to learn grammar systematically from Junior One. These students do not perceive a good impression of English grammar as it is widely considered dull and challenging. However, they show great interest in learning English if their teacher creates an engaging and meaningful lesson.

3. A Synthesis of conditional sentences

Conditional sentences consist of two clauses, a main (conditional/result) clause and a subordinate (*if*) clause. Parrot (2010) [3] use 'conditional clause' to refer to the main clause in all the rules and examples listed, which confuses students as the subordinate (*if*) clause is the one that sets the condition, and the main clause gives the result or consequence. His terminology is different from the way defined by other scholars like Badger and Mellanby (2018) [4], who divide the syntactic structure into a conditional (subordinate) clause and a result (main) clause. For simplicity and conceptual parsimony, this essay will adopt the term 'main clause' and '*if* clause', which is also under students' vocabulary level.

Conditionals have two features. First, the main clause is the result depends on the *if*-clause. Second, the order of two clauses can be exchanged. If the *if*-clause comes first, we generally use a comma to separate the two clauses. But a comma is not needed when the sentence starts with the

main clause.

According to the pedagogical literature, the conditionals can be divided into types. For example, in Parrot's (2010) [3] grammar book for teachers, conditionals are classified into four types, including 1) Zero: If + present tense, present tense; 2) Type 1: If + simple present, future form; 3) Type 2: If + simple past, would + bare infinitive; 4) Type 3: If + past perfect, would have + past participle. On the other hand, Celce-Murcia et al. (1999) [1] use only three categories in light of the semantic relationship, i.e., factual conditionals, future (predictive) conditionals, and imaginative conditionals (with sub-types of hypothetical and counterfactual). These two dividing methods are correlated. This essay summarizes and exemplifies the two methods using the three foci of grammar instruction (meaning, form, and use) with tables, reflecting their correlation.

Table 1 is a simplified classification of conditionals integrated both the semantic functions and straightforward forms. Table 2 is a comprehensive, to the author's knowledge and endeavor, but not exhaustive synthesis involving descriptions of the meaning, form, use, and examples of *if* conditionals. Although Swan (1994) [5] claims that it makes no sense to categorize them as "All sorts of possible combinations of verb forms are possible with *if*" (p. 53), it is still of significance to classify them in a table for the sake of clarity that he proposes. In all the tables, 'meaning' is deliberately placed before 'form' because of the principle that language is created for the purpose of meaningfully communicating rather than merely producing a language point. As language teachers, we need strive to keep 'meaning' in focus throughout a grammar lesson.

Besides the basic types and use, other variants and related connectors of conditionals are listed in Table 3 as a reference in case learners come across patterns that are not taught or less frequently used. Finally, Table 4 serves as a supplement about the demarcation between *unless* and *if ...not* as they are often treated equally by course materials and teachers, which is not true.

Table 1 An overview of conditional sentences

Type		Meaning	Basic form (& examples)	Use
Zero	Factual	General truths or facts.	If+ simple present, simple present (If you put wood into water, it floats.)	Scientific speeches or writings; mathematics; Personal habits, etc.
Type 1	Future (Predictive)	A highly possible condition and its probable result	If+ simple present, future form (If it rains, I will stay at home.)	Plans, negotiations, warning, instructions, persuasions, threats, suggestions, etc.
Type 2	Hypothetical	A hardly possible condition and its probable result	If+simple past, would + bare infinitive (If I had more money, I would buy a house.)	Dreams, fantasies, suppositions, Excuses, etc.
Type 3	Counterfactual	An impossible condition and its probable result	If +past perfect, would have- past participle (If I worked harder, I would have passed the exam.)	Reproaches, regrets, etc.

Table 2 A comprehensive synthesis

Type of Conditionals		Meaning (the relationship between the condition and the result)	Form (Formulas in expression)	Use (probably in what context or discourse)	Examples
Zero (Factual)	Generic factual	Unchanging general truth or rules.	If + simple present, Simple present (If this happens, that happens.)	In scientific speech or writing; In mathematics courses; Warning sb. of the rules or the law	If you take the fish out of water, it dies.
	Habitual factual	Fixed present habits	If + simple present, Simple present (if this happens, that happens.)	In daily conversations; Describing ones' habits or personality	If I get sick, I go to the doctor.
		Fixed past habits or schedules	If + simple past, Simple past (if this happened, that happened.)	Recalling one's habits or schedules in the past.	If had time, I played computer games.
	Inference factual	Very certain inferences of the results based on the speaker's prior knowledge	If+ present/past tense, Should/must (If this happens/is happening/has happened, that should/must happen.)	In detective stories when the truth is almost coming out.	If anyone has the answer, it must be Simon.
Type 1 (Predictive)	Future	Very likely future plans or contingencies; Strong logical probabilities of the results	If + simple present, Further form: will; be going to; be v-ing (If this happens, that will happen.)	Talking about plans; Expressing persuasions; Giving warnings; Making threats	If it rains, I will stay at home. If you stop watching TV, I will help you. If you keep gossiping, you will get fired. If you do it again, I will thrash you.
		Weakened results of future plans or contingencies; Weakened logical possibilities of the results	If + simple present, can/may/could/might (progressively weakened result form from will to might) (If this happens, that should/can/may/might happen.)	When the speaker/writer wants to show politeness or tentativeness; Giving advice	If you get up by 6, you may see the sunrise.
		Imperative or alternative results of the conditions	If + simple present, Imperative (If this happens, (please) do.)	Offering advice; Giving command, warnings or instructions;	If you drink, don't drive. If you have questions, email me.
		A range forms in the <i>if</i> clause depends on the meaning to be expressed	If + present form: (present perfect; present continuous), Future form (If this is happening/has happened, that will happen.)	Give warnings	If you haven't finished your assignment by this weekend, you'll get into trouble. If he's watching TV, He won't hear you.
		Weakened the possibility of the condition, for strengthening the result	If + should (happen to), will (if this should (happen to) happen, that will happen.)	Expressing reservation	If he should happen to come, I will make up with him.
		Replacing <i>if</i> in formal texts	Should+ subject, (Please) imperative (Should this happen, (please) do.)	In formal, written context. Usually at the end of your teacher's email.	Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Type 2	Hypothetical	Very unlikely yet possible condition in the present or in the future	If +past tense; Would +bare infinitive (If this happened, that would happen.)	Talking about dreams or fantasies	If I won the lottery, I would quit my job.
		Very unlikely yet possible condition in the future, but more tentative and more polite.	If +were+ infinitive, Would+ bare infinitive (If this were to happen, that would happen.)	Talking the events that are very unlikely to happen in future	If I were to stay at home tomorrow, I would cook.
		Further weakened the possibility of the condition for strengthening the result	If +should (happen to), Would +bare infinitive (If this should happen, that would happen.)	Talking about the events that are extremely unlikely to happen.	If I should have the time, I would go with him.
		Stronger emotion imposed in the condition	Were+ subject, Would/might +bare infinitive (Were this, that would/might happen)	Telling someone off	Were it really the fact, I might feel happier.
Demarcation between hypothetical conditionals and counterfactual conditionals: Hypotheticals refer to very unlikely but possible conditions, while counterfactuals refer to impossible or unreal conditions.					
Type3	Counterfactual	Impossible or unreal conditions in the present	If +simple past, Would +bare infinitive (If this happened, that would happen.)	Supposing someone is not himself; Describing something impossible	If I were you, I would let go. If my grandma was alive, she would support me.
		Unreal conditions in the past to express reproach and regret (or excuses) of the past events	If+ past perfect, Would have+ past participle (If this have happened, that would/ should/ could/ might have happened.)	Expressing regrets; Making excuses;	If I have started earlier, I would have finished it.
		Unreal condition, similar to 'if this had happened, that would have happened.)	Had +subject + past participle Would have +past participle (Had this happened, that would have happened.)	Expressing regrets	Had I known he was ill, I would never have shouted at him.
Note:					
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Demarcation among future, hypothetical and counterfactual conditionals mainly based on the degree of possibility of the conditions, high possibility, low possibility, and no possibility respectively. 2. Generally, will can be replaced by should/can/may/could/might, progressively weakened result form will to might; would could be replaced by should/could/might, progressively weakened result form from would to might. 3. Meaning, form and use of <i>if</i> conditionals may not be exhaustively listed. Learners are encouraged to employ appropriate tense-aspect or modal auxiliaries in light of what they want to convey in specific contexts. 4. This synthesis refers to grammar literature by Parrot (2010) and Celce-Murcia et al. (1999), based on Swan's (1994) six criteria. 					

Table 3 Variants and other conjunctions

Types	Meaning (the relationship between conditions and results)	Conjunctions and/or Form	Use (probably in what context)	Examples
Other conjunctions	The only condition for the result not to happen (*See the difference from "if not" in Table 6)	Unless (used in types of conditionals)	Talking about something is a requirement for admission;	You can't enter the pub unless you're 18.
	The essential condition for the result to happen	As long as (used in Type 1&2)	Claiming one's stance in a negotiation; Giving advice	I will help you as long as you ask me nicely.
	The essential condition for the result to happen	Provided (that)	In a business negotiation	We'll buy everything you produce, provided the price is right.
	The essential condition for the result to happen	On condition (that)	In a negotiation or permission	He agreed to speak on condition that he was identified.
	An act of imagination of the condition	Supposing	In an interview; Speculating on one's opinion in the conversation.	Supposing you were the millionaire, what would you do?
	The need to be ready for something	In case	A mother expressing precaution to her child	Take an umbrella in case it rains.
	The result still very likely happens in a hypothetical bad condition (Emphatic form of 'if')	Even if	Showing strong opinion E.g., A wife complaining his husband	I wouldn't marry you even if you were the last person on earth.
The condition plays no important role in the result	Whether ... or not	A man expressing his unconditional love to his girl	I will stay at home whether or not it rains.	
Variants	The condition is obvious and implied in the context	Link the two clauses with 'and' / 'or'	Giving advice or warnings in informal conversations	Read more and you'll know more. Hurry up, or you'll be late.
	Hypothetical present event; Counterfactual past event	If only + simple past; If only + past perfect	Expressing wishes Expressing regrets;	If only I could fly. If only I have got up earlier.
	The condition is already shown or understood in the context.	Single clause:	Replying to questions	A: Are you coming to China next year? B: If you invite me, I would be happier with more money. (=if I had more money)
	Past conditions and present results; Or present/future conditions and past results.	Mixed conditional sentences	Expressing regrets	If I had woken up earlier, I would be at work already. If I didn't have too many assignments, I would have gone traveling.
Note: Conjunctions and variants of conditionals may not be exhaustively listed.				

Table 4 Demarcations between 'if' and 'unless'

	Affirmative	Negative
open(unmarked) conditions	If	If ... not
Examples (Interpretations)	I will stay at home if it rains. (It's possible for me to stay at home if it doesn't rain.)	If I don't arrive on time, I'll call you. (I think I will be able to arrive on time, so I probably won't call you.)
exclusive(marked) conditions	Only if (or: if and only if)	Unless (=except if)
Examples (Interpretations)	I will stay at home only if it rains. (It's impossible for me to stay at home if it doesn't rain)	Unless I arrive on time, I'll call you. (I don't think I will be able to arrive on time, so I probably won't all you.)
Note: Examples may not represent all the meanings and uses.		

4. Pedagogical implications

4.1. Informed teaching sequence

ELT should prioritize teaching conditionals based on their frequency and real-life usage, as highlighted by Hwang (1979) [6]. His research (Table 5) shows that present-tense factual conditionals (Zero) are the most commonly used in both spoken and written English, followed by

future conditionals (Type 1), hypothetical conditionals (Type 2), and counterfactual conditionals (Type 3). This suggests that English teachers should initially focus on teaching Zero and Type 1 conditionals, reflecting their prevalence in everyday communication. However, Hwang's findings may be skewed towards academic contexts where expressing truths or facts is predominant.

The Oxford English textbook deviates from Hwang's sequencing by introducing Type 1 conditionals before Zero (Table 6), primarily due to the limited need among junior secondary students to discuss scientific truths. Another consideration is the influence of learners' first language (L1), where Chinese conditional expressions align more closely with Type 1 structures. This approach is deemed more straightforward for Chinese learners, supported by Swan (1994) [5], who advocates aligning content with learners' L1 and prior knowledge. Therefore, hypothetical and counterfactual conditionals (Type 2 & Type 3) are typically introduced later, after students have grasped modals, present perfect, and negation, as recommended by Celce-Murcia et al. (1999) [1]. This rationale shapes the sequence of conditionals in secondary ELT (Table 6).

Table 5 A frequency ranking of conditional sentence types

	Form	Meaning	Frequency ranking of use in speech	Frequency ranking of use in writing
1	If+ pres., pres.	Generic factual	1(19%)	1(16.5%)
2	If+ pres., will/be going to	Future(predictive)	2(10.9%)	2(12.5%)
3	If+ past, would/might/could	Present hypothetical; counterfactual	3(10.2%)	4(10%)
4	If+ pres., should/must/can/may	Inference factual; Weakened future	4(9%)	3(12.1%)
5	if+ were/were to, would/could/might	Present/future hypothetical; Present counterfactual	5(8.6%)	6(6%)
6	if+ had/have +p.p., would/could/might	Past counterfactual	6(3.8%)	7(3.3%)
7	if+ pres., would/could/might	Weakened future	7(2.6%)	5(6.1%)

Adapted from Celce-Murcia (1999) based on Hwang's (1979) corpora

Table 6 Sequence of instruction

Grade of learners	Prior knowledge concerning conditionals	Type of conditionals	Forms involved
(Junior)Grade 7	Simple present, simple future (will, be going to)	Type 1	If+ simple present, future form (If this happens, that will happen.)
(Junior)Grade 8	+simple past, present continuous, modal verbs (can, may, must) and their negation, imperative, Adverbial clause of time(when), present perfect,	Zero	If+ simple present., simple present
(Senior)Grade 10A	(Unavailable) Supposing learners have been introduced to all tense-aspect system and all modal auxiliaries as there is a review chapter of all tenses in Book 1.	Type 2	If+simple past, would + bare infinitive
(Senior)Grade 10B	The same as the above	Type 3	If +past perfect, would have +past participle

Note: Prior knowledge is with reference to the curriculum standard and the textbook design for Shenzhen secondary students.

4.2. Potential difficulties for learners

Literature have documented that conditionals are one of the most challenging grammar tasks in ELT (Celce-Murcia et al. [1], 1999; Covitt, 1976 [7]; Hwang, 1979 [6]; Tuan, 2012 [2]), especially for Chinese learners. They fail to perceive the subtleness amongst different conditionals involving various tense and aspect in two clauses. English tense-aspect system has been a headache for them as Chinese does not have verb tenses. To simplify it, teachers often tell their students to match verb tenses with time adverbials, which enables students to get correct answers in most cases although it is not true. However, in conditional sentences, the present tense refers to the future time and past tense refers to the present time, which totally perplex learners. Even worse, there are no counterparts in L1 that can be directly transferred to assist the understanding of the subtle relationship between the condition and the result. In this respect, it is suggested not to include all types of conditionals within one lesson. Meanwhile, only the four basic types with seven forms (Table 1 & 5) are systematically introduced in sequence (Table 6). Infrequent variants are not taught unless students encounter them (Swan, 1994) [5]. Furthermore, grammar items should always be presented and practiced in authentic, meaningful contexts to alleviate the difficulties, as suggested by Celce-Murcia et al. (1999) [1]. For example, when introducing Type 1, teachers can provide a

context with a list of class rules and ask students to practice the logical possibilities.

e.g. S1: What will happen if I am late for class?
S2: If you are late for class, you will receive more homework.

5. A critical analysis of the textbook's treatment

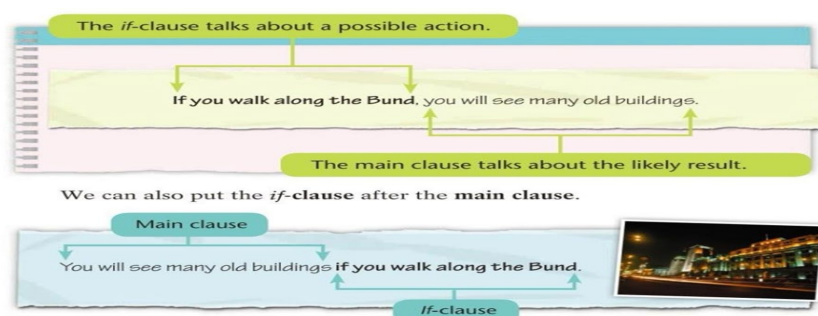
Excerpt 1

Conditional sentences (1)

We use **conditional sentences** to talk about possible actions and the results of these actions.

The definition provided in Oxford English is clear and does adhere to the criterion of conceptual parsimony (Swan, 1994) [5] without using complex terminology. However, the explanation involves at least four problems thwarting Swan's criterion of 'truth' (1994) [5]. Firstly, the wording is perhaps too economical to address to 'truth'. Not ALL the conditionals are used to talk about 'possible' action. Some conditionals involve 'impossible' or 'counterfactual' (e.g., If I were you, I would stay), which means truth may be threatened. Secondly, the definition is limited in the focus on 'actions' as the condition, while the condition could be a 'state' or a 'phenomenon' (e.g., If it rains, I will stay at home). Thirdly, as Parrott (2010) [3] suggests, conditional sentences express the dependence of the main clause on the if-clause. The textbook (*Excerpt 1*) fails to highlight this important relationship between the condition and the outcome. Lastly, the results of conditions are not certain but 'probable' in various degrees based on the meaning and expression.

Excerpt 2



The terms 'main clause' and 'if clause' in the example (*Excerpt 2*) are simple and within learners' lexis level, although it may require instructors to explain the relationship between the two clauses. To make the explanation more accessible, an illustration of 'possible' and 'likely' can be included. Meanwhile, that initial If-clause conditionals are introduced before initial main clause contributes to the clarity as the former is more recognizable with a comma between two clauses. According to Ford and Thompson (1986) [8], if-clause beginning accounts for 80 percent of conditionals in natural occurrence, which also supports the placement of the textbook. Additionally, that the sample sentences are selected from the reading section assist students better comprehend conditional sentences.

Despite the strengths, the examples (*Excerpt 2*) are limited in representing the rule. This unit is to introduce Type 1 conditional (If + simple present, future form). But students are only able to use conditionals to express 'a possible action with likely result' which suggest a logical possibility and get no access to other frequent uses such as talking about 'a possible situation with likely future plan' (e.g., If I have time tomorrow, I will go swimming). Likewise, sentences of another future form 'be going to' are expected to be included since it has been taught in the previous unit (*Table 6*), and the rule in the box (See *Excerpt 3* below) does not exclude 'be going to' as a 'simple future tense' in the main clause. Therefore, it would be useful to include more contextualized examples to express different types of meaning for truth and clarity in Swan's (1994) [5] criteria.

Excerpt 3

Things to remember

We can also use modal verbs such as *can* in the **main clause**.
If you **go** to Beijing, you **can visit** the Summer Palace.

Work out the rule

- The verb in the *if*-clause is in (the simple present tense/the simple future tense).
- The verb in the **main clause** is in (the simple present tense/the simple future tense).

First and foremost, ‘Work out the rule’ is the focus, compared to ‘Things to remember’ which functions as a reminder (*Excerpt 3*), and thus, should be put before the latter and right after the abovementioned examples. Otherwise, if learners are told that ‘*can*’ can be used in the main clause, that ‘the verb in the main clause is in simple future tense’ summarized in the rule is totally against Swan’s (1994) [5] criterion of truth. As we know, ‘*can*’ is not relevant to ‘future tense’, but it is still understandable if the writer intends to compromise with truth for the sake of simplicity and conceptual parsimony (Swan, 1994) [5] by using ‘future tense’ in place of ‘future form’. Such sacrifice also embodies in the simplified explanation of the rule that does not contain other types or forms of conditionals. To introduce ALL the uses of conditional sentences would probably be too much truth for learners to cope with, especially when they are first introduced to complex structures. Thus, it is justifiable that the rule focuses only on the use of the ‘If+ simple present, future form’ to express a possible condition and its likely result.

As for ‘Things to remember’, the writer probably consider that ‘*can*’ is frequent in conditionals and that it has an equivalent to learners’ L1. Nevertheless, it is of no much value to mention it in view of demarcation, simplicity, and relevance advocated by Swan (1994) [5]. First, model verbs like ‘*can*’ are put forward without clearly demonstrating their distinction with ‘future form’. Learners may not understand whether or not they are the same in terms of meaning and usage. Hence, demarcation is problematic. Second, model verbs in conditionals are a different form with different meanings and perhaps should not be covered in the first introduction together with the basic form. Simplicity should be particularly emphasized and it can be achieved by reducing the number of categories presented. Third, as for learners’ prior knowledge, ‘model verbs’ is a new concept not taught in the previous units. This means relevance is not addressed as the writer has not fully considered learners’ linguistic base.

6. Conclusion

Teachers need to constantly keep in mind the three foci of grammar instruction (meaning, form, use) when introducing conditional sentences. Meanwhile, they should encourage students to use conditionals flexibly in light of the meaning in specific contexts rather than rigorously recite the forms restricted in the previous synthesis.

References

- [1] Celce-Murcia, M., Larsen-Freeman, D., & Williams, H. A. (1999). *The grammar book: An ESL/EFL teacher's course*. Newbury House Rowley, MA.
- [2] Tuan, L. T. (2012). Learning English Conditional Structures. *Theory & Practice in Language Studies*, 2(1).
- [3] Parrott, M. (2010). *Grammar for English language teachers: with exercises and a key*. Ernst Klett Sprachen.
- [4] Badger, J. R., & Mellanby, J. (2018). Producing and understanding conditionals: When does it happen and why does it matter? *Journal of Child Language Acquisition and Development*, 6(1).
- [5] Swan, M. (1994). Design criteria for pedagogic language rules. *Grammar and the language*

teacher, 45, 55.

[6] Hwang, M. O. (1979). A semantic and syntactic analysis of if-conditionals University of California, Los Angeles--Teaching English as a Second Language.

[7] Covitt, R. I. (1976). Some problematic grammar areas for ESL teachers University of California, Los Angeles.

[8] Ford CE, Thompson SA etal. (1986) CONDITIONALS IN DISCOURSE: A TEXT-BASED STUDY FROM ENGLISH. In: On Conditionals. Cambridge University Press; 1986:353-372.