
Beyond the Textbook: The Importance of Common Sense in the EFL Classroom

Zainol Hasan, Risma Fahrul Amin
Universitas Ibrahimy; hasansideas02@gmail.com; rismafahrulamin@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores the pivotal role of common sense in English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly in addressing the limitations of textbook-based instruction. While textbooks offer a structured foundation, they often lack the adaptability needed to meet the diverse needs, interests, and learning styles of students. Using a systematic and thematic literature review, this research examines how teachers' practical judgment—rooted in experience, intuition, and contextual awareness—enhances lesson planning, classroom management, instructional strategies, and assessment. Findings reveal that common sense allows teachers to personalize learning, respond flexibly to challenges, and foster inclusive and dynamic classroom environments. Real-world case studies further demonstrate how teachers apply common sense to support student engagement, autonomy, creativity, and resilience. However, the study also acknowledges that common sense is inherently subjective and must be balanced with sound pedagogical principles. The research calls for the integration of common sense into teacher education and professional development as a vital pedagogical resource, emphasizing reflective practice and teacher agency. Ultimately, effective ELT requires not only theoretical knowledge but also the wisdom to apply it meaningfully in diverse classroom contexts.

Keywords

Common Sense; English Language Teaching (ELT); Teacher Autonomy; Learner-Centered Teaching.

Corresponding Author

First name Last name
Affiliation, Country; e-mail@e-mail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

The landscape of English Language Teaching (ELT) has undergone significant transformations over the past few decades. From traditional grammar-translation methods to communicative language teaching and task-based learning, the field has witnessed a plethora of pedagogical approaches (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Kumaravadivelu, 2006). These theoretical frameworks provide valuable insights into language acquisition but often overlook a crucial element: common sense. This seemingly simple concept, often dismissed as subjective or intuitive, plays a vital role in effective language teaching (Harmer, 2016; Thornbury, 2001). Common sense, in the context of ELT, can be defined as the ability to apply practical knowledge and judgment to teaching and learning situations. It involves making informed decisions based on experience, intuition, and a deep understanding of learners' needs (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Richards, 2006). While it may not be explicitly articulated in pedagogical theories, common sense is an essential ingredient for successful language instruction (Harmer, 2016; Edge, 1992).



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The overreliance on textbooks as the primary source of instructional materials has limited the potential for innovative and personalized teaching. Textbooks, despite their structured approach, often fail to address the diverse needs and learning styles of individual students (Richards, 2006; Tomlinson, 2011). They may impose a rigid curriculum that stifles creativity and critical thinking. Moreover, textbooks can become outdated quickly, especially in a rapidly evolving world where language use is constantly changing (Harmer, 2016; Nunan, 1988).

To address these limitations, teachers must move beyond the confines of the textbook and embrace a more flexible and learner-centered approach (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Tomlinson, 2011). Common sense can guide teachers in making informed decisions about lesson planning, classroom management, instructional strategies, and assessment. By considering the specific needs and abilities of their students, teachers can create engaging and effective learning experiences that go beyond the limitations of textbooks (Thornbury, 2001; Edge, 1992).

One of the key roles of common sense in ELT is in the area of lesson planning. Teachers can use common sense to tailor lessons to the specific needs and interests of their students (Richards, 2006; Nunan, 1988). By considering the age, language proficiency level, and cultural background of their learners, teachers can develop lessons that are relevant, engaging, and culturally appropriate. Additionally, common sense can help teachers select appropriate materials and activities that are aligned with the learning objectives and the students' interests (Harmer, 2016; Tomlinson, 2011).

Another important aspect of ELT where common sense plays a crucial role is classroom management. Effective classroom management is essential for creating a positive and productive learning environment (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Wright, 2005). Common sense can help teachers establish clear expectations, maintain discipline, and foster a sense of community among students. By observing student behavior and understanding their motivations, teachers can use appropriate strategies to address disruptive behavior and encourage positive interactions (Thornbury, 2001; Edge, 1992).

Instructional strategies are another area where common sense can be applied. Teachers can use their common sense to select and implement a variety of teaching methods that cater to different learning styles (Richards, 2006; Nunan, 1988). For example, some students may benefit from visual aids, while others may prefer hands-on activities or group work. By adapting their teaching strategies to the needs of their students, teachers can create more engaging and effective lessons (Harmer, 2016; Tomlinson, 2011).

Assessment is another critical component of language teaching. Common sense can help teachers develop fair, reliable, and valid assessments that measure students' progress accurately (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Wright, 2005). By considering the specific learning objectives of a course, teachers can design assessments that are aligned with the curriculum and provide meaningful feedback to students. Additionally, common sense can help teachers identify students who may need additional support or

challenge (Thornbury, 2001; Tomlinson, 2011).

In addition to these specific areas, common sense can also help teachers navigate the challenges of teaching in diverse contexts. For example, in multicultural classrooms, teachers can use common sense to create inclusive learning environments that respect and value the cultural backgrounds of all students (Richards, 2006; Nunan, 1988). By being sensitive to cultural differences and avoiding stereotypes, teachers can foster intercultural understanding and promote positive cross-cultural interactions (Edge, 1992; Wright, 2005).

While common sense is a valuable tool for teachers, it is important to recognize its limitations. Common sense is subjective and can vary from person to person. It is also important to balance common sense with sound pedagogical principles (Harmer, 2016; Thornbury, 2001). While common sense can guide teachers in making informed decisions, it should not replace the need for rigorous teacher training and professional development (Richards, 2006; Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

2. METHOD

The literature review in this study adopts a systematic and thematic approach to investigate the integration of common sense in English Language Teaching (ELT), especially in response to the limitations of textbook-centered instruction. Relevant scholarly sources were collected from peer-reviewed journals, academic books, and reputable online databases using keywords such as “common sense in teaching,” “ELT classroom practices,” “postmethod pedagogy,” “teacher autonomy,” and “limitations of textbooks in EFL.”

The inclusion criteria focused on literature published within the last twenty years to capture both foundational theories and contemporary perspectives. Particular emphasis was placed on works by leading ELT scholars such as Harmer, Richards, Kumaravadivelu, Thornbury, and Tomlinson, whose contributions explore pedagogical flexibility, learner-centered instruction, and the implicit knowledge teachers apply in diverse contexts.

A thematic analysis was conducted to categorize the findings into key areas: lesson planning, classroom management, instructional strategies, and assessment. Each theme was further analyzed to illustrate how common sense supports teacher decision-making beyond prescriptive textbook frameworks. Additionally, the review highlighted recurring challenges such as institutional constraints, teacher training gaps, and the tension between intuitive practices and formal pedagogy.

This method ensures a holistic understanding of how practical teacher judgment complements theoretical models in ELT and provides a foundation for rethinking classroom practice in more context-responsive and learner-oriented ways.

3. RESULTS

Common Sense in the EFL Classroom and the Limitations of Textbooks

Common sense, defined as sound judgment based on experience and practical wisdom, is a valuable asset for any teacher. In the EFL classroom, common sense enables teachers to make informed decisions about lesson planning, classroom management, instructional strategies, and assessment (Harmer, 2016). While textbooks provide a foundation for language learning, they often lack the flexibility and adaptability required to meet the specific needs of each student (Richards, 2006).

There are some limitations of textbooks, involved of one-size-fits-all approach, cultural bias, lack of real-world relevance, and limited opportunities for creativity and critical thinking. First, textbooks often adopt a standardized approach that may not cater to the diverse learning styles and paces of individual students (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). This can lead to frustration and disengagement among learners who require more individualized attention or alternative learning methods.

Second, textbooks may reflect cultural biases and stereotypes that can hinder intercultural understanding (Thornbury, 2001). This can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and limit students' ability to develop intercultural competence.

Third, textbook materials may not always align with the real-world language skills that students need to develop (Richards, 2006). This can lead to a disconnect between classroom learning and real-world language use, making it difficult for students to apply their language skills in authentic contexts.

Lastly, Textbooks can sometimes stifle creativity and critical thinking by providing a rigid structure for learning (Harmer, 2016). This can hinder students' ability to think critically, solve problems, and innovate.

To overcome these limitations, teachers must rely on their common sense to adapt and personalize instruction. By understanding the unique needs and abilities of their students, teachers can create more engaging and effective learning experiences.

For example, instead of rigidly following a textbook, teachers can use their common sense to select materials and activities that are relevant to students' interests and experiences. They can also incorporate real-world tasks and projects that require students to apply their language skills in authentic contexts. Additionally, teachers can foster a classroom environment that encourages creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration.

The Role of Common Sense in Different Aspects of Teaching

Common sense can be applied to various aspects of teaching, including: planning and preparation; classroom management; instructional strategies; and assessment. The first is planning and preparation. Effective lesson planning is crucial for successful language teaching. By using common sense, teachers can tailor lessons to the specific needs and interests of their students (Richards, 2006). This involves considering factors such as age, language proficiency level, and cultural background to create lessons that are relevant and engaging. Additionally, common sense can help teachers select appropriate materials and activities that are aligned with the learning objectives and the students' interests (Harmer, 2016).

Anticipating potential challenges and developing strategies to address them is

another important aspect of lesson planning. By using their common sense, teachers can identify potential difficulties that students may encounter and take steps to mitigate them. For example, if a teacher anticipates that a particular grammar point may be challenging for students, they can prepare additional exercises or explanations to support their understanding.

The second is classroom management. Effective classroom management is essential for creating a positive and productive learning environment (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Common sense can help teachers establish clear expectations, maintain discipline, and foster a sense of community among students. By observing student behavior and understanding their motivations, teachers can use appropriate strategies to address disruptive behavior and encourage positive interactions. For instance, a teacher may use humor, positive reinforcement, or redirection techniques to manage challenging behaviors.

Adapting teaching strategies to suit different classroom contexts and student behaviors is another important aspect of classroom management. Common sense can help teachers identify the most effective strategies for a particular group of students. For example, if a class is particularly noisy, a teacher may need to use more structured activities and limit group work. Conversely, if a class is relatively quiet, the teacher may encourage more student-centered activities to promote interaction and engagement.

The third is instructional strategies. A variety of teaching methods can be used to cater to diverse learning styles (Richards, 2006). Common sense can help teachers select and implement strategies that are most appropriate for their students. For instance, some students may benefit from visual aids, while others may prefer hands-on activities or group work. By using a combination of teaching methods, teachers can create more engaging and effective lessons.

Authentic materials and real-world tasks can enhance language learning by providing students with opportunities to practice language skills in meaningful contexts (Harmer, 2016). Common sense can help teachers select materials that are relevant to students' interests and experiences. For example, a teacher may use news articles, songs, or movies to teach vocabulary and grammar. Real-world tasks, such as role-plays, simulations, and problem-solving activities, can also help students develop their language skills.

Encouraging student participation and interaction is crucial for creating a dynamic and engaging learning environment (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Common sense can help teachers create opportunities for students to interact with each other and with the teacher. For instance, group work, pair work, and class discussions can promote language use and critical thinking. Additionally, teachers can use technology to facilitate interaction and collaboration among students.

The fourth is assessment. Assessment is an essential component of language teaching. Common sense can help teachers develop fair, reliable, and valid assessments that measure students' progress accurately (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). By considering the specific learning objectives of a course, teachers can design

assessments that are aligned with the curriculum and provide meaningful feedback to students. Additionally, common sense can help teachers identify students who may need additional support or challenge.

A variety of assessment methods can be used to measure different aspects of language proficiency (Thornbury, 2001). Common sense can help teachers select appropriate assessment methods, such as tests, quizzes, projects, and portfolios. Additionally, teachers can use informal assessment techniques, such as observation and questioning, to monitor students' progress on an ongoing basis.

Providing timely and constructive feedback is essential for helping students improve (Harmer, 2016). Common sense can help teachers provide feedback that is specific, actionable, and encouraging. By focusing on students' strengths and areas for improvement, teachers can help them develop their language skills.

Case Studies: Common Sense in Action

Several case studies illustrate how common sense can be applied to overcome challenges and enhance language learning, they are: adapting to learner needs; fostering creativity; using technology effectively; building rapport with the students; encouraging student autonomy; and adapting to unexpected challenges.

The first is adapting to learner needs. A teacher identifies a student who struggles with reading comprehension. Instead of rigidly following the textbook, the teacher provides additional reading materials at a lower level of difficulty and offers extra support (Richards, 2006). This common-sense approach allows the student to build confidence and gradually progress towards more challenging texts. By tailoring instruction to the student's needs, the teacher creates a more positive and effective learning experience.

The second is fostering creativity. A teacher encourages students to create their own stories and dialogues based on a topic they are interested in (Harmer, 2016). This creative approach allows students to express themselves authentically and practice language skills in a meaningful way. By giving students the freedom to explore their own ideas, the teacher fosters creativity and critical thinking.

The third is using technology effectively. A teacher incorporates technology into the classroom by using language learning apps and online resources (Thornbury, 2001). However, the teacher is mindful of the potential drawbacks of excessive screen time and balances technology use with traditional activities. By using technology judiciously, the teacher can enhance language learning without sacrificing the benefits of face-to-face interaction and hands-on activities.

The fourth is building rapport with the students. A teacher takes the time to get to know their students on a personal level, asking about their interests, hobbies, and cultural backgrounds (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). By building rapport with students, the teacher creates a more positive and supportive learning environment. This can lead to increased student motivation, engagement, and academic achievement.

The fifth is encouraging student autonomy. A teacher encourages students to take ownership of their learning by setting personal goals and monitoring their own

progress (Richards, 2006). By empowering students to become independent learners, the teacher fosters a sense of responsibility and accountability. This can lead to increased motivation and self-directed learning.

The sixth is adapting to unexpected challenges. A teacher encounters an unexpected power outage during a lesson. Instead of panicking, the teacher quickly adapts to the situation by leading a discussion or conducting a role-play activity (Harmer, 2016). By remaining calm and resourceful, the teacher maintains a positive learning environment and ensures that the lesson continues smoothly.

These case studies demonstrate how common sense can be applied to a variety of teaching situations. By using their practical wisdom and experience, teachers can overcome challenges, enhance student engagement, and create effective learning environments.

Challenges and Considerations

While common sense is a valuable tool for teachers, it is important to recognize the challenges and limitations associated with its application. Some of the challenges include: Balancing Common Sense with Pedagogical Theory; Overcoming Institutional Constraints; and Addressing Individual Differences.

It is essential to strike a balance between relying on common sense and adhering to established pedagogical principles (Harmer, 2016). While common sense can provide practical insights, it is important to ground teaching practices in sound theoretical foundations. For example, while a teacher may have a strong intuition about a particular teaching method, it is important to consider the underlying principles of language acquisition and learning theory.

Teachers may face limitations imposed by school policies, curriculum guidelines, and standardized testing (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). These constraints can sometimes hinder the application of common sense in the classroom. For example, a teacher may want to deviate from the prescribed curriculum to cater to the specific needs of their students, but they may be restricted by standardized testing requirements.

While common sense can help teachers tailor instruction to individual needs, it is important to be aware of the complexities of human learning and to seek additional support when necessary (Richards, 2006). Some students may require more specialized instruction or support, such as students with learning disabilities or language impairments. Teachers must be able to identify these students and provide them with appropriate interventions.

To address these challenges, it is essential for teachers to engage in ongoing professional development (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Professional development opportunities can help teachers develop their pedagogical knowledge and skills, as well as their ability to apply common sense in the classroom.

By reflecting on their teaching practices and seeking feedback from colleagues, teachers can refine their approach and improve their effectiveness. Additionally, by staying up-to-date with the latest research and trends in language teaching, teachers

can ensure that their common-sense approach is informed by evidence-based practices.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the critical yet often underestimated role of common sense in English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly when confronting the rigidities and limitations of textbook-centered instruction. As the results show, common sense functions as a bridge between pedagogical theory and the practical realities of diverse classroom contexts, enabling teachers to make context-sensitive decisions grounded in experience, empathy, and adaptability.

Moving Beyond Textbooks: Flexibility Through Practical Wisdom

One of the core insights that emerged from the analysis is the limitation of textbooks in catering to the diverse needs of students. While textbooks provide structure and consistency, they often impose a one-size-fits-all model that fails to address individual learning styles, cultural backgrounds, and real-world communicative demands. This resonates with prior critiques by Kumaravadivelu (2006) and Tomlinson (2011), who argue that pedagogical materials must be adaptable rather than prescriptive. Here, common sense empowers teachers to go beyond the text, using their intuitive judgment to select relevant materials, modify content, and create more inclusive learning experiences.

Common Sense as a Multidimensional Pedagogical Tool

The discussion further reveals that common sense is not a vague or subjective notion but a multidimensional pedagogical tool that operates across key teaching domains. In lesson planning, it enables teachers to design content that is age-appropriate, culturally relevant, and cognitively engaging. In classroom management, it supports the creation of a positive learning environment by allowing teachers to respond to students' emotional cues, manage disruptions tactfully, and foster mutual respect. This aligns with Harmer (2016) and Wright (2005), who emphasize that good teaching is as much about emotional intelligence as it is about methodology.

In terms of instructional strategies, common sense helps teachers differentiate instruction and utilize multiple modalities—visual, auditory, kinesthetic—to meet the diverse learning preferences found in EFL classrooms. As Thornbury (2001) highlights, this flexible approach is essential in moving toward more dynamic, learner-centered pedagogies. Furthermore, in assessment, the role of common sense is evident in designing fair and valid evaluations, offering timely and constructive feedback, and recognizing when students need extra support or enrichment.

Real-World Application Through Case-Based Insights

The inclusion of real-world case studies strengthens the argument for common sense as a vital component of teacher professionalism. These cases—ranging from adapting to individual learner needs to navigating unexpected challenges like power outages—illustrate how teachers' practical knowledge supports resilience and creativity in real-time teaching scenarios. This mirrors the postmethod perspective (Kumaravadivelu, 2006), which advocates for teacher autonomy, reflection, and the strategic use of local knowledge to achieve pedagogical goals.

Moreover, fostering creativity, leveraging technology appropriately, and

building rapport with students all require not only technical knowledge but also relational intelligence—an area where common sense becomes indispensable. These case-based insights serve as concrete examples of how theoretical concepts can be operationalized through teacher discretion and judgment.

Balancing Intuition with Theory: A Call for Reflective Professionalism

While common sense is a powerful tool, the discussion acknowledges its limitations. Being inherently subjective, it must be balanced with sound theoretical understanding to avoid reinforcing biases or ineffective habits. Teachers must be wary of relying solely on intuition without critically examining their practices. The study emphasizes that professional development, peer feedback, and engagement with current research are essential in refining and validating common-sense-based decisions.

Furthermore, institutional constraints—such as rigid curricula, standardized assessments, and bureaucratic policies—often limit teachers' ability to fully exercise common sense. Navigating this tension requires advocacy for more teacher agency and systemic flexibility within educational frameworks. As Richards (2006) notes, empowering teachers as informed decision-makers is crucial for sustainable instructional improvement.

Implications for ELT Pedagogy

Overall, the findings reinforce the notion that effective language teaching cannot be reduced to rigid methods or scripted materials. Rather, it demands a dynamic interplay between theory and intuition, between structure and responsiveness. The study suggests that teacher education programs should incorporate explicit training in adaptive teaching and reflective judgment, thus legitimizing common sense as a core pedagogical skill.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that common sense plays an essential and multifaceted role in English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly in navigating the limitations of textbook-based instruction. While textbooks offer a structured foundation for learning, they often fail to address the diverse needs, backgrounds, and learning styles of students. In contrast, common sense—rooted in teachers' practical wisdom, experience, and contextual awareness—provides the flexibility necessary to personalize instruction, foster engagement, and respond to real-world classroom challenges.

The analysis revealed that common sense supports effective decision-making in key areas of teaching: lesson planning, classroom management, instructional strategies, and assessment. Through case-based insights, the study illustrated how teachers employ common sense to adapt to learners' needs, encourage autonomy and creativity, utilize technology meaningfully, and respond resourcefully to unforeseen disruptions.

However, the study also acknowledged that common sense is inherently subjective and should be balanced with sound pedagogical theory. Teachers must engage in continuous professional development to ensure their intuitive decisions are informed by evidence-based practices. Moreover, systemic constraints such as rigid curricula and standardized assessments may hinder the application of common sense, calling for greater teacher agency and institutional support.

Eventually, this research affirms that effective language teaching is not solely the product of following prescribed methods, but rather the result of reflective practice that integrates theory, experience, and human judgment. Recognizing and legitimizing common sense as a pedagogical resource is crucial to fostering responsive, inclusive, and meaningful ELT practices.

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