

# If only it were true: the problem with the four conditionals

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*The traditional division of conditionals into four main types (zero, first, second, and third) has long been called into question. Unfortunately, the awareness that this description does not reflect conditional patterns in actual usage has not generally been reflected in EFL coursebooks. This article re-examines the arguments for a description of conditional patterns which reflects actual usage and uses corpus data to demonstrate the kind of patterns in frequent use. It then suggests two teaching approaches that may help teachers to tackle a variety of conditional patterns in the classroom.*

## Introduction

Twenty-one years ago, Maule (1988) wrote an article for *ELT Journal* questioning the ‘traditional’ division of conditionals into zero, first, second, and third conditional patterns. Inspired by the refusal of one student to accept as correct a conditional form (If he comes, I go), which did not fit the patterns she had been taught, Maule recorded 100 samples of conditionals from a random selection of scripted and unscripted television programmes. He did not claim that this sample represented the language as a whole (ibid.: 117); nevertheless, his findings were significant. He suggested that rather than the zero, first, second, and third conditionals, it was more accurate to divide the samples into real non-past/past uses and unreal non-past/past uses. Examples of these divisions are presented in Table 1 below, adapted from Maule (op. cit.: 122).

Type of conditional	Example	Forms used
a Real non-past	If you’re thinking of throwing it away, throw it away.	If + present continuous, present simple
b Real past	If you felt so strongly about it, why did you agree to do it?	If + past simple, past simple
c Unreal non-past	Don’t know, and if I did, I wouldn’t tell you.	If + past simple, would + infinitive
d Unreal past	If Giles had been trampled to death by a camel, it would have broken my heart.	If + past perfect, would + have + past participle

TABLE 1  
Examples of real and unreal conditionals

Although there were samples that fitted the traditional patterns, particularly the unreal conditionals (samples ‘c’ and ‘d’ above could be described as second and third conditionals respectively), Maule also found many samples that simply did not. These included the ‘real past’ usage shown in

sample 'b' above; the use of present simple followed by modals other than 'will', and the use of continuous forms in either the condition or result clause, shown in sample 'a' above. His results also showed a much greater frequency of real conditional uses; 68 in total compared to a total of 32 unreal uses, with 61 of the real uses describing present or future time. This led Maule to conclude that teaching only the traditional types, and in particular the first conditional 'If + present simple, will', of which he found only seven examples, means we 'consign the bulk of actual usage to some kind of dustbin for second class structures' (Maule *op. cit.*: 118).

## Recent research

Since Maule's article, we have witnessed an increased use of corpus data in discussions of EFL syllabus content and methodology, and conditionals have been examined with reference to large amounts of spoken and written text. This has led to many of the same conclusions as Maule: the traditional divisions of zero, first, second, and third conditionals do not give an accurate account of how conditionals are actually used. Willis (1990), for example, found that the majority of hypothetical uses of 'would' in the COBUILD corpus were not with an accompanying 'if' clause, so that 'I'd probably say no' is more frequent than 'If he asked me, I'd probably say no'. In a sample of written academic, narrative, magazine and newspaper texts, Fulcher (1991: 166) also found that real non-past uses made up a large percentage of his sample of 299 conditionals, with the 'If + present simple, present simple/continuous/present modal/imperative' accounting for 65.55 per cent of his data. More recently, Carter and McCarthy (2006: 749–50) found many samples of real non-past and real past conditionals in the Cambridge International Corpus, such as the following:

- If + going to, going to ... 'If you're going to buy a house, then you're going to need a lot of money' (real non-past).
- Past simple, if + past continuous ... 'They always took the dog with them if they were going anywhere' (real past).

## Data analysis

In order to confirm the findings of Maule *et al.* discussed above, we decided to examine 250 concordance lines randomly taken from the British National Corpus (2009). Fifty-four lines were removed from the sample as they did not use 'if' as part of a conditional or were from a line of text too fragmented to be analysed. The results can be seen in Table 2 below.

	Form	Example line from Corpus	Frequency of form
a	Real non-past If + present simple, present simple	If an earn out is to be used, it is recommended that it does not form too significant a part of the purchase price ...	61
	If + present simple, may	If a vacancy on the committee exists, then the trustee may appoint some other creditor ...	10
	If + present simple, present perfect	... if we get to alimony, I've seen the film!	4

If + can, present simple	... if it can be shown that ... can lead to ... it does not logically follow that ...	2
If + would like, imperative	If you would like to make any suggestions ... , please contact ...	1
If + present simple, should	If a vacancy on a committee exists, then ... a meeting of creditors should be convened ...	3
If + may, will	Even if Bernard Stasi may be right in describing ... , it will be a challenge to succeed him ...	1
If + present simple, can	Of course you can have a boiled egg if that's what you want.	8
If + present continuous, can	... if I'm making a film of myself ... , I can pass or fail ...	1
If + can't, must	If you cannot find a pulse, you must begin chest compressions ...	1
If + present simple, must	... even if the plaintiff overcomes the difficult hurdle of ... , he must further show that the contravention has caused him loss.	3
If + present simple + should, present simple	... if you take ... the starting point that the new settlement should have good access to primary network, you immediately limit ...	1
If + present simple, could	If this happens the frescoes could be damaged ...	3
If + present simple, present continuous	A motoring breakdown scheme ... is offering members a 20 per cent ... discount if they do not call out the service during the year.	2
If + present perfect, imperative	If the pose you have selected is a tense one, feel the tension ...	2
If + present perfect, shall	... the proprietor shall not be liable ... if it has been compiled with ...	1
If + present simple, will	She'll just become a laughing stock if she's not that already.	17

	If + present simple, shall	If food and beverages are not so provide, the holder of the licence . . . shall be guilty of an offence.	2
	If + present simple, going to	If he don't serve her he's gonna die, she's gonna punch him right!	3
	If + can, will	. . . they won't be able to tell us if we can have Ian until tomorrow.	1
	If + will, present simple	If the pump still will not run . . . it is probably in need of servicing . . .	1
	If + will, can	If the cast will just relax . . . , it can only improve . . .	1
	If + going to, should	. . . if you're not going to join us, then . . . you should let us join you.	1
	If + as + participle, would	. . . if as educationalists . . . , we would care to make some comment then . . .	1
<b>b</b>	<b>Real past</b>		
	If + present simple, past continuous	If it means anything else, Hume was making fun of Adams.	1
	If + present simple, past simple	. . . if it's the thing I'm thinking of there was some discrepancy.	2
	If + past simple, past simple	. . . if you wanted to know the answer . . . you had to keep zapping from channel to channel.	11
<b>c</b>	<b>Unreal non-past</b>		
	If + could, could	. . . if anything could send strange signals, the Thing could.	1
	If + could, might	If we could listen to the conversation . . . it might be anything but fascinating.	1
	If + past simple, present simple	. . . even if we did, we have no divers aboard . . .	1
	If + past simple, would ('d)	I'd give it a good hiding if it didn't behave.	21
	If + present simple, would	. . . if two members of staff happen to fall in love and decide to marry it would be churlish to be appointing blame.	4
	If + was going to, would	. . . if you was gonna do the one at King Arthur's I would of had some rice.	1

TABLE 2  
Samples of conditionals  
from the BNC

	If + past simple, could	An operation could be said to have increased efficiency either if fewer inputs were used . . .	3
	If + could, would	. . . if we could get three or four items, that would be very nice.	3
	If + past simple, shall	if she did not do so, 'this pre-eminence wherein ye are placed shall be your dejection to torment and pain everlasting'.	1
	If + past simple, might	If they got a few more of those it might help.	2
d Unreal past	If + past perfect, would + present perfect	If they'd done that, they would have won the Championship.	6
	If + past perfect, might + present perfect	. . . it 'might have saved time'; if . . . Hindley and . . . Brady had been shot.	2
	If + past perfect, past simple	If it had been believed in Paris, there was a further complication . . .	1
	Total		192

Of the 192 examples, 131 fit into Maule's category 'a'. However, it is noticeable that 24 patterns make up this category. By far the highest count of any form is 'If + present simple, present simple', but what is striking is the complexity of its use. A number of examples of this pattern are from legal style texts (for example 'If the determination is to be by an expert, the court has no jurisdiction') and may involve a number of conditions (for example '. . . if the latter is to be ability, and not just a performance . . . then . . .'). Combinations of present simple with modal verbs in category 'a' were also very frequent, in particular 'may' and 'can'.

It was very interesting to see the form 'If + past simple, past simple', constituting Maule's category 'b', being a frequent pattern, yet it is one that is seldom highlighted. For category 'c', the traditional second conditional form was well-represented, but the corpora also produce the very interesting example of 'If + present simple, would' for unreal non-past in the following chunk: 'If two members of staff happen to fall in love and decide to marry it would be churlish to be appointing blame'. Maule's category 'd' had the lowest showing in the corpora, even factoring in alternative forms.

### The reality of course materials

Despite this evidence, many textbooks and teaching materials continue to present conditionals only in the four 'traditional' types. There may be well-reasoned pedagogical arguments for this. Ur (1989), for example argued for teaching the first, second, and third conditionals on the grounds that their meaning and form was not transparent to her learners, whereas real non-past conditionals such as 'If + present simple, present simple' were. She accepted that the three conditionals are not '. . . even the most frequent or useful' but argued that they occur 'frequently enough to be considered useful' (ibid.: 73). Soars and Soars (1996: 76) similarly support

teaching the traditional conditional structures. They acknowledge that there are many variations to zero, first, second, and third conditional patterns but that these form the basis of all patterns and so are a useful starting point for learners.

These arguments would be fine if the four traditional patterns were seen as a starting point for examining real and unreal uses of conditionals. Unfortunately, the reality is that they are not normally presented in this way and instead an oversimplification is all most learners are exposed to. This does not seem to be a fruitful way to help learners cope with the variety of conditionals in actual use.

## Teaching implications

It is clear that a division of conditionals into the zero, first, second, and third categories does not adequately reflect actual usage. It is also clear that real uses of conditionals outnumber unreal usages quite significantly but that neither the variety of patterns nor their frequency is reflected in mainstream EFL textbooks. From this, a number of conclusions can be drawn:

- 1 Real uses of conditionals are worth more classroom time than unreal uses by virtue of their frequency.
- 2 Learners need coverage of the many patterns that are actually used to express real conditions, beyond 'If + present simple, present simple', including real past patterns and the many alternative modals used beyond 'will' and 'would'.
- 3 This coverage needs to be linked to work on actual tense usage. Learners know they can talk about the past by using past simple and it is not such a leap to apply this to real conditions in the past. For instance, if a learner is studying how to describe a past habit using the past simple and 'used to', for example 'When I was young, I used to go to bed early', it is fairly simple to teach real past conditionals alongside this, for example 'If I was tired, I used to go to bed early', or 'If I forgot my homework, I used to get told off'. In this way, a learner can view conditionals as forms that do not always express unreal, hypothetical meanings. It is perhaps the tendency to over-teach patterns such as the second conditional that can make students believe all conditionals are in some way hypothetical.
- 4 Learners need to be exposed to and made aware of conditionals, which either do not contain an 'if' clause, such as the hypothetical usage of 'would', or are more complex than one simple condition clause followed by a result clause.
- 5 For newly qualified teachers, the attraction of the four conditional patterns is understandable but can distort the way they account for conditionals to learners. It is easy to imagine a teacher 'rejecting' a pattern, which is in frequent use, simply because it does not fit one of the four patterns. Trainee teachers also need to develop an awareness of the variety of real and unreal patterns and could use corpus data such as the above as the basis for a discussion about the form and use of real and unreal conditionals. This should extend trainees' understanding of conditionals beyond the expedient four patterns.

## Possible teaching approaches

For productive purposes, there seems to be a certain logic to including conditionals as exponents of language functions. We might, for instance, teach real conditionals as one of several exponents in work on giving directions (if you turn left, you should see), telling anecdotes (I don't know if I've told you this . . .), or writing product instructions (If using fluoride supplements, consult your dentist).

We are not arguing here for a return to the rather limited 'functional' lessons of the early 1980s, or for teaching learners a list of exponents based purely on intuition. Rather, we would hope this could form part of a broader discourse approach to language learning, where the real conditionals highlighted are chosen with reference to a clear context, and taught as one of several exponents that realize particular speech acts. Teachers and textbook writers could make choices informed by corpus data, and the conditionals could be taught as typical patterns to be learnt as part of the way to express particular language functions.

One example from the BNC data above is the 'If + can't, must' pattern as exemplified by 'If you cannot find a pulse, you must begin chest compression', which could be taught as part of a lesson on formulating written instructions or describing procedures and processes. In the above lesson, this could be introduced through a topic such as first aid, with students being given a set of mini-scenarios (for example someone has cut their leg), and then being asked to identify what the best thing to do would be in each case. They could then be given some authentic first aid instructions to scan in order to identify the answers to the previous task before focusing on the language. The students would identify the 'if' patterns alongside other naturally occurring language in the context (for example 'if + can't + must', 'if + must, present simple'). As an example, the text below, taken from a first aid website, shows 'if' being used in a variety of ways to express the function of instructing. After looking at the language, the students could be asked to produce a set of instructions for dealing with another first aid incident, for example, a dog bite.

- 1 After giving the two full breaths, locate the victim's pulse to see if the heart is beating. To find the pulse, use the hand that is supporting the chin to locate the Adam's apple (voice box). Slide the tips of your fingers down into the groove beside the Adam's apple. Feel for the pulse. If you cannot find the pulse, you must provide artificial circulation in addition to rescue breathing.
- 2 Kneel at the victim's side near the chest.
- 3 With the middle and forefingers of the hand nearest the legs, locate the notch where the bottom rims of the rib cage meet in the middle of the chest.
- 4 Place the heel of the hand on the breastbone (sternum) next to the notch. Place your other hand on top of the one that is in position. Be sure to keep your fingers up off the chest wall. You may find it easier to do this if you interlock your fingers.
- 5 Bring your shoulders directly over the victim's sternum. Press downward, keeping your arms straight. For an adult victim, depress the sternum about 1.5 to 2 inches. Then relax pressure on the sternum completely.

- Do not remove your hands from the victim's sternum, but do allow the chest to return to its normal position between compressions. Relaxation and compression should be of equal duration.
- 6 If you must provide both rescue breathing and external chest compressions, the proper ratio is 15 chest compressions to 2 breaths. You must compress at the rate of 80–100 times per minute.
  - 7 Continue CPR until advanced life support is available.

(Source: [http://www.ibew701fbo.com/health\\_at\\_home/CPR.HTM](http://www.ibew701fbo.com/health_at_home/CPR.HTM))

Alongside such productive work, there would also seem to be value in asking learners to highlight conditional patterns in texts, following comprehension work. Once the patterns are highlighted, learners can be asked to classify them into real or unreal uses and to note the patterns in evidence. After a body of texts has been studied, they can form what Willis (2003) terms a 'pedagogic corpus' and a number of patterns can be focused upon, analysed, and discussed. The important thing is that the samples have already been processed for meaning and understood in context before being analysed. An example of this kind of task can easily be constructed from coursebook texts, which can contain many types of conditionals, even though they are rarely given an explicit focus in the books themselves. All the examples used in the following sample task are taken from the tapescripts of *Natural English Intermediate* (Gairns and Redman 2002).

### Sample pedagogic corpus task

Look at the following examples of conditionals, which do not always contain an 'if' clause. Each example is taken from a listening text we have already studied (tapescript numbers are given after every sentence). For each example, decide whether the speaker is describing something

- a real—which actually happens, which actually happened, or will happen or,
- b unreal—which did not actually happen, does not happen, or is not likely to happen.

Then decide if each example refers to c) the present, d) the past, or e) the future.

Example

If I'm feeling tired, I try my best to get an early night. (a, c.)

- 1 ... it's a great way to see the city  
*Would you go again?* (2.3)  
Definitely.
- 2 ... apparently hypnosis can work, if you apply yourself to it, I quite like that idea. (4.5)
- 3 Well, if we aim for about an hour's talk and then there's some time for question and answers afterwards. (4.8)
- 4 Make sure it's correct, because, you know, it costs me money if you make a mistake. (5.7)
- 5 Erm, if you have a problem at work with somebody in the family, it affects your work. (6.3)



- 6 Well, if you have school qualifications and basic computer skills, you should be fine. (6.5)
- 7 Listen, if it works out, come and visit? (8.4)
- 8 If I had more time, like on holiday, for example, I'd have a very long, slow, lazy lunch. (9.2)
- 9 If I have to buy a present for someone, I really like to take my time. (9.2)
- 10 If I had a cleaner, things'd be different and the place might just get tidy quicker. (9.2)

Following this, learners can then be asked to record the different patterns in evidence and then encouraged to record more of these as they find them in texts they read or listen to themselves. This kind of activity is aimed at building learners' language awareness: helping them to notice conditional patterns in the input they are exposed to in the belief that the more they develop this awareness, the better able they will be to make clear choices when they choose to use conditionals themselves.

## Conclusion

Teaching the traditional four conditionals may be a pedagogic convenience but it clearly does not reflect the actual usage of conditional patterns. Exposing learners to *only* these patterns does seem to 'consign the bulk of actual usage to some sort of dustbin for second class structures' (Maule 1988: 118), and there is clearly a need to at least supplement the teaching of zero, first, second, and third conditionals by teaching a variety of real and unreal conditionals for productive and receptive purposes.

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