

ELT Textbook Development: Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice

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Abstract—This study explores ways in which textbook development can play a crucial role in bridging the gap between theory and practice in English language teaching (ELT), specifically focusing on English as a Second Language (ESL) materials. Textbooks play a pivotal role in ELT instruction; however, their impact in practice often fails to meet their theoretical intentions. This research investigates how ELT textbook development, when guided by the principles of second language acquisition (SLA), can more effectively address the diverse needs of learners while meeting the contextual demands of various educational environments. Following a qualitative approach involving ESL teachers, this study examines the existence and/or lack of alignment between national language education goals, such as fluency, and the structure and content of available ELT textbooks. It also aims to highlight areas where this alignment can be further improved. Findings of the study point to a clear need for culturally relevant, flexible, and inclusive ELT textbooks that not only foster communicative skills, but also cater to diverse learner preferences, and also facilitate the creative practices of teachers. This study has suggested some principles for developing ELT textbooks. Recommendations for continued research into textbook evaluation and development are also made to support ESL instructors further in diverse settings.

Index Terms—textbook evaluation, textbook development, English Language Teaching

I. INTRODUCTION

Textbooks and supplementary materials play a key role in learners' language skill development, as highlighted by Tomlinson and Masuhara (2013). Their widespread use across various educational contexts paves the way for accessing time-efficient and structured resources for English language teaching and learning. At the same time, the widespread reliance on textbooks and supplementary materials underscores the need for ongoing research into effective methods for evaluating and designing textbooks (Al-Mousawi, 2020).

In this study, the terms 'textbooks' and 'materials' are used interchangeably, encompassing both the core ELT textbooks and their related resources. These materials often form the backbone of language instruction, influencing both the content and the teaching methods (Mishan & Timmis, 2015). Language materials go beyond content regulation, significantly influencing the practical implementation of language education (McGrath, 2013). They are typically based on specific teaching approaches, which in turn shape the methodologies adopted by both teachers and learners (Richards, 2006; Tomlinson, 2010).

Rationale of the Study

The development of materials is key to helping teachers understand and apply language learning theories (Crawford, 2002). Tomlinson (2001) highlights the importance of teachers' roles in selecting, evaluating, adapting, and organizing teaching materials. However, there is a lack of research on teachers' contributions to materials development, particularly within the context of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and in specific environments, such as Jordan. Dat (2003) argues that effective development of materials must connect with the local context, allowing learners to express their ideas and emotions authentically. The absence of theoretical support for creating locally relevant materials emphasizes the need for this study.

Tomlinson (2001) identifies two main motivations for exploring materials development: enhancing teachers' understanding of language learning theories and equipping them with the skills to evaluate and tailor materials to their learners' needs. McDonough and Shaw (2003) emphasize the importance of developing principled evaluation criteria for the enhancement of ELT textbooks.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The textbook is a fundamental resource in language education because it "fulfills a need, a purpose, it performs a function, conveys meaning.... language and coursebooks do not exist in a vacuum – they exist for and are shaped by a purpose within a particular context of use, culture and ideology" (Wala, 2003, p. 60), emphasizing that textbooks operate

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within, rather than isolated from, contextual influences (Mukundan, 2009). However, global textbook publishers often prioritize commercial gain, aiming primarily for profitability (Richards, 2001; Dat, 2006). Such textbooks, widely used for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction worldwide, are integral to classroom activity. Teachers often rely heavily on these materials, yet they frequently lack activities that foster creativity (Alkhalidi et al., 2022; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2013). To address this, both teachers and learners should leverage textbook exercises creatively to enrich language practice. According to Tomlinson (2015), textbooks should be viewed as flexible tools that teachers can adapt to enhance their creative potential, rather than adhering strictly to a predetermined structure. One approach to promoting creativity is by encouraging diverse student responses rather than standardized answers.

A. The Role of ELT Textbooks

The role of textbooks in EFL teaching presents numerous benefits, functioning as a 'map' to guide pedagogical objectives (e.g., Richards, 2001; Timmis et al., 2009; McGrath, 2016). By providing structured content and theoretical foundations embedded in classroom activities, textbooks influence classroom dynamics and learning outcomes (Byrd, 2001). Textbooks also provide consistency and coherence across EFL education, ensuring standardized teaching practices across schools within a given country (Canniveng & Martinez, 2003). However, while standardization brings uniformity, it may also limit creative teaching practices and restrict responses to the needs and interests of individual learners (Bell & Gower, 1998; Canniveng & Martinez, 2003). Some argue that predicting all learners' needs is unrealistic and that standard content may overlook shared language needs (Crawford, 2002).

Another advantage of textbook use is its contribution to maintaining high-quality content, given that many textbooks are rigorously tested and vetted (Bell & Gower, 1998; Richards, 2001). While textbooks can foster creative learning (Alkhalidi, 2023), they may also constrain the teacher's creativity, often limited by strict schedules, exam preparation formats, and lack of professional development support (Bell & Gower, 1998). Textbooks provide both linguistic knowledge and instructional support, enhancing efficiency by conserving teachers' and learners' time and effort (Richards, 2001). They offer skills and interactive learning opportunities within a structured framework, fostering meaningful linguistic interaction between teachers and learners (Crawford, 2002; Canniveng & Martinez, 2003). The integration of interactive elements within the textbook enhances the EFL learning experience (Timmis et al., 2009).

Furthermore, textbooks serve as valuable teacher-training resources, especially for novice teachers (Ur, 1996; Mukundan, 2009; Alkhalidi & Kayapinar, 2022;). They contain essential linguistic, methodological, and cultural support, often supplemented by teachers' guides (McGrath, 2016). For some teachers, especially those with limited access to formal training, textbooks may function as primary training resources (Timmis et al., 2009). Textbooks benefit both new and experienced teachers by offering structured activities and pedagogical strategies that guide the teaching process. Experienced teachers can also critically engage with textbook content, adapting it to encourage both teacher and learner creativity (Edge & Wharton, 1998).

Despite these strengths, there are valid critiques of over-reliance on textbooks, as excessive dependence may hinder creative teaching. Teachers who use textbooks exclusively, without seeking independent or critical thinking, may inadvertently contribute to student disengagement (Richards, 2001; Crawford, 2002; Ur, 1996). In summary, while textbooks offer a foundational framework and substantial resources for EFL instruction, creative and interactive approaches enhance their effectiveness. Properly adapted textbooks can support both teaching innovation and skillful practice, especially benefiting less experienced teachers as they develop instructional competencies.

The significance of textbook evaluation is widely acknowledged within the field (Tomlinson, 2013), as the effective evaluation of textbooks plays a crucial role in facilitating successful language learning (McGrath, 2016). Tomlinson (2013) further advocates for the development of teaching materials as a way to bridge linguistic theory and practice, helping educators apply theoretical concepts in classroom settings.

The development of ELT textbooks gained prominence in the 1990s (Tomlinson, 2001), and continues to be a vital aspect of effective language learning (Garton & Graves, 2014; McGrath, 2016). While teachers play a key role in this process, their involvement is often underestimated (Richards, 2001). Textbook development spans both theoretical fields, such as curriculum design, and practical areas like evaluation (Tomlinson, 2013). Bridging the gap between research and practice in a systematic manner is essential to fostering effective language learning (Graves, 2000; Saraceni, 2003; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2004).

Despite the challenges of aligning theory with classroom practice (Saraceni, 2003) and the absence of a perfect language teaching model (Cook, 1996), teachers' experience and knowledge can be utilized to evaluate and adapt ELT textbooks effectively (Tomlinson, 2013). Although various perspectives exist on language teaching approaches (Ur, 1996; Timmis, 2004), there is broad agreement on certain approaches that can guide the evaluation and development of ELT textbooks (Tomlinson, 2013).

B. Materials Development

Materials development is a highly effective approach in applied linguistics as it bridges theoretical frameworks with practical procedures that are central to the teaching and learning process (Tomlinson, 2003). Tomlinson asserts that materials development can aid applied linguists and theorists in defining and expanding their language learning theories and in gaining the skills required to put these theories into practical application. Through materials development studies,

applied linguists receive concrete evidence on the effectiveness and validity of language theories incorporated within instructional materials.

This process is dynamic and can be effectively executed by teachers, learners, and materials developers (Graves, 1996). Despite its significance, materials development has often been undervalued by teachers, who may overlook the intricate processes involved (Richards, 2001). Historically, materials development was considered a subset of methodology, with materials serving as illustrative examples of various teaching methods (Tomlinson, 2001). However, from the 1990s, increased attention was given to materials development in academic courses, and more research began focusing on principles and methods specific to materials design. Tomlinson (2003) conceptualizes materials development as both an academic field and a practical endeavor: academically, it examines the design, implementation, and evaluation principles of educational materials, while practically, it encompasses production, evaluation, and adaptation of these materials. These theoretical and practical aspects are mutually informative, with classroom application both guiding and being guided by theoretical insights. Materials development, therefore, engages applied linguists, developers, teachers, and learners in generating principles and practices that enhance language materials and, ultimately, language learning outcomes. A primary goal of materials developers is to bridge the gap between research and classroom application (Saraceni, 2003), though this objective remains a work in progress.

A structured, principled approach to materials development, as advocated by Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004), can yield valuable insights into the effectiveness of materials, fostering understanding of both pedagogical content and the learning process. As Graves (2000) notes, decisions in materials development are inherently shaped by individual beliefs, knowledge, and experience, which together form a foundation for making informed, creative instructional choices. This accumulated experience serves as a valuable resource in crafting theories and encouraging second language mastery among learners.

A key issue in the field is the disconnect between Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research and actual material practices (Saraceni, 2003). The lack of a definitive theory in SLA underscores the complexity of this challenge; SLA research does not yet offer a singular solution to the practical issues in language teaching, nor does it prescribe an absolute theoretical approach (Cook, 1996). Rather than seeking an all-encompassing model from SLA research, applied linguists and material developers should utilize established insights from SLA to create materials that support language learning (Tomlinson, 1998). Tomlinson emphasizes that the accumulated knowledge of language learning—rooted in centuries of teaching experience and decades of research—can guide the development of criteria that meaningfully enhance instructional materials. Despite ongoing debates on language teaching and learning methods (Ur, 1996; Timmis, 2004), there is a broad consensus on certain language-learning features that can guide the formulation of principles for materials evaluation and development (Tomlinson, 2003). Thus, materials should be designed in alignment with effective SLA-based principles, including:

- Engaging learners emotionally to create impactful learning experiences (Richards, 2001; Tomlinson, 2003).
- Incorporating content relevant to learners' needs and interests, which fosters motivation (Tomlinson, 2003; Timmis, 2004).
- Building learners' confidence and autonomy in language use (Crawford, 2002).
- Enhancing learners' awareness of the target language (Bolitho, 2003) and cultural contexts (McKay, 2002).
- Promoting communicative competence in the target language (Mukundan, 2009).
- Accommodating diverse learning styles (Oxford, 2001) and reflecting learners' current and future language needs (Tomlinson, 2003).
- Providing content that intellectually and emotionally engages learners (Tomlinson, 2003).
- Allowing flexibility for teachers to modify materials for them to address their students' needs and interests better (Crawford, 2002; Mukundan, 2009).
- Offering methodological support that inspires teachers to implement innovative and creative teaching approaches (Ur, 1996; McGrath, 2016).

To sum up, these principles, as guided by SLA research, are developed to make sure that language materials are more relevant, more flexible, and more meaningful and impactful in diverse learning contexts.

III. METHODOLOGY

In order to explore the experiences and perspectives of participants in real-world settings, this study employed qualitative research methods which allow direct interaction with individuals affected by the research topic (Creswell, 2009). Primarily following an inductive approach, the analysis integrates both inductive and deductive reasoning to examine the emerging patterns and themes from the collected data. The fundamental objective was to reach a deeper understanding of participants' subjective views and interpretations of the issues being investigated.

Twenty male and female teachers from Jordan voluntarily participated in the study. Open-ended questions, which were designed to elicit the teachers' insights on several key areas, were used to conduct semi-structured interviews. The key areas were:

- The relevance and effectiveness of ELT textbooks.
- The participants' suggestions for improving the ELT textbooks.

- The preferences of teachers regarding activities.
- Teachers' views on the strengths and weaknesses of ELT materials.

Data Analysis

The answers of teachers were analyzed systematically, as recommended by Creswell (2009). The responses were prepared and organized. Then the data were analyzed thoroughly several times using the inductive approach to create the themes. In this way, the researchers were able to specify the new themes.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

New themes have emerged that can be used in evaluating and developing ELT textbooks. The emergent themes are:

Relevance of Materials to Learners' Needs

The ELT textbooks and their accompanying materials address the needs of learners generally. Nevertheless, opinions regarding the cultural relevance of ELT textbooks were not similar to each other. While some participants, such as MA, perceived the textbooks to be related to the local culture, others, like KL, argued that they were overly narrow in focus and inadequately suited to the Jordanian context. This suggests that, from the teachers' perspective, the materials primarily support language skill development, but cultural alignment remains a topic of debate.

Awareness of Educational Objectives

Some teachers, such as SK, expressed confusion about the broader educational goals, revealing potential ambiguities in the curriculum. SK indicated that the objectives of the materials are overly narrow, and the content is not appropriately aligned with our cultural context. Additionally, the objectives are not connected to the demands of our local job market. This reflects a concern that current objectives may not align with Jordan's broader market needs, particularly in sectors like technology and business, where fluency in English is crucial. Teachers believe the curriculum may be too focused on narrow outcomes, overlooking future professional demands.

Discrepancy Between Educational Priorities and National Objectives

Several teachers highlighted a disconnect among national objectives, such as promoting fluency to meet the needs of the tourism sector. AL indicated that there are objectives and the focus on tourism is a priority "but there is a big gap between the general objective of our country {fluency} and the objective of the Ministry of Education." This indicates that while fluency is prioritized nationally, the focus on grammatical precision for exam preparation creates a misalignment in learners' practical language needs.

Potential Gender Bias in ELT Materials

Some teachers identified potential gender biases in the content, noting that certain topics seemed more geared towards boys, such as cars and sports. MA, for example, observed that certain topics—such as cars, political issues, and football—appear to be more oriented toward male interests and may not engage female students as effectively. This observation suggests that a more balanced approach to content is necessary to ensure engagement across genders, which has important implications for developing and evaluating inclusive materials.

Teacher's Guide and Teachers' Views

Teachers generally regard the teacher's guide as a key resource since it provides substantial methodological support for instructional practices. Nevertheless, opinions diverged regarding its effectiveness in improving linguistic skills. One teacher remarked, "The teacher's book is very good, it provides teachers with effective guidance on how to teach." Conversely, AA noted, "I depend on myself to improve my language." This variation suggests that while the teacher's guide is useful pedagogically, its contribution to teachers' language development may be limited.

The Importance of Flexibility in Methods of English Language Teaching

Some participants expressed concerns about the rigid reliance on the teacher's guide, highlighting the importance of adopting flexible approaches for teaching the English language using textbooks to accommodate the diverse needs of students and the varying contexts of schools. AI commented, "We have differences among our schools ... and our students ... so the teacher's book gives one method, but this can't be used in all classes." This highlights the need for adaptable strategies that accommodate the varying abilities and contexts of students and schools.

The Significance of Grammar and Vocabulary in Language Learning

Both teachers and students highlighted the critical role of grammar and vocabulary in the process of learning English, especially for exam preparation. One teacher noted, "Grammar explanations are detailed; they help the students very much to understand grammar." Another participant echoed this view, stating, "Grammar and the meanings of vocabulary are the most useful activities because they improve our language." This focus on grammar and vocabulary aligns with the academic demands placed on students and teachers, particularly for assessments.

ELT Materials and Preferences of Teachers

The findings of the study indicate that English Language Teaching materials frequently adopt a standardized approach, which may constrain the ability of teachers to adapt lessons to their teaching styles or their students' needs. One teacher remarked, "Many activities included in the material train students to be accurate rather than being fluent." This finding highlights the need for materials that can be adapted to support various pedagogical methods and techniques, without being strictly prescriptive.

Cultural Relevance in ELT Materials

Teachers expressed differing views on the cultural content of ELT materials. Some teachers valued the inclusion of culturally relevant content, arguing that it enhanced engagement by connecting learning to students' cultural contexts. S noted that the reading content is both useful and engaging as it provides historical information. It enables him to express his opinions in two languages, particularly when discussing historical topics in English. These observations prove the importance of incorporating local cultural elements in ELT materials so as to foster a more engaging and culturally sensitive learning experience.

To sum up, the findings offer valuable insights into how ELT materials can be improved for increased adaptability, inclusivity, and cultural relevance, thus becoming more effective in meeting the needs of both learners and teachers.

V. CONCLUSION

This study has identified a major gap between theories of second language teaching and the development and use of ELT textbooks. The key findings underscore the need for materials which lend themselves to adaptable usage, promote communicative language skills, and help students build confidence and independence. The research also highlights the importance of evaluating and improving ELT materials through a thorough consideration of practical teaching needs and a thorough consideration of theoretical principles. In this process of consideration, as Timmis (2004) pointed out, feedback from both teachers and learners should play a vital role if researchers are to develop effective materials. Therefore, to bridge the gap between theory and practice, the study proposes several guiding principles that can shape the way material developers can use when designing effective language teaching resources:

- Inclusion of Diverse Discourse Samples: Incorporating a broad range of discourse types in teaching materials to facilitate meaningful and practical language use.
- Flexibility in adapting materials: Designing materials that allow teachers to adapt content.
- Promoting Creative Practices: Encouraging creativity in both teachers and learners through well-defined goals and objectives.
- Clear Methodological Approach: Presenting a comprehensive teaching methodology that allows for effective instruction without being overly restrictive.
- Consideration of Preferences: Taking into account the preferences of both teachers and learners in the development of materials.
- Balanced Integration of Language Skills and Components: Ensuring equal attention is given to language skills and aspects, avoiding an excessive focus on any single aspect.
- Sensitivity to Culture: Incorporating culturally relevant content to motivate students to learn English.

The principles discussed above can help researchers and teachers to evaluate and develop ELT textbooks effectively, taking into consideration the learners' needs and teaching styles. Consequently, the gap between theory and practice can be bridged.

Recommendations

This research provides some recommendations for researchers. This study recommends further studies on evaluating and developing ELT textbooks in an attempt to enhance English language learning. New studies should take into consideration the following evaluation criteria:

- Identifying the possibility of gender-biased ELT content.
- Creating evaluation tools that focus equally on aspects of cultural sensitivity.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of materials in raising teachers' awareness about the learning objectives and outcomes.
- Promoting creativity in English language teaching.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of the teacher's guide in facilitating the enhancement of language teaching skills among non-native educators.
- Providing flexibility in teaching materials to support a variety of methods for teaching the language and accommodate different styles of teaching.
- Accommodating teachers' and learners' preferences, particularly in relation to content.
- Preparing learners for specific contextual needs, such as tourism, and
- Encouraging discussions that incorporate local cultures in second language learning.

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