

# Teachers' Interaction with Prescribed Teaching Materials: Evaluation, Adaptation and Exploitation

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## Abstract

In recent years, material development in English language teaching has received growing attention, yet the interaction between English language teachers and prescribed teaching materials remains an under-researched area. This study aims to address this issue and contribute to the understanding of teachers' agency in their interactions with prescribed textbooks. The study addresses this gap by exploring how five high school English teachers in two major cities in southern and southwestern China interact with prescribed textbooks within the curriculum policy context. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis, the study investigates teachers' evaluation, adaptation, and exploitation of materials, revealing that while teachers exercise agency in material development, both textbook structure and external factors contribute to the deprofessionalisation of teachers. The findings underscore the complex relationship between a standardised curriculum and teachers' context-sensitive practices, highlighting the need for flexible textbook designs and more supportive administrative practices to better facilitate teacher agency in classroom material use.

**Keywords:** material development, English teaching, prescribed textbook, teacher-material relationship, teacher agency

## 1. Introduction

Teaching materials play a critical role in language classrooms, serving as the foundation for much of the language input that learners receive and the language practice that occurs within the classroom environment. As Tomlinson (2012, p. 143) stated, "the ideal materials aim to provide all these ways of acquiring a language for the learners to experience and sometimes select from." Given this significance, teaching materials merit focused attention as an object of study within language curriculum and pedagogy research. Over recent years, the development and evaluation of English teaching materials have drawn substantial scholarly attention, with extensive literature discussing the design, writing, evaluation, and adaptation of materials. Key contributions to this area include McGrath (2016), who explored material evaluation and design for language teaching, McDonough et al. (2013), who examined the alignment of material design with language skills and classroom organization, and Tomlinson and Masuhara (2017), who provided a comprehensive overview of shifts from materials designed solely for teaching to those aimed at fostering language learning.

However, research on language teaching materials, as noted by Garton and Graves (2014), was largely characterised by its focus on providing practical 'cookbook' guidance for teachers. Such resources often concentrated on how teachers should design, evaluate, and adapt materials, rather than exploring the actual classroom interactions that occurred with these materials. This practical focus led to a notable gap in the literature concerning the interaction between teachers and teaching materials, an aspect that remained underexplored within language curriculum and pedagogy (Li & Harfitt, 2017; Saraceni, 2013). Few publications examine materials that are employed in classrooms, particularly in contexts where prescribed textbooks are mandated by curriculum policies (Meddings & Thornbury, 2009). This gap is particularly evident in contexts like China, where English teachers often work with specific, mandated textbooks. As Guerrettaz and Johnston (2013) suggested, there is a pressing need to better understand the relationship between teaching materials and the classroom experience. Addressing this knowledge gap is essential for comprehending the role of teacher agency in navigating and modifying prescribed materials to meet pedagogical and student needs.

This study aims to contribute to the understanding of teacher-material interactions, with a particular focus on the agency that teachers exercise when engaging with prescribed materials. Situated within two major cities in southern and southwestern China, this research investigated how English language teachers evaluated, adapted, and creatively utilised their prescribed teaching materials. The broader context of this study was framed by the Chinese Ministry of Education's ongoing reforms in basic education and teaching materials, beginning in the 1980s. Initially, high schools across China used a uniform set of English teaching materials based on audiolingualism and grammar-translation methodologies, offering no differentiation or choice (Wang & Chen, 2012). By the 1990s, however, the focus of material design began to shift towards communication-oriented teaching and fostering student interest (Wang, 2007). This period also saw the decentralisation of material development, with regional agencies authorised to design and publish textbooks aligned with the national English syllabus and local needs (Wang, 2007). The 2003 'English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (trial version)' issued by the Ministry of Education marked a further shift towards learner-centred teaching, supporting judicious and creative use of textbooks (Wang & Chen, 2012). Although English teachers across China now have access to a variety of materials, they continue to operate within a context where textbooks are typically prescribed, albeit with increasing scope for professional judgement and material adaptation.

This paper reports on a qualitative study involving five high school English teachers, examining their interactions with prescribed teaching materials within their classrooms. Using semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis, this study aimed to illuminate the nuanced ways in which teachers evaluated, adapted, and exploited their prescribed materials and how these practices were influenced by policy constraints and opportunities. The study specifically addressed the following research questions:

- (1) How do the English teachers in China evaluate, adapt, and exploit their prescribed teaching materials?
- (2) How does the curriculum policy enable or constrain the spaces and potential for teachers' agency in their material development?

## 2. Literature Review

To address the interaction between language teachers and language teaching materials, this study adopts Brown's (2009) definition of material as an artefact that shapes human activities, viewing teachers' use of materials as a design activity. Brown (2009) argued that materials, as artefacts, could extend human (in this case, teachers') capacity and mediate actions. Johnston (2007, as cited in Guerretaz & Johnston, 2013, p. 779) similarly suggested that language teaching materials should be conceived as "any artefacts that prompt the learning and use of language in the language classroom". Through these artefacts, teachers organise their language classrooms and achieve goals that would not be possible on their own. Materials thus serve as a medium for communicating ideas, practices, and classroom activities between teachers, students, and material designers. Teachers design classroom practices based on selected materials, which they adapt and improvise depending on classroom contexts and their professional judgement. This dynamic relationship forms the core of the interaction between language teachers and language teaching materials. This study primarily examines three perspectives of the teacher-material relationship: material evaluation, adaptation, and exploitation. Relevant literature is reviewed as follows.

### 2.1 Material Evaluation

While most language teaching materials are designed to meet the needs of a generalised target learner group, none are likely to be perfect for a specific school, class, or individual. McGrath (2016) pointed out that teaching from a material is not the same as basing an entire course on it. Before planning a lesson, teachers need to interpret and evaluate the available materials according to their objectives. McDonough et al. (2013) observed that material evaluation practices and criteria could vary across different educational settings. Teachers who can choose their teaching materials have greater freedom, but the evaluation process can be time-consuming. Conversely, for teachers whose materials are prescribed by the Ministry of Education or other similar bodies, they need to work with the set material as best they can and may resort to adaptation to better meet their contextual needs.

Several studies have explored how teachers evaluate their prescribed materials. Jazadi (2003) conducted a mixed-method study examining how high school English teachers in Indonesia used and assessed their mandated textbooks. Jazadi reported that teachers both relied on and critiqued the textbook. However, the study primarily focused on the drawbacks of the textbook instead of how teachers used the textbook or how their evaluations influenced their use. In a survey study, Jiang and Zheng (2009) investigated high school English teachers' and students' evaluations of a prescribed textbook in eastern China. They found that while teachers generally

supported the use of the textbook, students' evaluations varied according to their language proficiency levels. However, this study did not explore whether or how teachers evaluated and adapted the textbook based on student feedback. Both studies reported on teachers' evaluations of materials but did not connect these evaluations to actual use or to the contexts in which teachers worked. To address this gap, the present study examines not only teachers' evaluations but also the connections between their evaluations, their use of materials, and their specific contexts.

### *2.2 Material Adaptation*

Material adaptation is another well-explored theme in the field of material development. Many researchers associate adaptation with various modifications to materials, such as additions, modifications, and deletions (Brown, 2009). While the techniques can be numerous, the underlying reasons for adaptation merit greater attention. McDonough et al. (2013, p. 63) suggested "a direct relationship between evaluating and adapting materials, both in terms of the reasons for doing so and the criteria used." Thus, teachers' adaptation practices should be reviewed alongside their evaluation of the material. Although there are various principles and techniques for adaptation, the core logic of matching materials to context remains consistent. As McDonough et al. (2013, p. 67) argued, the purpose of adaptation is "to maximize the appropriacy of teaching materials in context, by changing some of the internal characteristics of a coursebook to suit our particular circumstances better". Teachers' adaptations contribute to a more conducive classroom environment and represent a highly innovative aspect of the teacher-material interaction.

Studies examining how teachers adapt their prescribed materials based on context and student needs have been conducted worldwide, though only a few focus on language classrooms. For example, Bosompem (2014) investigated tertiary-level teachers adapting mandated materials in Ghana. The study examined teachers' perceptions of their textbooks, along with their attitudes towards and practices of adaptation. However, it reported a limited range of adaptation techniques, such as addition, modification, replacement, and rejection, despite the potential complexity of teachers' adaptations. Furthermore, the study did not address the influence of curriculum and policy on adaptation practices. Other studies with a broader focus advocate for teachers to incorporate additional resources during material adaptation. Paik (2015), for instance, reported on Korean middle school teachers planning lessons within a textbook-based curriculum. The study recommended that teachers consider student contexts and policy guidelines to adapt curriculum materials to local characteristics. This study similarly recognises that to fully understand English language teachers' interactions with prescribed materials, it is essential to investigate the contexts in which teachers work and the resources they draw upon. Accordingly, this study will explore teacher-material relationships within their situated contexts.

### *2.3 Material Exploitation*

An area that has received less attention in the literature is teachers' exploitation of their materials. While some researchers classify exploitation as a type of adaptation (e.g., Islam & Mares, 2003), this study adopts McGrath's (2016, p. 71) definition of exploitation as "the creative use of what is already there ... to serve a purpose which is additional to that foreseen by the textbook writer". As Tomlinson (2012) argued, many teaching materials overemphasised linguistic and analytical aspects of language while neglecting the psychological and sociological realities of learners. Tomlinson (2013) further suggested that material exploitation can enhance engagement by adding content relevant to learners and by encouraging active thinking and participation. Saraceni (2013) also advocated a learner-centred approach that involves students in the material exploitation process.

Material exploitation remains an under-investigated area. As Tomlinson (2012) reported, studies on teachers' creative use of materials in the classroom are limited. The literature review has also shown that although material evaluation and adaptation have been well-articulated in terms of principles and techniques, the connections between these processes, contextual factors, and practical application remain to be explored. This study aims to examine teacher-material relationships in the Chinese context, where language teachers are increasingly granted freedom for evaluation, adaptation, and exploitation within textbook-driven settings. The study will investigate how teachers evaluate, adapt, and exploit their prescribed materials within the policy context and examine whether and how policy constraints or facilitates these practices.

## **3. Methodology**

The study was a qualitative investigation involving five high school English teachers from two major cities in southern and southwestern China. Since the study focused on teacher-material interaction within classroom settings, participants were purposefully selected to ensure that the research problem and questions could be effectively addressed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). All participants were in-service English teachers in public high schools who used textbooks prescribed by their local education departments. During the study, the

participants were teaching Senior 1 and Senior 2 classes and had varied lengths of teaching experience. The schools they worked in represented different types: three teachers were employed at high-status ‘key’ schools in their cities, while the other two taught in non-key schools. In China, students in key high schools are generally considered to have a higher level of academic competence and English proficiency. As McDonough et al. (2013) argued, school context and students’ capabilities may influence teachers’ interaction with their materials. Therefore, teachers from diverse contexts were chosen for the study. Table 1 profiles the five participants:

Table 1. Participants information

	A	B	C	D	E
Years of teaching	16 years	10 years	8 years	4 years	20 years
Grade	Senior 1	Senior 2	Senior 2	Senior 2	Senior 1
School Type	key	key	key	non-key	non-key

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. Firstly, a semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant. The interview consisted of two parts. In the first part, questions focused on teachers’ evaluation, adaptation, and exploitation of their prescribed textbooks. In the second part, an extract from a widely used English textbook series in China was presented to the teachers. This extract included two sections: a reading passage about greeting customs in various countries and a set of comprehension tasks related to the passage. Teachers were asked to evaluate the extract and explain how they would adapt and/or exploit it if they were to teach with this material. Their responses in the second part were compared and synthesised with their responses in the first part. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Secondly, documentary analysis was conducted to ensure the validity of the interview data. The ‘English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (trial version)’, published by the Ministry of Education (2003) and used to guide the participating teachers’ instruction and material development, was reviewed. Particular attention was paid to the application suggestions section in the curriculum document, which included recommendations for teaching, material development, and textbook use. This document was analysed to provide contextual data and corroborate evidence from the interviews (Bowen, 2009). The data from these two sources illustrated both the teachers’ practices and the policy context in which they worked. Analysis then focused on whether and how teachers’ practices were enabled or constrained by the policy context.

Thematic analysis was adopted to analyse the study’s data. Braun et al. (2019, p. 843) described thematic analysis as “a method for capturing patterns (‘themes’) across qualitative datasets”. By identifying themes in the data, researchers can interpret the patterning of responses across the dataset. The analysis began with generating codes from the interview transcripts. Several initial codes were identified, such as evaluation, adaptation, exploitation, student interest, school differences, and school management. These initial codes were then organised under broader themes, namely teachers’ evaluation, teachers’ adaptation, and teachers’ exploitation. Since documentary analysis was used to validate the interview data, the predefined codes were also applied to the curriculum document. Selected data from the curriculum document were then interpreted and used to enrich the narrative of the themes.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1 Teachers’ Evaluation

The interviews began with questions eliciting teachers’ comments on their textbooks. Most teachers held their textbooks in high regard. Teacher A referred to the textbook as ‘a trigger’ that helped shape the teaching design. Teachers B, C, and E described the textbook as ‘technically designed’ and ‘organised well,’ noting its coverage of a broad range of language knowledge and skills, including vocabulary, grammar, reading, listening, writing, and speaking. This reflects the alignment of textbook design with curriculum standards. English textbooks in China are designed and revised according to these standards, which include lists of grammar, vocabulary, topics, and performance descriptions for various skills. Although the content and details may vary due to regional needs, the underlying structure for grammar and vocabulary remains consistent, as the curriculum provides a unified standard. The textbooks offered teachers a clear structure for planning their lessons, which provided defined goals and, to some extent, reduced their workload. However, the fixed structure also limited teachers’ flexibility, particularly when content did not fully meet their needs.

Regarding the textbooks’ weaknesses, the teachers’ responses were surprisingly unanimous. Four teachers considered some textbook topics outdated, and Teacher D implicitly noted that certain topics could be boring for her students. Teacher E pointed out that some themes, especially those related to technology, such as robots and

the internet, might have been relevant a decade ago but did not appeal to students today. Outdated content in textbooks could fail to motivate both students and teachers. Since the 2003 curriculum and its textbooks had been in use for over a decade at the time of the interviews, it was unsurprising that some content no longer resonated with students in a fast-evolving world. Prescribed textbooks risk becoming outdated, particularly in language teaching, where the context and content are constantly evolving. Although new textbooks could be developed, their update frequency may not keep pace with the changing world.

In evaluating the textbook extract, most teachers provided positive feedback. Teacher A called it ‘pretty good’ due to its appropriate length and vocabulary level, while Teachers B and D found the content useful and interesting. Teacher E viewed it as practical for students. Teacher C, however, questioned its format, suggesting it should be rewritten into a conversational text. The generally positive comments likely stemmed from the cross-cultural theme, which could engage students and aligned with curriculum objectives, such as “cultural awareness” and “cross-cultural communication” (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 7). The comments also demonstrated that teachers evaluated materials based on factors such as language level, practicality, and student engagement. As McDonough et al. (2013) suggested, teachers’ evaluations directly influence their adaptation practices, which will be examined in the following section.

Interestingly, while teachers reached similar conclusions in their evaluations, their attitudes differed significantly. For example, Teachers A and D both described their textbooks as ‘basic,’ yet Teacher A, who worked in a key school, felt the textbook was too simple for her students and believed that additional preparation was needed to enrich the content. Teacher D, from a non-key school, considered the textbook appropriate for her students’ lower English proficiency. This distinction reflects the influence of different school contexts and student groups, with Teacher A and Teacher D tailoring their standards based on their students’ needs.

#### *4.2 Teachers’ Adaptation*

The interviews also explored teachers’ adaptation choices and their rationale for making these adaptations. All teachers agreed that they adapted their textbooks in various ways, with adding, deleting, and modifying content as common practices. Teachers A, B, and C cited the need to update outdated content as a primary reason for adaptation, consistent with their evaluations of the textbooks. These teachers reported supplementing materials with updated news, videos, and audio resources. In contrast, Teachers D and E, who expressed more satisfaction with their textbooks, focused primarily on replacing or omitting exercises that were too challenging or time-consuming. Their adaptations were more influenced by their students’ language levels and the time constraints of their teaching schedules.

The teachers also suggested adaptation strategies for the textbook extract, which were consistent with their reported adaptation practices. Teachers A, B, and C recommended significant modifications: Teacher A suggested adding more challenging reading passages; Teacher B intended to supplement the text with additional reading and have students write summaries; Teacher C preferred transforming the passage into a dialogue to practice cultural customs. Conversely, Teachers D and E were more conservative in their adaptations. Teacher D, finding the tasks overly complex, would simplify them into a short play, while Teacher E suggested assigning related passages for after-class reading.

These responses indicate that teachers do not adhere rigidly to textbook prescriptions, in line with the curriculum’s recommendation that “teachers should use the textbook flexibly and creatively” (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 16). Teachers are encouraged to “supplement, delete, change, expand and reorganise” textbook content as needed (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 62). Thus, while textbooks are prescribed, teachers retain autonomy in their usage.

The interviews highlighted that students’ English proficiency was a major contextual factor affecting teachers’ adaptations. Teachers A, B, and C, who taught in key schools, assigned more complex tasks, while Teachers D and E, in non-key schools, adhered more closely to the textbook. According to the curriculum, textbooks are based on a “basic-level principle”, providing foundational knowledge for most high school students (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 60). For students with average English proficiency, the textbooks may suffice, but for advanced students, the materials may be inadequate. This was evident in the teachers’ responses: those in key schools sought additional modifications, while those in non-key schools felt the textbooks met their students’ needs, although adaptation responsibilities have shifted somewhat to teachers themselves.

Other contextual factors, such as school administration and exams, also emerged from the interviews. For public high schools in China, teaching is often meticulously pre-arranged. Teachers noted that these arrangements could restrict their lesson plans and adaptation practices. For instance, Teacher A described her school’s four-part semester structure, with each segment ending in an exam. Teachers were required to complete specified content

within set deadlines. Teacher A expressed reluctance to rush her students through the syllabus but acknowledged the need to meet the timetable. Teacher B managed the limited time by omitting simpler textbook sections, while Teacher D noted that her students sometimes requested a shift from textbook content to exam-oriented exercises.

While administrative schedules and exams posed challenges for teachers, the curriculum cautions against adapting content purely for exams, stating that “changing the textbook content for exams should be avoided” (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 62). This reveals a discrepancy between curriculum expectations and real-world demands from school administration. The curriculum envisions a focus on developing students’ language abilities, while school managers prioritise meeting deadlines and achieving exam success. Teachers, caught between these conflicting demands, adjust their teaching accordingly, potentially impacting their professionalism and encouraging a narrower, exam-focused approach that may limit broader language development.

#### *4.3 Teachers’ Exploitation*

The interviews did not directly ask teachers about their material exploitation practices, as not all teachers may engage in material exploitation or fully understand the term. Instead, teachers’ narratives were analysed for evidence of exploitation practices. This analysis follows McGrath’s (2016) definition of exploitation as the creative use of the textbook to better meet students’ needs. Several teachers reported using their materials creatively to foster a more engaging learning environment. While evaluating the textbook extract, Teacher C, who worked in a key school, suggested that the passage should be rewritten into a conversational text. He proposed that, after rewriting, students could perform a role-play activity, allowing them to learn through linguistic and visual input as well as physical responses. This practice aligns with the ‘partial replacement’ activity described by Tomlinson (2013, p. 141), which aims to enhance relevance and engagement in students’ learning experiences. By adapting the content style, Teacher C sought to involve his students as active learners, rather than mere followers of the prescribed textbook.

Other teachers also reported instances of exploiting their textbooks creatively. Teacher A, who also taught in a key school, encouraged her students to conduct surveys and give presentations on topics that interested them. As Teacher A explained, in these cases, ‘students are taking part in modifying the textbook’. Teacher D, from a non-key school, also offered creative examples of exploitation, though her approach remained closer to the textbook content. For instance, before teaching a reading passage, she would have students read a selected part, then ask them to predict the beginning and write an ending for the story. She also mentioned seeking her students’ opinions on the materials. The practices reported by Teachers A and D illustrate a learner-centred approach to material development, in which students assume a more active role in the exploitation process. As Saraceni (2013, p. 52) argued, adapting and exploiting materials can serve as ‘an awareness development activity that potentially facilitates learner involvement and, eventually, empowers learners to develop their critical thinking’. These learner-centred practices are also in line with curriculum recommendations, as the curriculum document advises: “if possible, teachers should negotiate with students about what should be supplemented or deleted” (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 62).

### **5. Discussion**

The interview data showed that although teachers work with prescribed textbooks, they do not always strictly follow the prescribed instructions. Teachers evaluate materials based on their professional knowledge and the realities of their contexts. They further adapt and/or exploit the materials to meet their students’ needs, although these practices may be constrained by external factors such as administrative requirements and exams. The curriculum policy encourages teachers’ adaptation and exploitation, repeatedly emphasising that they should use the textbook flexibly to address their students’ needs. It also provides space for teachers to exercise their agency and professionalism, allowing them to draw on additional resources and create customised designs.

However, several factors may contribute to the deprofessionalisation of teachers when using prescribed textbooks. Firstly, the fixed structure of the textbook can limit opportunities for teachers’ professional judgement. Although this structure is convenient and advantageous to many teachers, it imposes a predetermined route that they must follow. Deviating from this route requires considerable effort to construct alternative materials and risks affecting students’ progress. Secondly, the content of prescribed textbooks may become outdated before new editions are developed and distributed. Teachers may replace outdated content with other resources, but this substitution relies heavily on their professional knowledge and autonomy, which does not always ensure successful outcomes.

Thirdly, textbooks are typically designed for an imaginary group of average students, which can lead to a substantial workload for teachers with more advanced students and limit the scope of practice for teachers working with average-level students. The interviews indicated that teachers in key schools adapted their

textbooks with significant effort, demonstrating their use of professional agency but also revealing that prescribed textbooks may not be entirely suitable for their students. For teachers in non-key schools, the textbooks appeared to meet the needs of both teachers and students, yet they still limited opportunities for students' further improvement. Fourthly, while a prescribed curriculum and textbook can promote equitable education, it can also lead to rigid pedagogical management. Teachers reported that fixed timetables and exam pressures constrained their lesson planning and adaptation. Although a standardised schedule helps establish expectations for teachers' work, it may restrict the breadth and depth of students' learning experiences.

## 6. Conclusion

This study examined how high school English teachers in China interact with their prescribed teaching materials by evaluating, adapting, and exploiting these resources within the constraints and opportunities presented by curriculum policy. Findings reveal that, although teachers are given some flexibility for material development, a range of internal and external factors—including the structured design of the textbooks and rigid administrative demands—can limit teachers' professional agency and lead to deprofessionalisation. While the curriculum supports flexible textbook use, the fixed content and structure often restrict teachers' ability to fully address students' diverse needs, highlighting the importance of adaptable textbook designs that can accommodate various proficiency levels and evolving societal topics. Producing dual versions of textbooks, for instance, could better align with both high-achieving and average-level students, offering teachers greater freedom to select appropriate materials.

The study contributes to understanding teacher agency in material development and underscores the complex relationship between a standardised curriculum and teachers' context-sensitive practices. However, limitations include the lack of classroom observations and insights into students' responses to adapted materials. Future research should focus on these aspects, as well as longitudinal studies observing teacher-material interactions over time to assess the impact on student engagement and learning outcomes.

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