ADAPTING AND DEVELOPING ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING/LEARNING MATERIALS

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ABSTRACT

Although English teaching/learning materials are abundant and more and more learner-centred, materials-in-use need a teacher's careful consideration to effectively facilitate learning. Teachers can exploit the availability of English language resources by taking serious principles of selecting and adapting predetermined coursebooks, the result of which leads to the development of learning materials appropriate to particular of types of learner. Ideally, this process entails useful information for professional materials developers and publishers who will then create innovation in materials for the better use.

1. Introduction

Teaching/Learning materials are "anything which is used to help language learners to learn" (Tomlinson, 2011:xiii). Being an English teacher – language learning enabler includes the ability to select, use and develop materials that enables the learners to reach their full potential. Nowadays the expanding market of English learning resources features this job as an on-going process with both advantages and challenges, especially when the teacher has to take learners' differences into consideration. The idea of a teacher who carries out his lesson from the textbook in a safe way has been seen as a lack-of-innovation. The expectation from class seating is the image a creative teacher who brings about substantially motivating activities not only by the way he manages the class but also by the materials he chooses.

This paper argues for the importance of teachers' ability to select, use and develop available English teaching/learning materials for an effectiveness use. In addition a review of how materials are selected, used and developed is undertaken in order to picture the whole process teachers should go through when preparing their lessons.

2. English teaching/learning materials in Vietnam

English learning materials can be classified into three groups: imported coursebooks and supplementary resources, in-country designed textbooks, and authentic resources. Each type has its own strengths and weaknesses. First, being developed by principles of language acquisition, relevant and coherent in structure and content, obviously, the imported learning materials gain their popularity in the market. They possess a lot of advantages, to name a few, they have stimulating visuals, systematic tasks, emphasis on independent learning, linguistic accuracy, interesting and varied texts, wide range of topics (Bao Dat, 2008). From the teacher's perspective, it is convenient to make use of the whole package of coursebook materials which usually include at least a workbook, an easy-processed teacher's guide, high-quality CDs and/or DVD, and relevant supplementary books. Additionally, learners may find themselves interested in the uniform of units, various content and colorful visual reinforcement. However, Bao Dat (2008) clarified that imported coursebooks are known as "global coursebooks" and thus not designed for

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any particular market. Thus when they are used in a Southeast country, teachers and learners have to cope with some difficulties concerning the complexity of instructions, unfamiliarity of cultural information, and lack of meaningful opportunities for learners to express themselves.

Second, due to this insufficiency of imported learning materials, the educational administrators have given consideration to self-designed textbooks, the result of which is a series of in-country textbooks used in Vietnamese high-schools has come into life. Compared to the imported coursebooks, in-country textbooks merely provide a very limited genuine language exposure. Furthermore, there are evidences of linguistic inaccuracy, unintended effect and vague content throughout the textbooks. Also, the intended balance between content and skill-based activities cannot achieve any effects but makes life difficult for students (Bao Dat, 2008). Specifically, whereas the form-focused exercises are found helpful, the skill-based activities fail to shape learners' foreign language skills after a duration of seven years. The scare success of learners proves that English textbooks by non-native speakers turns out a hard land to plough.

Third, to help learners transfer the skills and information they learn in class to real life, using the authentic resources has been under much consideration by more and more teachers. Authentic materials, such as English newspaper/magazines articles, graded readers for written language, and TV/radio programmes, movies, songs for spoken language, etc. are believed to enable learners to confront with real life English by native speakers. By using these authentic dialogues, for example, the teacher can focus on variations in pronunciation, and how intonation and incomplete structures are used to express meaning. However, it is actually a very difficult task to get students model oral activities on the exchange and see how close they can come to producing the same effect (Beare, n.d).
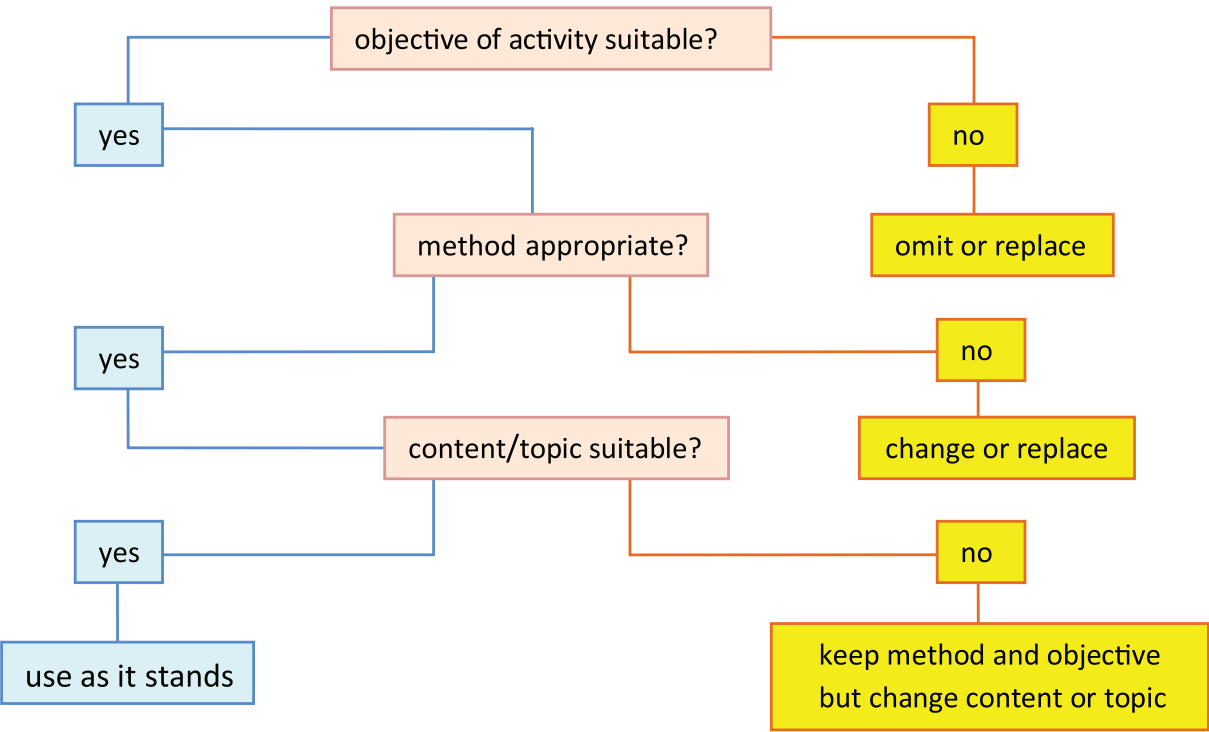
As being discussed, each type of materials has its own advantages and disadvantages. Moreover, according to Cunningsworth (1995), it is rare to find a perfect fit between what learner needs and what the coursebook contains. A teacher who wants to bring wind to the sail has to be able to find out the problems involved with learning and supplementing materials to select and use them appropriately. In reality of Vietnam English teaching/ learning context, it is popular that a main textbook is chosen on the basis of convenience for teachers, learners and administrators. Therefore, teachers may not be able to choose their coursebook, but they can still make choices about what materials in it to use, how to use and supplement the chosen parts suitably. Materials adaptation, then, can be a very "worthwhile activity, giving added life and impact to even very ordinary coursebook." (Cunningsworth, 1995: 137).

3. Adapting coursebook materials

Coursebook adaptation, for the most parts, starts with materials evaluation – the attempt to measure the value of materials (Tomlinson, 2011). Evaluating learning materials normally includes an analysis of tasks and contents which leads to a discovery of possible mismatches between the materials and a particular group of learners. Evaluating work draws teachers' attention to both nature of the coursebook or materials and their learners' characteristics and brings about great benefits when the mismatch is tackled. With the wide range and variety of learning materials, teachers now learn how to adapt the irrelevant activities and pick and choose the relevant ones from other resources to bridge the gaps between the coursebook and the learner.

This following diagram will help in deciding whether to adapt an exercise or other activity in a given coursebook:

Diagram 1: Cunningsworth's process of materials adaptation

(After Cunningsworth, 1995:137)

As we can see in the diagram, there are three main areas involved in the process of adapting materials. First, the objective of activity should be consistent to the objective of the lesson or the activity will be replaced by another one. When the activity is suitable, the teacher next considers the method implied to see whether the pre-assumption on how to do the activity fits to the learners' learning style. Finally, the content of the activity should meet the learners' interest and motivation and culturally relevant, if not, they should be changed.

Normally, the learning materials provide the main content for a lesson, materials-in-use tend to be more personalised for the learners to have a sense of familiarity and to activate their schemata. For example:

Coursebook provides:	Teacher can provide additional:
• situation/context	• warmers
• pictures	• instructions
• dialogues	• role-plays
• tasks and exercises	• homework tasks

(Spratt et al., 2011)

The teacher can also change the order of activities in the coursebook in order to create variety, such as interaction pattern, sequence of skill practice, level of difficulty, mood, etc. In case the coursebook is unsuitable and insufficient, the teacher may want to provide extra language or skill practice. Therefore, the selection and use of supplementary materials and activities need to be taken account. The supplementary materials include skills development materials,

grammar, vocabulary, and phonology practice materials, and collections of communicative activities. In accordance with the availability of teaching resources, teacher can exploit different types of learning materials to supplement the coursebook. Let us take some more examples:
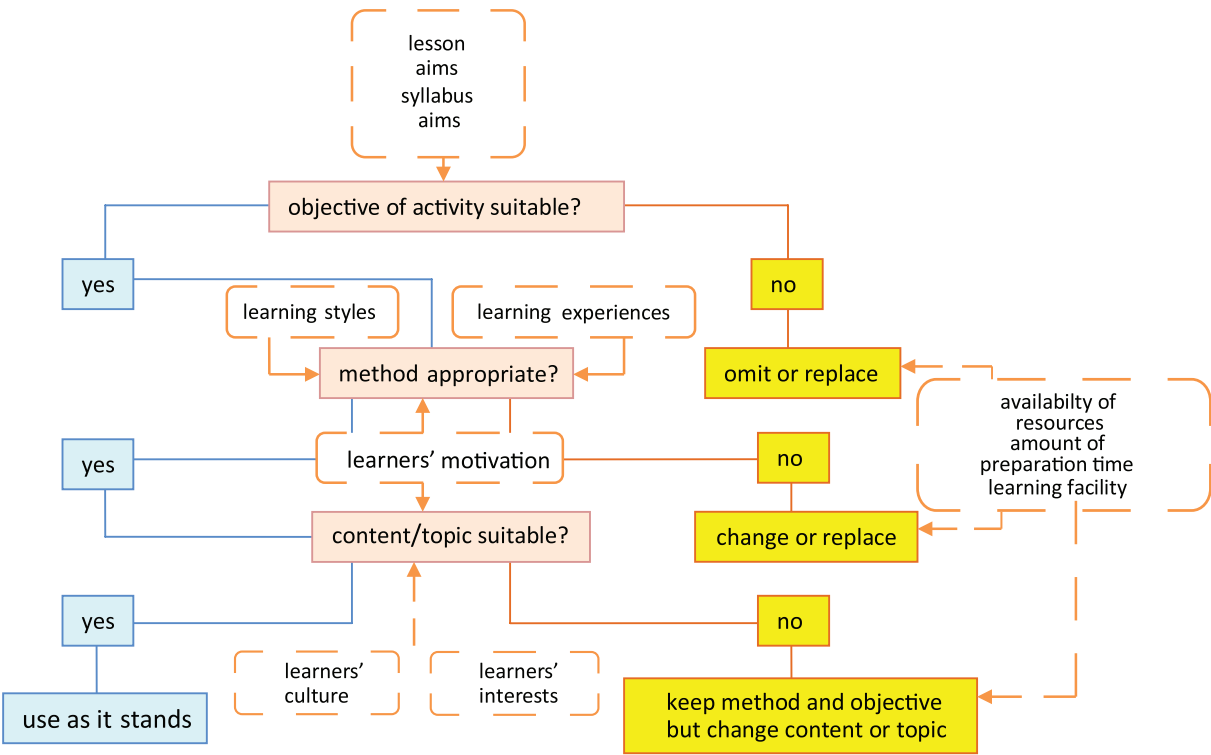
Coursebook does not have:	Teacher can provide:
• enough grammar revision	• some extra exercises from grammar book
• fluency-based practice	• activities from collections of communicative activities
• exam strategies	• model tests from an exam practice book
• pronunciation focus	• a collection of relevant poems and songs

As a summary, Spratt et al. (2011) pointed out that teachers often base their selection of learning materials (both coursebook and supplementary materials) on a 'need analysis'. That means teachers gather information about learners' levels, interests, language needs, learning styles and motivation to figure out what their learners have in common and how they differ to build up a class profile. The teacher's task is then to select the materials that best match this profile.

The following diagram is modified from Cunningsworth's to visualize different factors teachers can consider to adapt teaching/learning materials in a particular context.

Diagram 2: Modified Cunningsworth's process of materials adaptation – factors influencing the decision-making process on materials selection and use.

4. Developing learning materials

By making decisions based on many factors presented in diagram 2, teachers are no longer knowledge users, they are knowledge producers. Freeman (1998:10) asserted that 'the knowledge always changes in the implementation.' All changes that matter in the process of transferring materials into actual practice require thorough evaluation and fine decision making. In other words, by adapting different aspects of materials and by solving recognized mismatches, teachers do create learning materials for their students. Whatever they do to provide input – writing textbooks, telling stories, expressing opinions, providing samples of language used, etc. – they do so ideally in principled ways related to what they know about how languages can be effectively learned (Tomlinson, 2011).

Therefore, apart from professional materials developers, classroom teachers are in fact responsible for the evaluation and implementation of language teaching materials. Their contribution can be more interactive when having materials in use and maximize the likelihood of intake and to stimulate purposeful output of their learners. In reality, an effective personal materials can be developed and shared for common use among teachers and learners by hard photocopies or by new technologies electronic formats like power point slides, emails, You Tube, Face book, Twitter, blogs and mobile phones.

5. Conclusion

With the dramatic development of the English teaching/learning materials, teachers can explore them by evaluating coursebook materials, selecting, adapting and developing those that will be most suitable for their teaching purposes and a particular type of learner. Importantly, the teacher voice from classroom as a result of the whole process of materials adaptation, contributes a practical undertaking to field of study of materials development, providing sources of language and language acquisition. In short, teaching a language is no longer the overt presentation of information by teachers to learners, but by all the steps done by teachers – materials developers to make learning happen.

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