

Materials Adaptation in ELT: Challenges in India Context

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Abstract

Materials adaptation is relatively a recent field of study in ELT, commencing in the late 1980's. Materials adaptation in ELT refers to the modification of materials by bringing the materials closer to a particular context of language teaching. The purpose of materials adaptation is to make language teaching more effective. This paper discusses the process of materials adaptation in ELT focusing on the various techniques. Through a comprehensive literature review and description of existing practices the paper elucidates various techniques employed in materials adaptation. Moreover, the paper investigates diverse issues that hinder the adaptation of ELT materials in Indian context. The aim of this paper is to shed light on the materials adaptation as a significant process in ELT. Moreover, the paper also aims to highlight various issues in Indian context that need to be addressed to include materials development as a crucial element in English language teaching classrooms in India.

Keywords: India, ELT, ELT materials, materials adaptation, materials development.

Introduction

Materials in ELT refer to anything that can be used in English language teaching. According to McGrath (2013) materials in ELT include realia and representations. Realia are real

objects such as a chair or a piece of fruit and representation includes a drawing or a photograph of someone or something. Such materials can be called as non-verbal because they do not consist of any language content. McGrath (2013) argues that the advantage of verbal materials which include written and spoken materials over those of non-verbal materials is that they consist of both language and content. The form of language in verbal materials serves as the examples of language use and the content refers to the ideas carried by the language to which the learners react. Tomilinson (2001) defines materials as “anything which can be used to facilitate the learning of a language”. They include visual, auditory and print materials. Despite technological advances in electronics, textbooks are still the most used language learning and teaching materials (Tomilinson, 2001). Textbook materials act as the primary source for presenting the content of the language that has to be taught and learnt. Textbook materials determine the aims and objectives of an ELT programme.

Richards (2014) states, that the textbook materials provide the main basis for the curriculum. They also provide an outline for carrying out the teaching/learning activities. Moreover, textbook materials provide evaluation strategies for measuring the process of teaching/learning process. Many researchers (Grant, 1987; O’Neill 1982; Hutchinson and Torres, 1994; Ur 1996; Cunningsworth; Richards, 2001; and Tomilinson) have argued in favor of using the textbook materials in ELT.

The various reasons to use textbook materials in ELT can be summarized as follows.

1. Textbook materials are cost effective in terms of time and money.
2. Textbooks provide a basis for language teaching and learning curriculum which provides the teachers with guidelines to carry out the teaching process.
3. Textbooks provide learners with samples of language upon which they can maximize their learning.
4. Textbook materials help teachers and students keep track of what has been learnt and help learners revise what has been taught.

Textbook materials play a significant role in English language teaching and learning in Indian context. They do not only provide language teaching-learning content but also provide a framework for carrying out the teaching process. The textbooks are significant in ELT classrooms

in India because they provide a syllabus, the language content, methodology, and ways to assess what learners have learnt. Moreover, the dependence on these textbooks can also be largely associated with the fact that the learners are evaluated on the basis of these textbooks in the end term examinations.

English is taught as a compulsory subject in many states at the school and college level. The textbooks for English in India are produced by the ministry of education, for example, the English textbooks for government schools of Kashmir are developed by NCERT India. A textbook development committee is formed which includes members from English departments of universities, colleges and schools such as professors, and lecturers.

At the state level the textbooks for English are developed by the state boards or universities. For example, the English language textbooks for the undergraduate students are developed by the University of Kashmir. Given the multilingual and multicultural diversity of India, these textbooks most often pose a lot of problems in English language teaching.

The textbook development committee is in no way a representative of the diverse multilingual and multicultural India. The textbooks developed do not reflect the practical aspects of an actual Indian classroom, the needs of the learners, and the needs of the teachers. This gives rise to problems at the various levels such as inappropriate content, rigid methodology, uninteresting activities, and insufficient activities.

The teachers in India are mostly non-native speakers of English language and heavily depend on the textbooks to carry out their teaching process. In such contexts where the teachers are dependent on these textbooks English language teaching becomes inefficient. One of the solutions to address such problems is to replace the textbooks with new ones. But, replacing the textbooks with new ones is a policy decision and takes a lot of time and resources.

Since textbooks cannot be replaced after every academic session, it is more efficient to make changes in the already existing textbooks. These changes can be made in order to meet the

specific teaching-learning needs of a particular context. This process of making changes in the textbooks to make language teaching effective is called adaptation.

Materials Adaptation

Materials adaptation is a process of changing the existing materials to better suit specific learners, teachers and contexts to facilitate effective learning (Tomlinson and Masuhara, 2018). This definition provides three significant elements, namely, learners, teachers and contexts, with respect to which the changes in a textbook can be made. Mc Donough et al. (2013) view adaptation as a matching process between the external criteria and the internal criteria. The external criteria may include learner characteristics, physical environment, resources and class size and the internal criteria includes the content of the materials. It is a process where a teacher decides to change content such as activities, exercises, texts, and tests to produce a revised version for the learners. Mc Donough et al (2013) state that adaptation is a response to specific learner's behavior at a particular moment in the teaching learning process. Materials adaptation does not indicate that the materials are defective, rather, materials can be well developed and well organized but they may not meet the specific needs of a particular language learning and teaching context. In such cases, adaptation becomes a 'necessary activity' (Mc Donough et al 2013) to bridge the gap in ways that will be satisfying for those who learn from it' (Stevick, 1972).

Reason for Adapting ELT Materials

Language teaching classrooms always pose many challenges for language teachers. The cases where materials do not meet the specific requirements of a teaching learning context can be addressed by adapting the materials. The main reason for adapting materials is to make English language teaching effective. Islam and Maves (2003) state that adapting materials can help in catering for all learner styles, provide for learner autonomy and make language input more engaging. Tomlinson and Masuhara (2018) point out that adapting materials can not only contribute to the learners' learning but also to the teachers' enjoyment of teaching.

McDonough et al (2013) provide a list of reasons to adapt materials which include insufficient grammar coverage, unknown vocabulary in reading passages, inauthentic listening

passages, easy comprehension questions, too much or too little variety of activities and inappropriate subject matter for the learners. But, every teaching learning situation differs, therefore, the reasons for adapting materials may vary depending on a particular teaching learning situation.

Techniques of Adaptation

The four techniques for adapting materials mentioned by McDonough et al (2013) are discussed as follows:

1. Adding: The addition implies that the materials which are not sufficient for the learners are supplemented by adding more to them. However, it is also important that the addition of more content into the materials should not have any effect on time allocation. The addition can be done quantitatively the technique of extending. In this technique the addition is done by extending the same exercise or activity. This can be done in situations such as enough practice examples of some aspect of language are needed, extra reading passages for reinforcing key linguistic elements are needed, or extra exercises for the explanation of new grammar points is needed.

Addition can also be done through the technique of expanding. Such additions put new components or new language skills in the already existing materials. these additions are different from extending because they are not only the extension of an existing materials but move into new directions by adding to the methodology. For example, adding practice exercises on sentence stress and rhythm in already existing pronunciation practice which only contains practice on individual sounds, or adding a listening comprehension materials to a reading passage because of insufficient coverage of listening skill.

2. Deleting

Deletion refers to taking out or omitting material on a small scale such as part of an exercise or on a large scale such as a unit in a textbook. The deletion in materials can be applied in situations such as pronunciation exercises may be too general and the learners may not require them and such exercises can be deleted, language functions presented in a textbook may not be required by the

learners, or discussion section at the end of units for learners who cannot tackle those discussions adequately.

3. Modifying

Modification refers ‘to an internal change in the approach or focus of an exercise or other piece of material’ (Mc Donough et al 2013). Modification can be done in two ways: rewriting and restructuring. Rewriting is used when some linguistic content needs modification. and restructuring is used when classroom management needs modification.

Rewriting can be done to change the focus of materials such as making activities more communicative where textbooks lag behind in meeting students’ needs. Rewriting is done to relate activities more closely to learners’ backgrounds and interests, introduce samples of authentic language, or make tasks more purposeful (Mc Donough et al 2013). Rewriting can be done to make the content local so that the students can understand it easily. A text may have appropriate language material for a specific group, but may not match in terms of its cultural content. Several studies have indicated positive results when we incorporate local learners’ culture into ELT materials by making the linguistic input more appropriate, and by exploiting what learners know best by rewriting a reading text which was previously filled with foreign elements. Islam and Mares (2003) also provided extensive examples for making textbooks more learning centred through rewriting.

Restructuring refers to the modification which may change the structuring of the class while following a textbook. These changes are done where rewriting is not possible and the teachers are required to follow a textbook. For example, role-play activities may not match the size of classrooms, sometimes the classroom size may be too large or too small for carrying out such activities. Similarly, a written activity designed to carry out individually can be made more easy for the learners if it is turned into a group activity. In such cases the modification means to change the focus of an exercise, text or an activity.

4. Simplifying

As the term suggests, simplifying is a technique of adaptation in which the elements of materials are simplified. These elements may include instructions and explanations of activities

and exercises to make them easier for learners. Mc Donough et al (2013) states that sometimes oversimplifying may be misleadingly partial. For example, telling learners that adverbs in English are always formed by adding 'ly' to adjectives. The technique of simplification is mostly applied to the reading passages with emphasis on changing various elements to match the text more closely to the proficiency level of the learners. Simplification can be done to reduce sentence length or complexity, control new vocabulary with reference to what learners have already learned, changing grammatical structures.

5. Reordering

Reordering refers to the process of changing the parts of a textbook by putting them in a different order. This can be done within a unit by adjusting the sequence of presentation of activities or putting the units in a different order within a textbook.

Issues in ELT Materials Adaptation in India

This section discusses various issues that hinder materials adaptation in India. The present study identifies five major issues that could hinder the process of materials adaptation in ELT in Indian contexts.

i. Examination Driven Teaching

In India, examinations take precedence above all else (Meganathan, 2009). Teachers predominantly rely on textbooks without considering the actual needs of their students. These examinations assess reading and writing skills, with questions often relying on memorization. Consequently, teachers prioritize syllabus completion over fostering the learners' language skills. Inflexible exam requirements mean teachers cannot alter activities, exercises, or texts, as exam questions are typically based on these materials. Teachers with innovative ideas for textbook modifications often find themselves unable to implement these changes in the classroom, as they must adhere strictly to examination guidelines. Teachers often feel pressured to adhere strictly to the prescribed syllabus and teaching materials to ensure students perform well on exams, leaving little room for adaptation of the textbook materials.

ii. Unified Textbook

The use of a single, standardized textbook across diverse educational contexts in India can pose challenges in catering to the varying needs, interests, and proficiency levels of students. These textbooks are designed for a broader audience in which the linguistic and cultural background of the students is often overlooked. Such textbooks often lack flexibility and hinder teachers in adapting the materials to meet the needs of the learners. A unified textbook may not adequately reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity of India, often overlooking regional variations in language usage and experiences. The content and activities in a unified textbook may not resonate with students from different socio-cultural backgrounds, potentially leading to disengagement and limited learning outcomes. The unified textbooks are often subject to strict standardization requirements, leaving little room for adaptation by teachers. This can hinder teachers' ability to address individual learning styles, preferences, and abilities within their classrooms. Moreover, these textbooks often adhere to a particular methodology that might not be suitable for all learners. Teachers, in such cases, may find it challenging to adapt the material to align with alternative teaching methodologies or approaches that better suit their students' needs.

iii. Lack of Training

The teachers who are involved in the textbook development at the state or national levels often belong to the higher levels of education and have years of experience in teaching English language. But, these teachers are not the representative of all the teachers who are involved in teaching English in Indian classrooms. The teachers in India do not have any training in textbook development. They are unaware about the principles and procedures of both textbook development and textbook evaluation. This poses a serious problem when it comes to adapting textbooks in a particular context. Firstly, such teachers often fail to identify the learner needs. Secondly, in cases where such teachers might sometimes succeed in identifying learner needs their limited professional development hinders their ability to adapt and innovate in response to evolving educational needs. Adaptation involves modifying textbook content, activities, and assessments to accommodate students with varying abilities and learning preferences. Untrained teachers lack the expertise to effectively differentiate instruction, resulting in limited adaptation and engagement among students.

iv. Time Constraints

Time constraints within the educational system, including crowded curricula and limited instructional hours, may restrict teachers' ability to deviate from prescribed teaching materials and explore alternative solutions to various problems associated with the teaching. Teachers often struggle to cover the required content within the allocated time, leaving little flexibility for supplemental activities, or individualized support for students. Moreover, teachers in Indian classrooms are often burdened with many administrative duties which further reduces the time available for their experiments with the textbooks.

v. Classroom Size

Large classroom sizes are a major problem in Indian context. Teachers often teach in classes with more than 30 students. This is a significant problem in textbook adaptation because the teachers may struggle to provide individualized attention to each student. Adaptation often involves tailoring instruction to meet the diverse needs and learning styles of students. However, in a large class setting, teachers may find it challenging to address the specific needs of every learner, leading to less effective adaptation of materials. Effective adaptation also requires differentiating instruction to accommodate students with varying proficiency levels, learning styles, and abilities. In a large classroom, implementing differentiation strategies can be challenging due to the sheer number of students. Teachers may find it difficult to modify materials and activities to suit the diverse needs of all learners, resulting in limited adaptation.

Large class sizes can inhibit student interaction and participation. Adaptation often involves incorporating interactive and collaborative activities to engage students actively in the learning process. However, in a large classroom, opportunities for meaningful interaction and participation may be limited, making it challenging to effectively adapt materials that rely on student engagement.

Managing a large classroom can be demanding, requiring effective classroom management strategies to maintain order and discipline. Adaptation efforts may be hindered by the need to focus on managing behavior and maintaining a conducive learning environment, leaving less time and energy for modifying materials and activities.

Conclusion

The study discussed the process of materials adaptation in ELT, shedding light on the diverse techniques used in this process. Adaptation is of paramount importance in ELT ensuring effective language teaching outcomes by localizing ELT materials. It is a growing field of study within the realm of ELT and various research studies have been carried out throughout the world to understand the intricacies of the process. However, in Indian context not much has been discussed on the field of materials adaptation. India is a multilingual and multicultural nation and addressing these issues at the classroom level in ELT textbooks can prove beneficial for meeting the needs of both the learners and the teachers.

This study discussed various issues in materials adaptation in the Indian context such as examination driven language teaching, unified textbook, lack of training, time constraint and classroom size. These issues reflect the ground reality of Indian ELT classrooms which need to be addressed to foster a conducive environment for effective materials adaptation. This will result in catering to the dynamic needs of the learners and teachers and enhance the quality of ELT materials in India.

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