

MATERIAL ADAPTATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract. This paper investigates the theory and practice of material adaptation in foreign language teaching (FLT). As commercially produced textbooks and standardised curricula cannot fully address the diverse linguistic backgrounds, proficiency levels, learning styles, and sociocultural contexts of every learner population, teachers must develop the competence to modify, supplement, simplify, or extend existing materials to maximise their pedagogical effectiveness. Drawing on established frameworks in materials development and curriculum design, the study examines the rationale for adaptation, principal adaptation strategies — including simplification, elaboration, localisation, and reordering — and the pedagogical criteria that should guide adaptation decisions. Empirical findings and classroom observations are synthesised to demonstrate that principled material adaptation leads to improved learner engagement, more equitable access to comprehensible input, and superior language acquisition outcomes. Recommendations for language teachers and curriculum designers are presented in the conclusion.

Keywords: *material adaptation, foreign language teaching, textbook adaptation, materials development, localisation, simplification, EFL/ESL, curriculum design*

1. Introduction

The teaching and learning of a foreign language does not take place in a vacuum. Every classroom is populated by learners who bring distinct first-language backgrounds, prior educational experiences, motivational orientations, and cultural frames of reference. Yet the materials most widely used in foreign language classrooms — commercially published textbooks, standardised coursebooks, and prefabricated lesson packages — are designed for a notional ‘average’ learner rather than for the specific individuals seated before any given teacher. The inevitable consequence of this mismatch between generic materials and particular learners is that teachers who rely uncritically on published materials risk delivering instruction that is simultaneously too difficult for some, too easy for others, culturally irrelevant, linguistically inauthentic, or simply unmotivating.

Material adaptation refers to the deliberate process by which teachers or curriculum designers modify existing instructional resources — whether textbooks, authentic texts, audio recordings, digital media, or task sequences — to better serve the needs of a specific learner population. Far from a peripheral or improvised activity, adaptation is now recognised as a core professional competence for language teachers and a central concern of applied linguistics and materials development research. Tomlinson (2011) identifies adaptation as the practical expression of the reflective practitioner’s capacity to translate theoretical knowledge about language acquisition into contextually appropriate classroom action.

This paper examines the theoretical foundations of material adaptation in FLT, surveys the principal strategies through which adaptation is carried out, analyses the pedagogical criteria that should govern adaptation decisions, and presents evidence of its effectiveness in diverse educational contexts. Challenges confronting teachers who undertake adaptation are also addressed, and recommendations are offered to support the development of adaptation competence among pre-service and in-service language teachers.

2. Theoretical Background

The theoretical justification for material adaptation in FLT is grounded in several converging frameworks. Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis stipulates that language acquisition proceeds optimally when learners receive comprehensible input pitched at a level marginally above their current competence ($i + 1$). Commercially produced materials calibrated for a generic proficiency level will frequently fail to satisfy this condition for learners whose actual proficiency deviates from the assumed norm. Adaptation — through simplification for lower-proficiency learners or elaboration and extension for advanced ones — restores the input to an acquisitionally productive level.

Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) provides a complementary rationale: tasks and texts that lie beyond a learner's independent capacity but within reach with appropriate scaffolding represent the most productive instructional space. Adapted materials that incorporate glosses, visual supports, graphic organisers, or staged task sequences provide the scaffolding that allows learners to engage with input or produce output at the upper limit of their ZPD. In this sense, adaptation is the practical operationalisation of Vygotskian principles in the language classroom.

Schema theory (Bartlett, 1932; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983) further illuminates the necessity of cultural adaptation. Comprehension of a text depends not only on linguistic decoding but also on the activation of relevant background knowledge, or schemata. When reading materials presuppose cultural knowledge that learners from different backgrounds do not possess — references to unfamiliar festivals, sports, foods, or social conventions — comprehension is impeded regardless of linguistic proficiency. Localisation of content, a principal form of material adaptation, addresses this problem by replacing culturally remote references with locally familiar equivalents or by supplementing texts with the background information learners require.

Finally, Tomlinson's (2011) principles of materials development provide a normative framework against which the quality of both original and adapted materials can be evaluated. Materials should, among other criteria, achieve a positive affective impact, deliver rich and contextualised exposure to the target language, encourage learner investment and personalisation, and promote the development of both accuracy and fluency. Adaptation guided by these principles transforms not merely the surface features of a text or task but its fundamental capacity to serve acquisition.

3. Rationale for Material Adaptation in FLT

The primary rationale for material adaptation is the persistent gap between the assumptions embedded in published materials and the realities of specific teaching contexts. McDonough and Shaw (2003) identify several dimensions of this mismatch: proficiency-level misalignment, in which materials are pitched above or below the actual competence of the learner group; cultural irrelevance, in which content references are inaccessible or alienating to learners from particular backgrounds; linguistic inauthenticity, in which the language modelled in materials does not reflect the naturalistic patterns of the target language as it is actually used; and pedagogical incompatibility, in which the methodology implied by materials conflicts with learners' educational traditions or the institutional constraints of the teaching context.

A further rationale concerns learner diversity within a single classroom. Even where a coursebook is broadly appropriate for the majority of a class, individual learners will differ in their prior knowledge, learning styles, processing preferences, and motivational goals. Differentiated

adaptation — providing modified versions of tasks for learners at different proficiency bands, or offering alternative text types to serve different reading preferences — acknowledges and accommodates this diversity rather than suppressing it in the interest of uniformity.

The expansion of English as a lingua franca (ELF) and the growing recognition of World Englishes have added a further dimension to the adaptation imperative. Materials produced primarily in the United Kingdom or United States frequently present a monolithic, native-speaker-normative model of English that does not reflect the pluricentric, international uses to which English is put in most learners' lives. Adapting materials to include diverse English accents, intercultural communication scenarios, and non-Anglophone cultural references better prepares learners for the authentic communicative demands they will encounter beyond the classroom.

4. Strategies of Material Adaptation

4.1 Simplification

Simplification is the most frequently practised form of adaptation and involves reducing the linguistic complexity of a text or task to make it accessible to learners whose proficiency falls below the level presupposed by the original. Lexical simplification replaces low-frequency or specialised vocabulary with more common synonyms; syntactic simplification shortens sentence length, reduces subordination, and converts passive constructions to active ones; and discourse-level simplification removes implicit cohesive links and makes logical relationships explicit. While simplification carries the risk of producing unnatural language that no longer models authentic usage, judicious application produces accessible texts that retain their communicative authenticity.

An important distinction must be drawn between simplification and elaboration. Whereas simplification reduces complexity by substitution or deletion, elaboration adds redundancy — paraphrase, explanation, exemplification — that aids comprehension without distorting the original language. Chaudron (1983) demonstrated that elaborated input, characterised by repetition and explicit reference, facilitates comprehension at least as effectively as simplified input while preserving more of the naturalness of the original. For this reason, many contemporary adaptation practitioners prefer elaboration over simplification as the default strategy for addressing proficiency mismatches.

4.2 Extension and Supplementation

Where materials are insufficient in quantity, narrow in scope, or deficient in particular skill areas, teachers adapt by extending existing tasks or supplementing with additional materials. Extension may involve adding follow-up writing or speaking tasks to a reading text, deepening the cultural or thematic content of a unit through additional authentic sources, or expanding a vocabulary set beyond the items explicitly introduced in the coursebook. Supplementation introduces entirely new materials — authentic newspaper articles, podcasts, film clips, or online interactive resources — to address gaps or enrich the input available to learners.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) emphasise that supplementation should be principled rather than additive: materials added to a course should serve identifiable acquisitional or motivational purposes and be integrated into the broader pedagogical sequence rather than appended as isolated extras. The risk of unsystematic supplementation is cognitive overload and a loss of curricular coherence, which may undermine the learning gains that additional materials are intended to generate.

4.3 Localisation and Cultural Adaptation

Localisation involves replacing culturally specific references, names, contexts, and scenarios in published materials with locally familiar equivalents. In EFL contexts where published materials originate from Anglophone countries, localisation is particularly important for maintaining learner engagement and activating the background knowledge on which comprehension depends. A reading text about cricket can be adapted to feature football or wrestling; a dialogue set in a London supermarket can be relocated to a local bazaar; a listening exercise featuring British cultural references can be supplemented with parallel materials drawing on the learners' own cultural environment.

Localisation must, however, be balanced against the legitimate goal of expanding learners' intercultural horizons. Exclusive reliance on locally familiar content risks creating an ethnocentric curriculum that fails to develop the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) that many learners require. The most effective cultural adaptation achieves a principled alternation between the familiar and the new, using locally anchored materials as a bridge to cross-cultural exploration rather than as a substitute for it.

4.4 Reordering and Restructuring

Reordering involves rearranging the sequence of materials, tasks, or language items within a course to achieve a more coherent pedagogical progression or to align with the specific needs and interests of a learner group. A coursebook that introduces grammatical structures in a sequence determined by commercial rather than acquisitional logic can be restructured to follow a more empirically grounded developmental order. Tasks within a unit can be resequenced to front-load vocabulary preparation before a reading text, or to move a productive speaking task earlier in the lesson to exploit learners' peak energy and motivation.

Restructuring at the macro-level involves the reorganisation of an entire course or curriculum, potentially combining materials from multiple sources, deleting entire units deemed irrelevant to learners' goals, and redistributing instructional time to reflect a revised set of priorities. Such large-scale restructuring requires not only pedagogical skill but institutional authority and time, and is therefore more commonly undertaken in teacher-designed or institution-specific programmes than in settings where a prescribed coursebook carries regulatory force.

5. Criteria for Principled Material Adaptation

Effective material adaptation is not opportunistic or impressionistic but is governed by explicit pedagogical criteria. Tomlinson (2011) proposes that adapted materials, like original materials, should be evaluated against the following standards: they should have a positive affective impact by engaging learners' emotions, interests, and imagination; they should deliver rich, varied, and contextualised exposure to the target language; they should promote learner autonomy by encouraging reflection and personalisation; they should be achievable within the constraints of available time, technology, and learner proficiency; and they should maintain internal coherence with the broader aims and content of the course.

McDonough and Shaw (2003) add a procedural criterion: adaptation should be the minimum intervention necessary to achieve the desired pedagogical outcome. Excessive modification risks distorting the original material beyond recognition, losing the authenticity or linguistic richness that made it worth using in the first place, and investing more preparation time than the gains justify. The principle of minimal adequate adaptation directs teachers to ask not 'How can I

transform this material?’ but ‘What is the smallest change that would make this material work for my learners?’

A further criterion is learner-centredness: adaptation decisions should be anchored in systematic needs analysis rather than in the teacher’s personal preferences or assumptions about what learners ‘should’ find interesting. Needs analysis instruments — questionnaires, learning style inventories, diagnostic language tests, and consultation with learners themselves — provide the empirical foundation on which defensible adaptation decisions can be built.

6. Methodology and Classroom Practice

A structured adaptation cycle proposed by Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) consists of four stages. In the Evaluation Stage, teachers conduct a systematic analysis of existing materials against learner needs, contextual constraints, and principled criteria, identifying gaps, mismatches, and redundancies. In the Decision Stage, the teacher determines which adaptation strategy — simplification, elaboration, extension, localisation, or reordering — is most appropriate for each identified mismatch. In the Production Stage, adapted materials are created or sourced, piloted informally, and revised. In the Assessment Stage, the effectiveness of adapted materials is evaluated through learner performance data, observation, and feedback, with findings informing the next cycle of evaluation.

A classroom-based study conducted at a university in Uzbekistan over one academic year ($n = 80$ EFL learners) examined the impact of systematically localised and elaborated reading materials on reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. The adaptation group, which worked with texts whose cultural content had been localised and whose vocabulary had been elaborated through in-text glosses and paraphrase, demonstrated statistically significant gains ($p < .05$) over the control group on both reading comprehension assessments and incidental vocabulary tests. Qualitative data from learner interviews indicated higher perceived relevance, greater motivation, and reduced anxiety among learners in the adaptation condition, confirming the affective as well as cognitive benefits of principled adaptation.

7. Challenges and Limitations

Despite its evident pedagogical value, material adaptation faces substantial practical obstacles. The most pervasive constraint is time: adaptation is a labour-intensive process that demands not only subject knowledge but curriculum design skills, cultural sensitivity, and technological literacy. Teachers operating under heavy timetables with minimal preparation time are likely to find systematic adaptation aspirational rather than achievable, and may default to unmodified commercial materials even where they recognise their inadequacy.

Copyright presents a legal constraint on the reproduction and modification of commercially published materials. While educational fair use provisions in many jurisdictions permit limited adaptation for non-commercial classroom purposes, teachers must navigate these provisions carefully and institutions must provide clear guidance on permissible practice. The growing availability of Open Educational Resources (OER) and Creative Commons-licensed materials has partially mitigated this constraint by expanding the corpus of legally adaptable resources available to language teachers.

Teacher competence is a further limiting factor. Adaptation requires not only awareness of the mismatch between materials and learners but also the linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical knowledge needed to produce effective alternatives. Many pre-service teacher education programmes devote insufficient attention to materials evaluation and adaptation, leaving newly

qualified teachers without the conceptual frameworks or practical skills to adapt materials systematically. Investment in targeted professional development is therefore a prerequisite for the widespread adoption of principled adaptation practice.

8. Conclusion

Material adaptation is an essential dimension of professional language teaching practice. The irreducible diversity of learner populations, the cultural specificity of commercially produced materials, and the inherent limitations of any single published resource make adaptation not a remedial activity but a routine expression of pedagogical expertise. The strategies of simplification, elaboration, extension, localisation, and reordering, when applied within a principled framework guided by needs analysis and acquisition research, transform materials that are merely available into materials that are genuinely effective.

The evidence reviewed in this paper supports the conclusion that systematically adapted materials generate measurable improvements in comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and learner motivation. Going forward, the field requires more longitudinal research into the sustained effects of adaptation on language development, as well as design research that produces practical, replicable adaptation protocols for teachers working across different proficiency levels, age groups, and educational contexts. Teacher education programmes are urged to embed materials evaluation and adaptation as a central component of both pre-service training and in-service professional development, equipping language teachers with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to transform available resources into optimally effective tools for the learners they serve.

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