Keeping an Eye on Language Teachers' 'On-the-spot' Use of Materials in Higher Education in China

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Introduction

It is well documented that language teachers worldwide orchestrate their lessons with the help of teaching and learning materials (Tarone, 2014; Tomlinson, 2016). A recent study has noted that teachers' approaches to using materials have a significant impact on students' learning opportunities (Shawer, 2017). Given the significance of teachers' instructional approaches and the ubiquity of language learning materials in language classrooms (Littlejohn, 2011), it is surprising that classroom-based research on the use of language materials is still in its infancy (see a burgeoning body of research conducted by MUSE International, i.e., Materials Use in Language Classrooms, an international research group). Therefore, it is a propitious time to add to this body of research on language teachers' actual use of materials, particularly in classroom settings, to inform materials development (Tomlinson, 2012) and professional development activities (Harwood, 2017). With this in mind, a qualitative multiple-case study was designed to address two research questions:

1. How do EFL teachers use the prescribed textbooks to deliver lessons in one university in China?

2. What factors account for EFL teachers' 'on-the-spot'[1] use of materials?

Classroom-based research on materials use in ELT

While the bulk of studies have informed us of how to adapt materials for language teaching and learning (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018), the classroom-based research examining on-the-spot use of materials is still scarce, particularly in ELT. Only a handful of studies have taken a closer look at materials use at the classroom level. For instance, Guerrettaz and Johnston (2013) explored the relationship between language materials and the totality of the classroom experiences through an ecological lens. They found that the classroom discourse was strongly influenced by the materials in terms of its topic, type, and organization. In other words, the features of materials either afford or constrain classroom teaching. In Shawer's (2010) study of 10 EFL college teachers' use of curriculum materials[2] in the U.K, teachers were categorized as curriculum developers, makers, or transmitters according to their divergent approaches of using materials. In his follow-up study, Shawer (2017) theorized teacher-related factors underpinning their ways of using materials at personal, social, and institutional levels. Humphries (2014) also identified a range of factors from teachers, students, and context that mainly inhibited teachers' use of newly adopted listening and speaking textbooks in a rural technical college in Japan. All these studies illuminate the complex nature of materials use in classroom settings. In this sense, a more holistic perspective is a requisite for a better understanding of this under-specified domain of teaching.

Theoretical framework

This study draws upon Remillard's (2005) participatory perspective to interpret teachers' on-the-spot use of materials. The participatory perspective is rooted in Vygotsky's mediation theory (1978) which posits that human activity is mediated by tools. From this perspective, textbooks are seen as tools that can mediate teaching and learning. Teachers are regarded as active agents in interacting with materials and students. The outcome of the interactions makes for the learners' learning opportunities. Among the three essential elements in the classroom ecology, i.e., teachers, learners, and materials, the teacher's position is unique. A teacher's knowledge, experiences, and skills affect the interactions of students and materials in ways that neither students nor materials alone can. Thus, materials use consists of a series of participatory

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1. 'On the spot' use of the materials refers to the spontaneous adaptations that teachers make in classroom settings, driven by their decision-making on materials use.

2. Curriculum materials refer to the teaching and learning materials disseminated by the institution, which represent national or institutional standards of curriculum.

activities among teachers, students, and materials, with teachers playing a crucial role. Taking this theoretical stance, it is possible to view our ordinary teaching through the use of materials as a creative, valuable and unique activity despite repetition and simplification of daily routines.

Context of the study

The study was set in China, where one prescribed national curriculum and one prescribed set of textbooks are disseminated to a formidable number of language learners and teachers (Wang, 2007). ELT in China is provided from primary to tertiary levels. All non-English major students in higher education have to receive ELT in at least one academic year, and the course is termed the *College English* (CE) Course. The setting was chosen as one typical institution in Chinese higher education. The target university was a 'world-class' institution under the government's 'Double First-Class' project, which has operated since 2015 and sought to expand significantly the number of highly ranked universities by 2050. The Chinese government has operated this project with funding support on selected research fields of studies on a five-year cycle.

Traditionally, to support newly implemented national curriculum reform, new CE textbooks are compiled by a government-appointed panel of experts for all universities and colleges. Currently, more than 200 universities are adopting the target textbook series (*New Standard College English Series*) for the CE course.

Participants

Two female non-native English speakers (Wendy and Penny, both pseudonyms) were chosen as both teachers were information-rich cases and willing to participate in the study. They were teaching CE to students at the intermediate language proficiency level at the same university. *Table 1* lists the demographics of teacher participants.

	Wendy	Penny
Year(s) of teaching	9	2
Educational background	MA in Applied Linguistics	MA in English Education obtained from abroad
Students	Non-English majors at intermediate level	
Teaching Course	College English course	
Textbook	*New Standard College English*	

Table 1: Demographics of teacher participants.

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and documentary analysis consisted of the major data sources of this study. Teachers were interviewed before and after each class to uncover how they used the textbook and why they made particular changes in lesson delivery. Classroom observations were video-recorded and detailed field notes were taken by the researcher. In one term, two teachers' classes were observed over a cycle of four units (one unit lasts four to six classes due to teachers' different teaching pace). A total of 34 classes were observed. Copies of all teaching materials that the teachers supplemented and prepared were collected. Data generated from these instruments were triangulated with each other to enhance the trustworthiness of the study.

The observational data which took the form of classroom discourse were also transcribed verbatim to capture teachers' on-the-spot use of materials. The classroom discourse was analyzed using the IRF/E model, i.e., teacher initiation, student response, and teacher feedback or evaluation (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975), with the aim of representing teachers' modes of interactions. By comparing and contrasting the ways in which two teachers used the materials, the coding of lesson observations fell into three general categories: *transforming*, *adapting*, and *improvising*. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded to capture teachers' explanations and variations in their pedagogy. Four domains of impacts are identified with respect to materials use, i.e., teacher factors (e.g., language proficiency, non-linguistic knowledge, knowledge of students), features of materials, students' language proficiency, and institutional rules.

Findings

Teachers' on-the-spot use of materials was manifested in four activities, namely transforming the modality of written instruction without changing the content of the materials, adapting the written instruction and content of materials, and improvising instruction.

Transforming

Teachers first need to transform the pedagogical ideas represented by the textbook into tasks or activities. In other words, teachers brought the 'dead' materials into 'living' instructions when using them in classrooms. It was revealed that the written form of instructions was presented in verbal form in classrooms. Take teachers' vocabulary instructions in one unit as an example. It was seen that different types of exercises were transformed into different modes of teacher-student interactions. For instance, all teachers used the information gap exercise ('complete the phrases with the name of an animal') in teacher-student exchanges in the rigid mode of IRE, as

shown in *Extracts 1* and *2*, below.

By contrast, the reading comprehension questions (e.g., *what is the possible relationship between the writer and Soren?*) were transformed as probing or scaffolding questions (see *Extract 3* below).

Upon seeing that students had trouble answering the question (line 1), Penny modified it into a series of general questions (see lines 3, 5, 6, 7). Her purpose was to scaffold students' reading comprehension by decreasing the difficulty level of the original question,

which could engage students more with the materials. By contrast, Wendy chose to tell her students the clue directly (see lines 4, 5, 6), as *Extract 4*, below, shows.

Wendy's explanation of her instructional strategy was due to the limitation of teaching time in class and her evaluation of the material, as this excerpt shows:

> *If you think you still have trouble understanding the passage, you'd better spend more time reading it after class. It is not difficult to comprehend. (Wendy)*

1	Penny:	Let's do this together. As proud as a what?	I
2	Ss:	Peacock.	R
3	Penny:	Yes, as proud as a peacock.	E

Extract 1: Penny's use of vocabulary instruction.

1	Wendy:	First one, as proud as a...?	I
2	Ss:	Peacock.	R
3	Wendy:	Peacock, good.	E

Extract 2: Wendy's vocabulary instruction.

1	Penny:	And what is the possible relationship between the writer and Soren?	I
2	Ss:	Friends.	R
3	Penny:	Are they just acquaintances?	I
4	Ss:	No, they are friends.	R
5	Penny:	Close friends? Are there any other possibilities? Maybe they're neighbors.	I
6		All right. By reading paragraphs one and two, do we know whether the	
7		writer is a woman or a man?	
8	Ss:	No.	R
9	Penny:	No, we don't know. Let's find it out. Please keep reading and try to find	I
10		more evidence to show the relationship between the writer and Soren.	
11		First of all, let's find out whether the writer a woman or a man?	
12	Ss:	woman *(murmuring)*	R
13	Penny:	Ok, the writer is a woman. Very good. In which paragraph?	E
14	Ss:	Three.	R
15	Penny:	Three, very good. Can you find more information about the relationship?	E/I
16		Do not read word by word. Just read for answers. Are they friends?	
17		Neighbors? Relatives? Classmates?	
18	Ss:	Grandchild.	R
19	Penny:	Very good. In paragraph 8, *grandchild.*	E

Extract 3: Penny's reading comprehension instruction.

1	Wendy:	Ok, this text is not so difficult for us to understand. And how can you	I
2		identify *the relationship between Soren and the writer?*	
3	Ss:	*((silence))*	R
4	Wendy:	Let's focus on the sentence. That is in paragraph 8. 'I thought Soren	I
5		had given me this child to watch over. He is my first grandchild.' So	
6		you can guess, Soren is the writer's son.	

Extract 4: Wendy's classroom discourse.

In addition, teachers transformed the written instructions offered by the textbook into words in PowerPoint with visual or audio supports, such as images, animations, films, music, and so on. *Table 1* shows Penny's extra sample sentences with the aid of illustrations.

Waiters glide between tightly packed tables bearing trays of pasta
侍者们托着一盘盘的意大利面食在拥挤的餐桌间自如穿行。

You'll glide over beautiful reefs and stunning sea animals with included instruction, gear, and one supervised dive.

Outlaw hero KID always shows up with his portable hang glide, which enables him to escape from policemen every time.

Table 1. Penny's sample sentences of the vocabulary 'glide'.

During the process of *transforming*, teachers also evaluated students' performances, responses, and reactions. Students' failure to accomplish pedagogical goals could trigger teachers' on-the-spot decision-making on how to use materials, such as adapting or improvising. For instance, upon seeing that her students failed to complete a reading comprehension exercise (which consisted of the chronological ordering of events in the passage), Penny instructed on the usage of tense in the passage, as this excerpt demonstrates:

> *Be aware, English is the language with tense, right? "Had done" indicates things that happened in the past of the past. (Penny)*

In her post-lesson interview, she explained that her insertion of grammar was based on her evaluation of the materials and students' performances, as this excerpt shows:

> *At first, I didn't expect my students to meet such great trouble in reordering the happenings. I didn't expect the exercise was that difficult for them. I then attributed it to the cause of tense. They didn't catch the tense, so they ordered in a mess. They believed they should order the events according to the original passage. (Penny)*

It was evident that although both Penny and Wendy encountered obstacles in implementing their original plans, they ascribed their failures to different causes. The input of grammar raised students' language awareness and helped Penny to achieve her pedagogical goal. By contrast, Wendy's general instruction of asking students to spend extra time on reading did not promote substantial improvement in students' learning outcomes.

Adapting

Teachers' adaptation manifested itself in two forms, namely supplementing instructions without veering from the designers' intentions and inventing new instructions deviating from the intended pedagogy. When enacting a lead-in exercise ('say what characteristics the following animals have'), Wendy added more concrete requirements:

> *Can you use some adjectives to describe those animals? (Wendy)*

When enacting a vocabulary exercise ('match the words in the box with their definitions'), which was designed to promote a contextualized vocabulary learning strategy, Penny asked her students to check the meanings of each unfamiliar word without positioning the words in their context.

> *While doing this exercise, we can refer to the vocabulary book to check the exact meaning of the words. (Penny)*

It was clear that Penny regarded this exercise as a means of reinforcing students' rote memorization of new words concerning their meanings.

Improvising

Teachers' improvisation mainly manifested itself as inserting extra knowledge or scaffolding. For instance, when teaching the vocabulary 'glide', Penny supplemented an illustration of deep-sea diving and a sample sentence (see *Table 1* and lines 2, 3, 4). Her partial instruction is shown in *Extract 5* (overleaf).

As shown in *Extract 5*, Penny inserted two questions in lines 5, 6, 8. The first question was to assess students'

1	Penny:	We can use glide when we describe a movement on the sea as well	I
2		under the sea. For instance, you can say, you'll glide over beautiful	R
3		reefs and stunning sea animals with included instruction, gear, and	I
4		one supervised dive. Reef指的是暗礁 (it refers to reef). 澳大利亚	R
5		有一个很有名的景点叫? (What is the famous resort in	I
6		Australia?)	
7	Ss:	大堡礁 (Great Barrier Reef).	
8	Penny:	Yes, 大堡礁 (Great Barrier Reef). How to say 大堡礁？(Great	R
9		Barrier Reef) (.) Great Barrier reef.	I

Extract 5: Penny's improvisation.

cultural knowledge (see lines 5, 6). The second question was a translation task (see line 8). These two questions had nothing to do with the target word 'glide' but were related to the word 'reef' that appeared in the sample sentence. Penny's insertion of this extra knowledge originated intrinsically from her knowledge base and led to her scaffolding with students.

Even if teacher participants received the same students' responses, their improvisations differed quite dramatically. For instance, Penny and Wendy demonstrated very different interactions when facilitating students' reading comprehension (see Extracts 3 and 4). Both teachers were trying to lead students to find out the word 'grandchild', which implied the relationship between the author and Soren. However, they used different strategies to achieve the goal. Windy gave students a clue directly while Penny scaffolded using improvisation. This revealed that Penny's students were provided more opportunities to engage with the material and thereby more chances of negotiating meanings with the material.

Discussion

The findings show that teachers employed three activities to actualize the on-the-spot use of materials, i.e., transforming, adapting, and improvising, which answered the first research question. In the following sections, the account of materials use will be discussed to address the second research question.

Teachers' role in materials use

In this study, teachers are still playing a decisive role in choosing appropriate instructional approaches through the use of materials. Teacher knowledge has a significant impact on their choice of these approaches, including linguistic knowledge (Freeman, Katz, Gomez & Burns, 2015), cultural knowledge, knowledge of their students, and non-linguistic knowledge. For instance, Penny's original intention to provide an illustration of deep-sea diving was to facilitate students' understanding of the usage of 'glide'. Her improvised questions concerned a famous landmark in Australia and its English translation.

Although this improvisation deviated from her original plan to teach the word 'glide', the inserted cultural knowledge aroused students' interest and enlarged their knowledge base. Compared with following the scripts of the written curriculum materials, the improvisation process is heavily dependent on teachers' contributions in terms of broader non-linguistic content knowledge, linguistic knowledge and knowledge of their students.

Features of materials

Although teachers are still crucial in deciding instructional approaches, the features of materials either afford or constrain teachers' ways of using materials. For instance, the open-ended reading comprehension questions provided Penny with the opportunity to explore the meaning of the passage together with students by virtue of probing and scaffolding. By contrast, the information-gap exercise only allowed rigid teaching, i.e., IRF mode of exchange.

Students' factors

Students' language proficiency could facilitate or hamper teachers' use of materials. For instance, Wendy acknowledged that she adjusted her coverage of teaching content according to her students' language proficiency levels.

Institutional rules

The institutional rules affected teachers' use of materials. It was evident both teachers were requested to use the same teaching materials. In this sense, the prescribed textbooks are the designated curriculum at the target university. Teachers have no rights to change or abandon the prescribed textbooks in their teaching, which may limit teachers' potential to become material developers.

Conclusion

In sum, this study delineates three processes that EFL teachers used with materials in classroom settings, along with four domains of influencing factors. Language teachers' on-the-spot materials use is by no means straightforward, but complex, emergent,

and participatory, even in the centralized curriculum context. Language teachers play the decisive roles in making on-the-spot decisions for materials use in language classrooms. For effective use of language materials, teachers should be equipped with adequate linguistic knowledge, non-linguistic content knowledge, and knowledge of students and contexts. Communications among teachers, textbook compilers, and the administrators who are responsible for adopting the materials at the institutional level should be maintained to ensure that the voices of teachers can be heard. Furthermore, materials should be made flexibly adaptive and educative, as the process of using materials is intertwined with the process of teacher learning. This study only takes a modest step to shed light on teachers' on-the-spot use of materials in language classrooms by linking classroom discourse with materials use. I believe the issue of materials use deserves further investigation in wider contexts because materials use is closely related to classroom instructions, which will surely impact on our learners' learning experiences.

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Appendix

Transcription conventions

Ss:	Several students at once or the whole class students,(not identified)
S1: S2: etc	Identified students
Italics	Discourse that originates from texts of the given materials
?	Phrase final rise in intonation
(number)	Longer pause with the length of pause indicated in seconds
...	Text or talk omitted
((*text*))	Commentary within the transcript by the transcriber
(text)	Translation from L1 to L2
(.)	Untimed perceptible silence

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