

**ABSTRACT**

This article examines the concept of flexibility ELT materials development. It is uncommon during the everyday classroom practice that teachers would follow a textbook wholly but to some degree they would make changes to make it more relevant to learners' needs, levels and learning styles. The space and condition that allows for such changes to happen is known as 'flexibility'. The discussion looks first of all at how the concept of 'flexibility' can be defined through academic discourse on second language materials. Second, it explores the ways in which flexibility be measured by theoretical frameworks based on academic discourse in L2 instruction. Finally, it proposes ideas of how the concept applies in second language materials and pedagogy.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Tegan, an English teacher from Swinburne University in Australia, participated in a ten-week delivery in China of a Certificate III ESL course as practice within a partnership between a Chinese college and an Australian university. Tegan was presented with a copy of the module book before departure and was warned before departure that the curriculum had changed, but was not told how much. Upon arrival, Tegan realised that the curriculum had changed from a structured academic English course based on the skill of description to a business-oriented mishmash that followed no recognised structure. The vocabulary was selected without recycling intention and was hardly related to real-world business settings. The activities were unimaginative, conventional and repetitive, and did not follow basic communicative principles. The book, which was not the one was given, was filled with spelling and punctuation errors, as well as contradictions in activity instructions and the activities themselves. In order to derive any kind of teachability from the module, Tegan found herself having to pitch in to not simply supplement the textbook, but to replace complete parts that were unsuitable even for students at the right level. This involved an enormous amount of effort and time on her part, leaving her constantly tired and frustrated.

The anecdote above reflects a real, anguished dilemma of an impassioned ESL teacher. In textbook utilisation, teachers are faced with the responsibility to minimise various potential problems and make thoughtful decisions that allowed for a class of students to learn effectively. Such effort requires not only teacher professional competence but also a high degree of flexibility both in the materials and in the pedagogy. Although this is not a novel or radical concept, it tends to be taken for granted by many educators and researchers in EFL/ESL education, and thus theorisation in materials development rarely considers it as an entity of its own. Flexibility, however, has an untapped potential for use in evaluation and teacher development.

As a coursebook user and lecturer in materials development, I find it fairly infrequent, to this date, that material writers and publishers take flexibility into serious account as a fundamental feature of ELT materials. With the exception of a few course titles which intentionally assimilate flexibility into their design, it remains an ongoing appeal among scholars for materials to give more attention to this quality. Possible reasons for such uncommon practice might come from limited interaction between curriculum theorists and textbook writers, institutions' perception of flexibility as a threat to standardisation, the views of some writers toward flexibility as a self-doubting and indeterminate part of the design, as well as publishers' and distributors' interest in boosting sales on certain regional market.

This article examines the concept of flexibility in textbooks and materials evaluation, which is the bridge that connects potentially irrelevant materials with teaching adaptation. It is uncommon that teachers would follow a textbook wholly but to some degree they would make changes to make it more relevant to learners' needs, levels and learning styles. The space and condition that allows for such changes to happen is known as 'flexibility'. In this discussion looks first of all at how the concept flexibility has been defined through academic discourse on second language materials. Secondly, it explores the ways in which flexibility can be invested in materials through concrete criteria based on academic discourse in L2 instruction. Finally, it proposes ideas of how the concept applies in second language pedagogy and teacher development.

## **2. DISCOURSE ON FLEXIBILITY**

The earliest emergence of this idea was by O'Neill in 1982, but it was not until 1987 that it was termed as 'flexibility' by various scholars and was recommended to be included in textbook evaluation by Sheldon in 1988. Through analysing literature excerpts, the definition of flexibility is not produced but simply proven, as will be later discussed in the article. Historically, the development of this construct originated from scholars' critical views of materials for their potential subjectivity, which led to many improvement attempts and responses to that view with various proposed frameworks for course evaluation over the years. When almost all kinds of modifications failed, flexibility has gradually sneaked into the picture as a tactic to bridge the gap between irrelevant materials and effective use. This section attempts to summarise such a process.

Since the 1980s, the coursebook of the English language learning and teaching industry has evolved from a book of readings to a complete 'package' (Littlejohn, 1998), which Lyons (2003) refers to as the "multidimensional product" (p. 491). Nowadays, it is not uncommon for a textbook to be a visually vivid book of colourful pictures and characters, with the option of cassettes, CDs, videos, DVDs, and even supplementary software and web-based additional. This expansion of resources is a response to the evolving views of language learning and pedagogical beliefs (Murray, 2003). Yet, amidst it all, the textbook is still the mainstay of the industry, with its importance illustrated by Sheldon's (1988) reference to it as "the visible heart of any ELT programme" (p. 237).

The extent to which a coursebook can simultaneously meet the contentment of the writer, the appropriacy to users and the ambition for commercial sales is often minimal and tends to require a

great deal of negotiation. In 1981, when Allwright wrote his scathing article about the coursebook, he believed that language learning materials could only “embody decisions, but they cannot themselves undertake action” (p. 9). Being simply lifeless objects, they were viewed as the tyrant within the classroom (Williams, 1983), demanding that teachers and learners conform to it with no room for deviation or personalisation on either’s part. A year later, O’Neill (1982) expanded this view by stating that despite the broadness or narrowness of it, the essential language components present in a coursebook should allow for applicability in most situations with most students. Over the years, coursebooks became more user-friendly packages of materials, being light, easily scanned, and do not require “hardware” or “electricity” (Ur, 1991, p.80). They are a way to keep “order within potential chaos” (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994, p. 327) by providing structure, as well as reassuring the students that structure is present (Harmer, 1998; R. O’Neill, 1982).

Richards (Richards, 2001) lists numerous benefits of the coursebook, including maintaining quality of education and standardising instruction. Critics, however, point out that coursebooks are commercially tainted as they are just a “compromise between the financial and the pedagogical” (Sheldon, 1987; 1988). A commercially viable book cannot be wholly the vision of an educator as the book will become too specific and the target market will not be profitable. As a result, the type of textbook that is commercially viable is one that tries to appeal to everyone everywhere in every language learning situation (Cunningsworth, 1984; McGrath, 2002). Then the textbook becomes too broad to be interesting or relevant. Another issue that has come to uncover is the inherent bias underlying the textbook, as Dat (2006) writes “since coursebooks reflect the writer’s knowledge and view of the world, when they are transferred and used by people whom the writer knows little about, irrelevance of content and subject matters are likely to result” (p. 52). Other researchers have also touched on such irrelevance in materials (Edge & Wharton, 1998; Hutchinson, 1987; Jolly & Bolitho, 1998; Murray, 2003), denoting that although coursebook writers may not be consciously aware of their own beliefs, they still permeate throughout the book in both content and organisation of activities. A coursebook, therefore, has potential to be subjective, and whether it proves to be effective depends on how well it anticipates the multiple ways of being relevant to the users and how effectively it supports their teaching and learning as a result of such imagined potentiality.

(McGrath, 2002) states that evaluating materials is about “the making of judgements (p. 22). Researchers such as Brown (1995) and Rubdy (2003) take this idea further by recommending ‘suitability’ and ‘fitness’ as respective qualities for what is to be evaluated. Others also talk of potential value and relativity (Hutchinson, 1987) due to the evaluators’ personal differences in areas such as needs, beliefs and backgrounds (Tomlinson, 2003c). As Sheldon (1988, p. 245) writes, evaluating materials is “fundamentally a subjective, rule-of-thumb activity, and that no neat formula, grid, or system will ever provide a definitive yardstick”, a stance that is echoed by other researchers in the field (Richards, 2001; Tomlinson, 2001; 2003c). A good illustration of this quote is given by Peacock (1997), in that it is common for the management of an educational institution to “obtain a few new coursebooks which are briefly looked over or flicked through by the more experienced teachers in the school, after which books are chosen on the basis of the subjective judgements or first impressions of those teachers” (p. 1).

Mukundan (2006) and Tomlinson & Masuhara (2004) acknowledge the regularity of such impressionistic evaluations. Mukundan (2006) also points out that when the evaluation was an explicit

activity, it was “usually in the form of a checklist” (p. 170). This tool, which generally consists of a list of questions that have been categorised, has existed for half a century (Riazi, 2003), and it is probably the most commonly used item to formally evaluate a coursebook. McGrath (2002) lists four advantages for the checklist: being systematic, cost effective, convenient and explicit. One major disadvantage is the subjective choice in criteria, leading the book to being ‘local’ (McDonough & Shaw, 1993; Sheldon, 1988; Williams, 1983), which can be weighed through scores or simply contains questions to be answered. Thus, what is relevant in one ELT situation may be completely irrelevant in another, due to the personal needs and beliefs behind the inclusion and exclusion of certain criterion. The fact that different checklists exist demonstrates this need for relevancy (Cunningsworth, 1984; McDonough & Shaw, 1993). A more comprehensive evaluation scheme is proposed by Tomlinson (2001), which is utilised by Masuhara et al. (2008) shows variations to the original categories and the keywords associated with them.

The ultimate challenge with most checklists, as Harmer (2001) argues, is that when a coursebook fails to predict what actually happens when it is used, a checklist prepared by others might dictate their view of what is appropriate in a particular situation. Another issue in materials evaluation is the timing of an evaluation. Cunningsworth (1984) divides this into three periods: pre-use, in-use and post-use. ‘Pre-use’ refers to a textbook chosen before the start of a course. This evaluation, which occurs the most frequently in the everyday classroom teaching, is more generally known as ‘selection’ (Rubdy, 2003). However, it also tends to be the most impressionistic. In-use evaluation, which is also referred to by Tomlinson (2003c) as whilst-use evaluation, occurs during the length of the course, both inside and outside the classroom. Post-use evaluation, in the meanwhile, has the potential to provide the most insight into a textbook and has strong potential to give rise to flexibility so as to continue supporting teaching and learning.

### **3. UNPACKING THE FLEXIBILITY CONSTRUCT**

If the term ‘flexibility’ is typed into Google the results are mostly about exercise and fitness, coupled with a number of websites about flexible workplace laws. In a much lesser frequency, it is a word that weaves its way in and out of literature on educational materials (Bell & Gower, 1998; Breen & Candlin, 1987; Finney, 2002; Howard & Major, 2005; Hutchinson, 1987; Masuhara, et al., 2008; Tomlinson, 2003b; Tomlinson, 2001). Although this quality has been occasionally recognised, it remains hardly connected with vibrant methods of incorporating it into coursebooks and thus flexibility is still a philosophy that cannot be readily applied. Although there seems to be a silent agreement amongst the education community about the meaning of flexibility, a closer look at all the views presented throughout the literature shows how diverse this concept turns out to be. Consider the following differing perspectives, to name a few:

Flexibility refers to a changeable time frame – It is a “particular feature of many ESP courses, particularly those aimed at professional people, is the time pressure under which they have to operate (...). Any material used on such courses must therefore bear this in mind, so that it can be used in a flexible way to fit into the time constraints that exist.” (Pilbeam, 1987, p. 121)

Flexibility refers to teaching and learning styles – It “allows for some differentiation in how the book is used by different teachers and students by introducing an element of choice, which increases the flexibility of the material.”

(Cunningsworth, 1995, p. 23)

Flexibility refers to situations and contexts - “The activities and materials proposed must be flexible, designed to develop skills and strategies which can be transferred to other texts in other contexts.” (Crawford, 2002, p. 86)

Within these three quotes, the themes of time, styles and contexts have been related to flexibility; and in all these views, the meaning of flexibility seems to be internalised rather than presented with a definition of its own. Along this line, Lyons (2003, p. 497) also raises the question about the ambivalent sense in this concept: ‘when a book is described as flexible, what does *flexible* refer to?’ To take this discussion further, I listed below are a number of references showing the ways in which flexibility in second language materials has been peculiarly understood. Various scholars realise that flexibility has served the following actions:

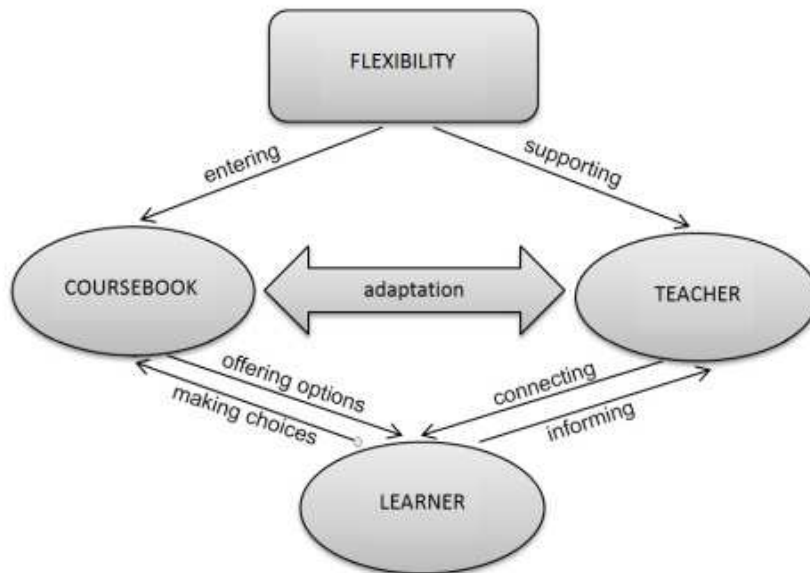
- Adaptation - Being able to adapt materials, including: omission, addition, reduction, extension, rewriting/modification, replacement, re-ordering, and branching (Maley, 1998); being able to modify the written text by way of manipulating and altering, using and discarding, reusing and recycling (Hodder, 1994);
- Rearrangement - Being able to change the sequencing of units and tasks within a textbook (Bell & Gower, 1998; Mares, 2003); being able to use the same text with difference procedures (Maley, 1998);
- Time management - Being able to lengthen or shorten time of tasks and lessons (Pilbeam, 1987);
- Strategy utilisation - Assisting learning impact so that skills and strategies can be transferred to various texts and contexts (Crawford, 2002);
- Selection - Being able to choose, either as a student or as a teacher, what to learn and how to learn it (O'Neill, 1982; Saraceni, 2003);
- Variation - Providing creativity and variety in material and content (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Howard & Major, 2005);
- Blending - Easing integration within a syllabus or curriculum (McDonough & Shaw, 1993);
- Expanding - Making supplementary and additional materials available (Masuhara, et al., 2008);
- Learner support - Being able to cater to different learning styles and preferences (Breen & Candlin, 1987; Masuhara, et al., 2008);
- Contextualisation - Being able to localise the content to suit the environment (McDonough & Shaw, 1993; Tomlinson, 2001 ; Masuhara, et al., 2008); being “made locally appropriate to the different classroom contexts in which learners find themselves” (Widdowson, 2000: 30); and
- Individualisation – Taking into account the fact that students in the same classroom may vary in age, abilities, interests, personalities, seating, formality, cultural and learning backgrounds (Doff & Jones, 2007).

From all the themes above, a definition of flexibility would need to encompass all of these ideas. Flexibility is a coursebook quality which allows teachers to appropriate materials in context by adapting, rearranging, managing time, utilising strategies, selecting, diversifying, blending, expanding, supporting, contextualising, individualising, among other decisions that bring about the optimal teaching and learning impact. In a word, it seems that flexibility is synonymous with conditions for adaptation, without which it would be much harder for teachers and learners to make teaching and learning appropriate. This implication goes along the line with a question posed by Lyons (2003) regarding whether a textbook can embrace a propensity for adaptation. The inference of this inquiry could be: where does the enactment of flexibility fall? Tomlinson & Masuhara (2004) provided a clearer hint with the attempt to give flexibility a definition, maintaining that it was “the extent to which it is easy for a teacher to adapt the materials to suit a particular context” (p.1). Based on this view, it seems that the teacher, rather than the textbook, that should indeed be flexible. Arguably, a material is considered flexible if it enables the teacher to become bendable enough to cater for the needs of learners in context. This understanding can be unpacked further by Graves’s (2001) elaboration that “textbooks are tools that can be figuratively cut up into component pieces and then rearranged to suit the needs, abilities, and interests of the students in the course” (p. 188). Bell & Gower (1998) are also amenable to this view by maintaining that “coursebooks are tools which only have life and meaning when there is a teacher present” (p. 118).

The above line of argument, however, does not take the learner into account; not does it specify the role of learners in the operation of flexible learning. If we agree that a definition of flexibility should be encompassing rather than narrow, it might be worth asking another question: do learners have a say in flexibility? Saraceni (2003) suggests that good materials “should provide learners with the possibility of choosing different activities, tasks, projects and approaches, and therefore of adapting the materials to their own preferred learning needs” (p.76). This understanding suggests that the adaptation act should also be performed by the students themselves and not the teacher alone. At the same time, however, given the fact that the majority of learners are often in a position to demand an approach, they should be exposed to a variety of different resources so that they themselves become more flexible, having experienced different ways of learning. Arguably, students have no actual responsibility to be flexible until the teacher facilitates this ability; and thus they have not been able to play an active role in the classroom setting despite educators’ increased appeal in expediting a learner-centred classroom.

Taking various aspects of the literature containing references to flexibility in textbooks into account, flexibility cannot be a stand-alone quality in course materials but should work with various responsible stakeholders including the teacher, the learner, writers and resources. I have constructed the diagram below to illustrate what has captured scholarly concerns:

Figure 1 - The impact of flexibility on the L2 classroom process



The chart demonstrates how flexibility as a highly complex construct influences the use of coursebooks to serve teaching and learning. Flexibility enters into the book in order to support the teacher in appropriating his/her pedagogical operation. However, since the book has been published before reaching the classroom, it needs the teacher's help to connect its content with the learners, who need to provide the teacher with information about them. The learners, in the meanwhile, also have the right to make choices from the coursebook by selecting the content which they prefer to use, and the book has the responsibility to offer such available options.

Flexibility supports various relationships among the book, the teacher and the learner in powerful ways. As illustrated by the large arrow in the middle of the chart, between the coursebook and the teacher is a two-way interaction in which the former provides helpful conditions for adaptation and the latter utilises those conditions to cater for the classroom context where learner needs and preferences were taken into account. The teacher and the learner also share a reciprocating relationship whereby none of them should dictate the classroom process but one should observe the strengths and styles of the other in order to respond accordingly.

The operation of flexibility in coursebooks is in fact a process that does not rest on a teacher alone but rather on everyone involved in the entire classroom setting. This understanding comes very close to how Tomlinson & Masuhara (2004) conceptualise flexibility as "the extent to which it is easy for a teacher to adapt the materials to suit a particular context" (p. 1). This understanding shows that flexibility in the teacher and that in the coursebook have a mutual relationship bound by shared responsibility. On the one hand, if the teacher is not creative enough to transfer materials to the learners and help them learn, the material will be of little use. On the other hand, if the coursebook is not creative enough to provide inspiring options, the teacher might struggle with it and become less pedagogically effective. In this picture, it is worth emphasising that the learner plays an important role. As McGrath (2002) indicates, the fact that teachers are the mediators between published material and learners, and can choose to work with its intentions or undermine

them, is a good reason for not only listening to what learners have to say, if they choose to voice their views, but also for actively researching those views .

#### **4. IMPLICATIONS OF FLEXIBILITY**

Ever since it was considered an evaluation category by Sheldon in 1988, flexibility as a quality often faded to the background as the dominance of learner needs surfaced. While McDonough & Shaw (1993) call their category 'the flexibility factor', the lack of questions on this quality reflects that it is not really a proper consideration in evaluation. Canniveng & Martinez (2003) express concern about the limitation of second language materials and encourage teachers to be more active in bridging the gap:

“Coursebooks, because of their universal natures, cannot fit all circumstances, but teachers should, nevertheless, be helped to develop the reflecting, analysing and evaluating powers to create successful lessons for all the students, needs and personalities there could be in any given situation.” (pp. 484-485)

By far, Rubdy (2003) and Tomlinson (2001) attach greatest importance to flexibility in their criteria, and Rubdy's questions mostly reflect the want for choice, in sequence and adaptation. Tomlinson (2001) and Masuhara, et al. (2008) also suggest incorporating the broadest range of criteria when considering flexibility in the textbook, including affect, usefulness, localisation and learning styles. Now and then, a few scholars have appeal for flexibility to be formally incorporated in teacher training program and course evaluation schemes with clear guidelines to assist second language teaching and learning processes, as Tomlinson (2003a) highlights:

“...flexibility should be one of the main aims when developing frameworks for evaluation and adaptation and its achievement should ensure principled connections between materials, target learners and specific environments of learning.” (p. 101)

From the time Williams (1983) suggested that “English language teachers-in-training need to be acquainted with the principles of textbook evaluation” (p. 254) until when Hutchinson (1987) attached importance to why teachers should be instilled with evaluative techniques, the discourse has revealed time and time again that materials evaluation and teacher development should go hand in hand (Edge & Wharton, 1998; Hutchinson & Torres, 1994; Tomlinson, 1998); Masuhara, 1998, 2006). Although many scholars have advocated for teacher development through materials evaluation, “the literature remains sparse and teacher-training courses give little importance (or even sometimes ignore this area) in their programmes” (Canniveng & Martinez, 2003, p. 479).

It seems clear that teacher-training courses need to give materials development and evaluation more focus so that teachers can be in touch with skills for using materials in their daily working life. Although subjective judgments can be impressionistic and spontaneous, long-term experiences with materials adaptation would liberate novice and untrained teachers from scrambling in the dark due to the lack of advanced skills in the profession. Such benefits from materials evaluation are not only practical but also lead teachers through a process of theorisation. Teacher training is a



way to expedite this process and develop the teachers themselves as reflective academics, the latter being a position that has been and is still advocated by researchers (Canniveng & Martinez, 2003; Edge & Wharton, 1998; Hutchinson & Torres, 1994; Masuhara, 1998, 2006; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2004; Williams, 1983).

It is through materials evaluation for use that teachers can learn to be flexible. They can become more consciously aware of themselves, their beliefs on language learning and teaching, and how the materials fit with their situation (Hutchinson, 1987). Masuhara (2006) expands this view by adding that teacher development can lead to fulfilment of potential and achieving satisfaction, as well as feeling empowered. Though this is an important issue that needs to be addressed, a far greater one lies in the lack of research in the significant area of flexibility.

On an additional note, flexibility can be perceived as a tool that promotes teacher and learner creativity. If we agree that, as Dougill (1987) and Graves (2001) acknowledge, teaching is all about choice, flexibility is the impetus that promotes this process. The practice of evaluating a textbook and putting such outcome into use would provide a propensity for teachers to become more innovative alongside many other potential benefits in the profession. In fact, flexibility, which according to Edge & Wharton (1998) is connected with creativity, can arise through unplanned 'accidents' in the classroom (R. O'Neill, 1982), or through the teacher's resourceful dialogue (Islam & Mares, 2003) with the textbook. Cunningsworth (1984) also states that the textbook should "be seen as that of an 'ideas bank' which stimulates the teacher's own creative potential" (p. 65).

## **5. WAYS TO MAKE COURSEBOOKS FLEXIBLE**

This section recommends some key ideas for implanting flexibility in materials so as to shorten the gap between irrelevant content and real teaching contexts. Flexibility in material design and curriculum development, as a matter of fact, should stay at the forefront of academic training programs. It is because, as Tomlinson (2014) points out, experiences in materials adaptation will train teachers not only to cope with unexpected classroom eventualities but also to accomplish flexible frameworks for writing ELT materials, which in the end would benefit long-term professional development.

Since high impact teaching is often acquired through hands-on rehearsal, L2 materials should support this process by providing helpful alternatives and rich resources. The coursebook, after all, is an artefact with potential for communication, manipulation, alteration, implementation and rejection, as can be situationally decided by individual teachers. It is essential that such contextualisation be supported to create stress-free and enjoyable learning events where possible. In order to make this happen, coursebooks need to satisfy the following conditions:

- Providing activities with multiple options, where possible and reasonable, so that learners of different class sizes, classroom seatings and facility circumstances can perform them;
- Providing activities with multiple degrees of challenge so that mixed-level learners can find their own abilities;
- Offering rich communication activities to ensure opportunities for both formal learning and informal acquisition;

- Providing diverse texts which embrace not only factual information but also the use of fiction to facilitate both practical knowledge and novel imagination;
- Preparing learners for the various realities of language use in the real world;
- Allowing the content to be useful and relevant to learners in any country by offering choices of what to discuss;
- Providing multiple ways of stimulating responses so that learners of various backgrounds can participate with resources drawn from their own lives, views, feelings, knowledge and experiences;
- Organising for learners to adapt the materials to their personalities and learning styles, such as taking into account analytical learners who focus conscious attention on discrete learning points, kinaesthetic learners who prefer physical movement, and experiential learners who enjoy a discovery approach; and
- Avoiding subjective views that might disturb learners' beliefs and values unless there is a chance for learners to argue with those views.

## 6. DEMONSTRATION OF FLEXIBILITY IN TASK DESIGN

To show how ELT materials can be made more flexible to maximise learning, I would like to demonstrate a particular case in which a task, taken from a real coursebook, can change and improve in its flexibility. In *English File Intermediate Student's Book* (1999: 92), an activity asks learners to make sentences to express where people come from. The visual illustration displays a collection of characters whose appearance features represent their countries and learners are supposed to decide which country each person comes from. In the picture, the overweighted American wears a Hawaiian shirt and a cowboy hat and is using a pair of binoculars in a manner which suggests that he is a nosey person. A young lady looks slim and elegant to suggest that she is Italian. The mean-looking South American wearing sunglasses and smoking a pipe, dressed in a flamboyant, flashy suit to demonstrate a well-off mafia figure. In a word, members of various cultures are reduced to cliché and predictable looks in the writer's attempt to make the characters recognisable to serve certain forms of language practice.

Not only does the visual illustration decrease representative of various cultures to conventional, narrow formulations but it also provides misleading icons of what would occur in the real world: all people coming from the same country must have the same public image and gives off the same simplified impression about their origin.

One way to take learners out of this stereotypical construction could be by inviting them to select one (or more) of the following options:

1. Each student finds picture of at least three people who know who come from three different countries and asks either a classmate or the whole class to guess their origins. They can be celebrities or ordinary people that you know.
2. Each student imagines you are from a country other than yours. Without saying what your name is and without mentioning any famous landmark, show at least one picture of your (imagined) country for the class to guess where you come from.

3. Working in groups of three members, select a country and look for a set of several pictures representing various people from that place. Show them all to your class and let everyone guess where the people in the pictures come from.
4. Classmates working in pairs to create a drawing with two or three images representing three actions or activities that people normally do if they live in that country (such as taking the bullet train, sleeping on the floor, and eating sushi). Ask others to guess where that pair of classmates come from.
5. If learners are in a multicultural class, get up from your seats to walk around and ask one another where they are from. If you already have the answer you can say it for confirmation or if you are unsure you can make guesses.
6. Each student writes the name of a country on a piece of paper to put into a box. The teacher then shuffles and re-distributes those names to the whole class. Each student now has one name to imagine you come from that country. Individually students stand up saying a few key words related to that country for the class to guess where they each come from.

These optional sub-tasks allow learners to use their own resources not only to assist the teacher in his/her teaching but also invite learners to create meaning for themselves. Although the eventual output is simple to say someone is from what country, the process of participating makes learners become open-minded with multicultural information, develop noticing as a tool in learning new words and structures, resisting fixed ideas about the world being imposed on learners, building rich information into the learning content, interpret how people enjoy the living environment, collaborating more with peers, making lesson content less conservative and creating fun in the learning process. These options also help learners move away from over-simplification of reality and share new information about other cultures as learners to enrich their experience and expand their cultural awareness about a world filled with diversity.

Conventional images and stereotypical information in coursebooks reflect flawed thinking about people and cultures, provide an inaccurate picture of the real world and cause damage to learners' thinking. As Hinton (2000) points out, if a wide range of people hold the wrong view it becomes easy for more people to stick with it. Such conveniences become harmful as 'much of our knowledge of other people does not come from personal contact with them but through other sources' (ibid: 25-26) and for this reason many EFL learners may never have a chance to find out the truth about other cultures. As Cunningsworth (1995) indicates, language is a cultural phenomenon. Learners while studying language also subconsciously take in cultural elements and it is the writer who has the power to affect that view in many positive ways.

## **6. IMPLICATIONS OF FLEXIBILITY IN TEACHER DEVELOPMENT**

A metaphor for flexibility could be a tool box that provides available resources open to any new arrangement of teaching and learning in context. It is not right for a coursebook to be created in an irrelevant manner to many contexts and to leave the task of evaluation and modification to the teacher, assuming that if something goes wrong, it is the teacher who will remedy it. To avoid excessive repairing of existing problems, the coursebook should contain rich diverse resources with systematic guidance for teachers and learners to organise new combinations for their own situations. When such conditions are provided, there is no longer the need to evaluate the whole

coursebook, which might be a waste of time, but only evaluate the relevance of each tool to meet what the everyday classroom requires. Only when such conditions are provided will teachers and learners be able to make the classroom process effective. Flexibility plays a huge role in creating a vibrant learning impact which includes outcomes such as negotiation, experience, collaboration, inspiration, enhancement and empowerment – each of which is elaborated as follows:

- Negotiation - Flexibility represents a valuable negotiation space for teachers to interact with the coursebook and allows further negotiation to happen between the teacher's ability and learners' need, between the teacher's decision-making skills and the real everyday classroom setting.
- Experience - Flexibility in coursebooks equips teachers with more experience in materials adaptation and enables them to evaluate and reconstruct pedagogical resources in context, which in the end makes a contribution in teacher development in both knowledge and competence.
- Collaboration - Different teachers using the same flexible coursebook may end up teaching diversely depending on their choices, strengths, personality, pedagogical skills, and classroom situations. Such practice may be worth sharing among teachers.
- Inspiration - Flexibility is a substance that inspires teachers rather than bore them with the same routine when using textbooks. It alerts teachers to the fact that there is never a single logical way to teach a lesson but there can be multiple ways and opportunities for the same lesson to be taught successfully. Such processes not only increase the action but also open the mind.
- Enhancement - If the teacher happens to be the author of the coursebook, flexibility allows the teacher to play with possibilities through trying out options, reflecting on practice, evaluating tasks, and revise the materials for increased learning opportunities. Such a process also encourages a stronger sense of classroom experiment and enhances creativity in teachers.
- Empowerment - Flexibility in materials development respects and empowers teachers as the owner of materials who treat coursebooks as tools not authority. By reducing the control of materials over the teacher and by liberating teachers from being reliant on the written text, this position expands options in lesson planning and allows teachers to share responsibility with textbook writers.

The role of flexibility is not only to give learning materials an interesting design but also to facilitate the ways in which materials are evaluated and adapted. Flexibility helps teachers develop insights into different views of language and learning and into the principles of materials design, and is something we do against the background of knowledge about our learners and of the demands and potential of our teaching situation. It is difficult to see how the dependent activity of adaptation can take place without this kind of understanding. Evaluation and adaptation of materials are of vital importance in relation to the learning process and they should not be left, according to Tomlinson (2003a) to the impromptu intuitions of teachers under pressure of time and institutional constraints.

## BIODATA

Dat Bao has worked with universities in the UK, the US, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and presently lectures in Monash University. His expertise includes curriculum design, materials development, intercultural communication, classroom silence, creative pedagogy, and visual pedagogy in language education. He is the author of *Understanding Silence. Ways of Participating in Second Language Acquisition* (Bloomsbury, 2014).

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