

Evaluation and Adaptation of Materials: The Use of Backpack 1 Textbook in Chinese Schools

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Abstract:

This paper evaluates the use of an English language textbook in the Chinese context according to four criteria: suitability for the context, communication and tasks, learner engagement, and intellectual, aesthetic and emotional involvement. The paper culminates with adaptations which are proposed as changes that can render the teaching materials more suitable for the learners. Based on the evaluation of the textbook, rationales for the adaptations are provided. Some of the main rationales include: making the materials more relevant to students, catering for learners' differences, engaging and involving the students, and being at the appropriate level with challenging and varied tasks.

Keywords: China, communication, engagement, involvement, materials evaluation and adaptation, suitability, textbook.

1. Introduction:

The report aims at evaluating the exercises in the Backpack 1 coursebook (which also comes in an electronic version) by Pearson Longman publisher which is intended for students ranging from 7 to 10 years old. The report will firstly provide a brief background about English teaching in China. Secondly, the report will proceed with the justification for selecting four criteria of which will be used later to evaluate the textbook. Lastly, rationales for the proposed adaptations to make the materials suitable for the learners will be given.

1.1. Learning English industry

China is experiencing what Pan (2015) refers to as 'English mania'. Learning English has not only become an essential subject in schools, but also a learning necessity for kids as young as 2 years old. English is a trendy subject which is introduced to 2-6-year-old children in kindergartens all over China (Cortazzi & Jin, 2002). In addition, tens of millions of students at primary school level only learn English language (UNESCO, 1999). The number of Chinese students who are learning English in general totals 300-400 million (Wei & Su, 2012). Pan (2015, p.43) stated that the parents "invest in English language tuition for their children... at a very young age, so to provide them with a competitive edge." Parents also urge their children to learn English for the prestige it bestows on its learners and the academic and professional advantages it offers (Cortazzi & Jin, 2002). On the other hand, China's significant economic development and open-door policy has encouraged many students to learn English for travel or study abroad purposes (Cortazzi & Jin, 2002).

English has taken a firm place as a subject in the Chinese educational system (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). National coursebooks which are jointly published with the international publisher Longman are used (Cortazzi & Jin, 2002). A survey conducted by Cortazzi & Jin (1996) showed that there is an increasing development in the use of technology for English learning as well as improvement in the types of activities the teachers employ. However, English lessons in Chinese schools still utilize vocabulary repetition and grammar drills as the main activities. The lessons are characterized by the use and adherence to the Chinese traditional practice of Mandarin study which considers rote learning and memorization a sign of successful learning (Peng & Zhang, 2009). The shortage of qualified and competent teachers has, consequentially, led to the reckless recruitment of foreign nationals who are not experienced nor qualified to teach (Mengqi, 2019).

1.2. China's international schools:

There has been a significant increase in the number of international schools in China over the past two decades “fuelled by a widening appeal of global-oriented, English-medium education among middle-class families in several fast-developing Asian economies” (Wu & Koh, 2021, p.1). The schools in China are of two types. These are independent international schools which hire only foreign nationals and international programs in public schools that hire both foreigners and Chinese (Robinson & Guan, 2012). Most of international schools are costly and the students are usually from upper-class families who ready their children for study abroad and an international career (Schulte, 2017). The Chinese parents also opt for international schools if their kids fail to enroll in a prestigious public school or if the students are from a migrant family without the city's hukou (household registration used in China) (Schulte, 2017). Moreover, parents choose international schools to attain social status; a fact that renders international schools a mere commercial commodity (Cao, 2021).

The parents who are aware of the disadvantages of the Chinese education system (such as memorization and cramming) prefer to put their children in international schools as an endeavor to bring back innovation and creativity spirit into the students' study life. International schools promote activities that shift the focus from the teacher as that of a performer to that of a conductor (Xia & Zhou, 1999). Although international schools may play the role of an alternative to public school, they still do not resolve the issue of exacerbating competition and inequality in Chinese schools (Cao, 2021).



Figure 1. a large class of 30 students in a Chinese international school.

1.3. China's new education policy regarding English teaching

China is a fast-changing country with new laws and regulations being passed regularly. Among these are the new rules regarding education reform in general and teaching of English in particular. The new regulations prohibit for-profit institutions to offer after-school tutoring in core subjects in an attempt to increase birth rate by reducing living expenses associated with costly tutoring (Reuters, 2021). The regulations resulted in the shutdown of numerous training centers and the prohibition of after-school tutoring during public holidays, vacations and weekends; a result that left parents feeling anxious about the negative impact of the regulations in a competitive education system (Reuters, 2021). In addition, the regulations brought in strict inspection and dissolution of existing schools, including online ones, as an effort to reduce the burden of

students' homework (Xinhua Net, 2021). This has forced many schools to cancel their teaching offers and to register as non-profit organization (Xinhua Net, 2021).

Some of the reasons for this undertaking include the rendering of English as a distraction from other essential school subjects by the Chinese ministry of Education (Zheng, 2014); a deed that subsequently led to the removal of English in the national university entrance exam (Rui, 2014). Other rationales include the willingness of the government to regain control over the disorderly education sector (Xinhua Net, 2021) and the need to supervise and check the work legitimacy, eligibility, and qualifications of foreign teachers- some who may disseminate 'subversive' foreign ideas (Kipfer, 2021). Whether these measures are implemented for the sake of providing good quality education to the Chinese children or not is still doubted by people who consider the regulations as part of a long-term agenda for societal control (Jacobson, 2021).

2. Justification

2.1. The coursebook's Suitability for the context

The first criterion the report will access is the suitability of the textbook for the context. The major issue for teaching in this context is the large classes of 30 students, and sometimes even more. Cortazzi and Jin (1998) stated that Chinese view learning from a collectivistic perspective wherein successful learning takes place in large groups better than small ones. The learning and teaching practices in China are rooted in models based on the values of collectivism (Triandis, 1995) as well as on the values of Confucianism (Chen, 1990). The use of the coursebook in hand which is created in the West and which is based on individualistic values does indeed contrast with the Chinese mindset of learning. This makes teaching for foreign teachers rather daunting. Research by Elizondo (2013) demonstrated that large group classes have negative impact on students in that their social and affective needs get neglected and their self-esteem deteriorated as a result of feeling afraid, embarrassed or inferior. Moreover, the objective of enhancing students' speaking skills does not seem to be realizable with this coursebook since it contains only a small dialogue section with functional structures that encourage memorization of chunks rather than developing communication skills. This is because the Chinese's view on learning and teaching languages inclines towards the use of textbooks which emphasize the knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and translation (Wang, 1999).

Foreign teachers in China usually feel overwhelmed to teach a large class with mixed level students. A class could have advanced students and beginner students who have never had English learning experience before with students on the continuum who are able to communicate the basics only. Elizondo (2013) argued that a mixed-proficiency language class could have negative effects on students' progress, retention and participation as well as on classroom management. Students demonstrate individual differences that the teacher needs to heed to in order to deliver a smoothly successful class. These include social skills, learning abilities, language aptitude, motivation, and age (Elizondo, 2013). Students who have different learning styles, abilities, levels, and learning preferences need a teacher who can adapt the lesson to fulfil the students' learning needs (Bender, 2012). Adami (2004) stated that differentiated teaching provides the suitable environment for mixed-level students in that it recognizes the uniqueness of each student and allows them to showcase what they know and can do. As the classrooms become diverse, it becomes necessary for teachers to implement differentiated teaching that includes varied activities (Bender, 2012; Cox, 2008). A textbook without varied activities that would engage students with different proficiency levels renders it unsuitable for the current context.

2.2. Communication and tasks

Communicative tasks, though they are of paramount importance in the learning process, seem to be lacking in the Backpack coursebook. Communicative tasks are limited due to the nature of the textbook which gives priority to learning vocabulary, reading and listening. This is due to the fact that the communicative approach in China faces the issue of persistent traditional practice of teaching and the teacher-centered classrooms (Peng & Zhang, 2009). Although the communicative approach has developed in Chinese EFL contexts, the Chinese teachers of English still focus on grammar drills and vocabulary memorization (Rao, 2013). Foreign teachers in China, on the other hand, are inclined to utilize either a learner-centered or a rote-learning approach. Learner-centered approach puts the learners at the center of the lesson planning despite the risk of imbalanced and competing interests and needs of students (Cameron, 2001). Rote-learning,

however, encourages memorization by repeating vocabulary and chunks. A rote-learner is a student who memorizes materials without necessarily comprehending them (Edwards, 2007). Rote-learning becomes an issue that renders the language learning process meaningless in that students start memorizing language chunks without giving them any thought or meaning.

Learners need tasks that can enhance their skills so as to enable them to communicate effectively. Task-based language teaching, according to Larsen-Freeman & Anderson (2011), is a strong version of the communicative approach (CA) wherein students can acquire language through the use of language. CA is defined by Richards (2006, p. 16) as “activities where practice in using language within a real communicative context is the focus, where real information is exchanged, and where the language used is not totally predictable.” CA develops the four language skills and improves students’ communicative competence (Richards & Rogers, 2001); a capacity which will allow EFL students to use the target language and communicate effectively in a variety of social situations (Hiep, 2007). One way to improve students’ communicative competence is to facilitate tasks which allow for the use of authentic language which is, according to researchers such as Gilmore (2007) and Rilling & Dantas-Whitney (2009), important in providing meaningful input and boosting motivation. Language can be authentic if it is produced for the purpose of communication and not for teaching, and a task can be authentic if it created to achieve a communicative outcome and not for the sake of practicing the language (Tomlinson, 2012).

2.3. Learners engagement

Dörnyei (1994) stated that “motivation is one of the main determinants of second/foreign language (L2) learning achievement” (p.273). Young learners, however, have little extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For this reason, young students need activities that are interesting and engaging instead. The coursebook fails to cater to this aspect in that it does not contain enough engaging activities. Banna et al. (2015) argues that engagement is of vital importance in resolving the problems of students’ isolation, dropout, and retention issues. Meyer (2014) adds to that and said that the importance of engagement lies in the role it plays as evidence of students’ cognitive development and their ability to willingly take part in the learning process to create their own knowledge. For a certain content to be engaging, it has to be interactive. Lear et al. (2010) stressed the importance of interaction, which can either be with the content, peers, or instructors, in providing engaging, active, and interesting lessons.

Dörnyei and Csizer (1998) stated that teachers can engage their students by using materials that can appeal to the learners’ interests of which they may be willing to discover or learn about. The teaching materials can be made interesting by personalizing the teaching and learning processes as well as by acquainting students with elements from the target language culture. Also, the materials must be stimulating and present novelty so as to ignite a sense of curiosity and interest in students (Cameron, 2001). Brookshire et al. (2002) stated that for materials to be engaging, they must rely on the use and integration of imagery that can captivate the students’ interest. Researchers such as Gilmore (2007) and Rilling & Dantas-Whitney (2009) further argue that the use of authentic materials can enhance both students’ engagement and motivation to learn a language.

2.4. Intellectual, aesthetic and emotional involvement

Being intellectually, emotionally and aesthetically involving is a principle in materials development which is of great import (Tomlinson, 1998). The textbook in hand is unsuccessful in providing thought-provoking activities as well as intellectual challenges that would stimulate the students’ learning. Intellectual challenges can assist the students to successfully acquire the language (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2011). The coursebook, however, uses undemanding and effortless exercises that only encourage rote learning. Many EFL content developers fail to incorporate intellectually stimulating materials for students despite the vital role language plays in children’s intellectual maturation as suggested by Vygotsky in his child development theory (Lim, 2004). Tomlinson (2003, p. 6) corroborates this when he said that “most coursebooks make little attempt to achieve affective engagement... and they present learners with bland texts and activities in which the learners remain neutral without their emotions being engaged.”

Tomlinson (1998) stated that emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic involvement is a vital principle that needs to be taken into consideration when designing materials for students. He further adds that students maximize

their language exposure and get motivated to learn the language when they are emotionally and intellectually involved in the learning experience (Tomlinson, 2010). To achieve this level of involvement, teachers need to use materials and activities that can get the students to think deeply while doing the task in hand and then provide personal responses to it (Tomlinson, 2010). More importantly, the students get a positive access approaching the content when it is conceivable, understandable, and able to provide meaningful input (Krashen, 1985). Mishan (2005) stressed the importance of authentic materials arguing that authentic texts “provide the best source of rich and varied input for learners” in that they influence “affective factors essential to learning, such as motivation, empathy and emotional involvement” (pp. 41-42). Mishan further adds that authentic texts can also activate “whole-brain processing” which can assist the learners in remembering the content for a long-term (2005, p. 42).

3. Evaluation

3.1. Suitability for the context

Class size has not been considered when designing Backpack 1. The major issue with the coursebook is the text and image size which could not be seen clearly in a big classroom of about 30 students. As can be seen from figure 1, the text size is so small and the details in the images are vague. The students cannot read nor see the images clearly without coming to the front of the classroom. This makes it difficult for students to focus and pay attention. The issue of size relatively persists even after replacing the TV with a big touchscreen. In addition to small size of text and images, the visual aids in Backpack 1 are in low quality (see figure 2). This makes it difficult for students to discern facial expressions, type of clothes or the action performed from the back of the classroom. Images are vital pedagogical tools that need to be clear, bright, realistic and reflective of what is being taught to enhance students’ comprehension (Brookshire et al., 2002).



Figure 1. the texts and images in Backpack 1 are so small and difficult to discern.



Figure 2. the quality of some images in Backpack 1 are poor.

The speaking activities, which depend mainly on repetition, are not suitable for large groups since the pair activity in the textbook does not give participation opportunities to all students (see figure 3). Having all students participate would render the speaking activities time-consuming and disengaging. Group size, which has effect on the learning environment, needs to be considered when designing the coursebook to provide engaging activities (Harmer, 2007). The lack of varied activities, which could engage students with different proficiency levels, also renders the textbook unsuitable for the context.



Figure 3. unsuitable speaking tasks in Backpack 1

3.2. Communication and tasks

The communicative activities in Backpack 1 seem to be too simple for the proposed age. These simple tasks demand little use of students' existing skills (Tomlinson, 1998). Despite the fact that the students have prior English learning experience and that the book is a second level in a series after the Starter coursebook, it still makes use of alphabet-based activities such as synthetic phonics as seen in figure 4. Having the students make connections between the letters in written words and the sounds of the spoken language is not just too simple, but also fruitless.

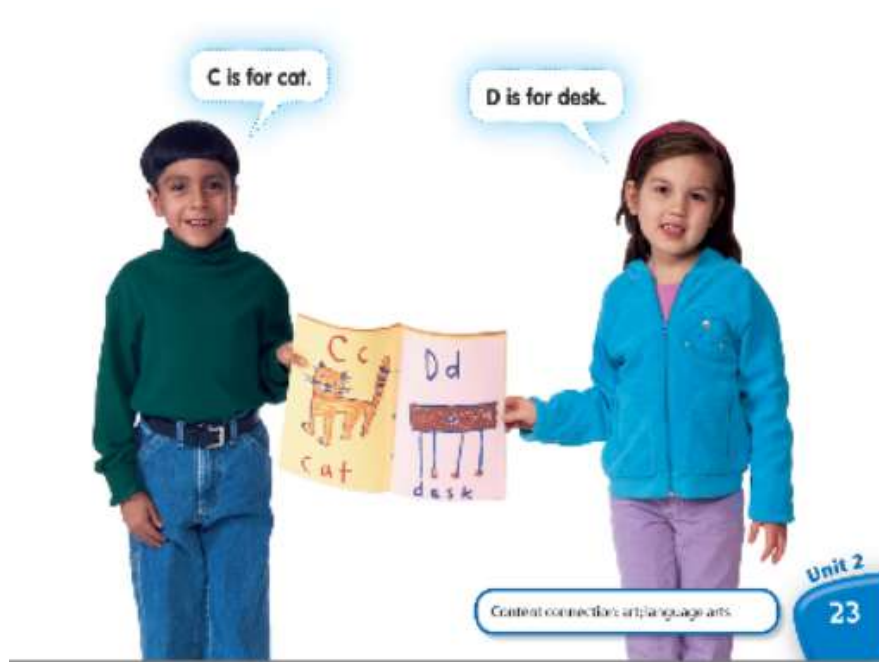


Figure 4. Phonics-based task in Backpack 1

Moreover, the communicative tasks do not seem to promote learner's autonomy. The activities in figures 5 and 6 are designed in a manner in which learners do not gain independence while learning the language. The tasks are communicatively poor in that they only encourage the students to repeat and memorize unauthentic chunks, questions and answers which eventually results in no real-life and unnatural dialogues. The communicative tasks at hand do not provide any change for students to interact and exchange information. For a speaking task to be effective, it needs to involve the learners for the purpose of communication rather than for the sake of practicing language points (Tomlinson, 2012). Larsen-Freeman & Anderson (2011) adds that the use of authentic texts is an essential characteristic of a communicative task.



Figure 5. An example of a communicative task with two people.



Figure 6. An example of a communicative task with three people.

3.3. Learners engagement

There are several attempts in Backpack 1 to engage learners by the use of colorful illustrations and the inclusion of songs. However, the textbook fails to import interesting real situations and simulations by topic-related pictures and videos within each unit. The only videos which are incorporated are the unit songs which some students, with little intrinsic motivation, find disengaging for their speed or simplicity.



Figure 7. An example of a song video from Backpack 1.

In addition to the multimedia-related issue, the activities in the textbook are rather repetitive and monotonous. The activities lack in variety and interest. The coursebook contains the same listen-and-write, listen-and-say or listen-and-draw activities. The absence of variety makes some students bored, disinterested

and disengaged due to the lack of activities that stimulate and support their learning styles. Figure 8 shows an example of a listen-and-draw activity that could be interesting for some students, but dull to others due to its high repetitiveness in the textbook.

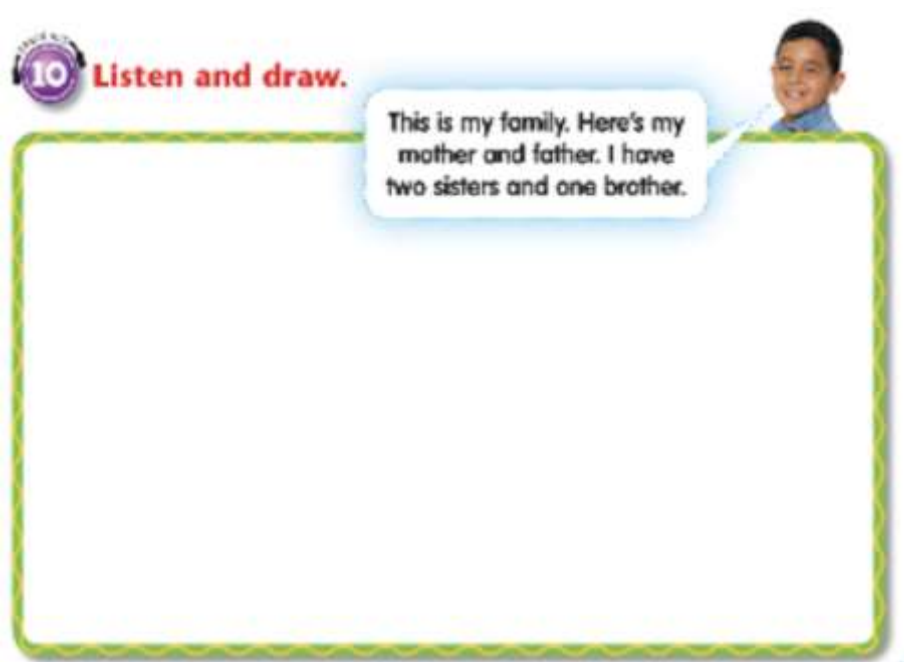


Figure 8. A listening and drawing activity.

Another aspect that is lacking from the coursebook is the quality of interactivity that can be in the form of games. Games that involve students to communicate and practice the language in an interesting way are nearly absent. Figure 9 presents an example of a rolling-wheel game that does not present any instructions on how to play it. The game is unplayable in that students cannot cut the wheel off their textbook. The only solution is for the teacher to prepare a new PPT game or have the students to make the game using cardboard paper. The games in the textbook are, therefore, of little use and value. Good games do not only enhance learners' proficiency, but also improve students' motivation, lower their stress, and give them opportunities for communication (Richard-Amato, 1996).



Figure 9. An example of a review game.

3.4. Intellectual, aesthetic and emotional involvement

The textbook involves activities which demand little cognitive processing. The easiness and simplicity in the tasks in figure 10 fail to provoke and stimulate cognitive abilities in students. The textbook also fails to provide intellectual challenges that would require the students to think creatively and critically. Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008) stated that intellectual challenges assist students in successfully acquiring a language. Moreover, the coursebook fails to provide proper activities that would involve the learners aesthetically and emotionally.

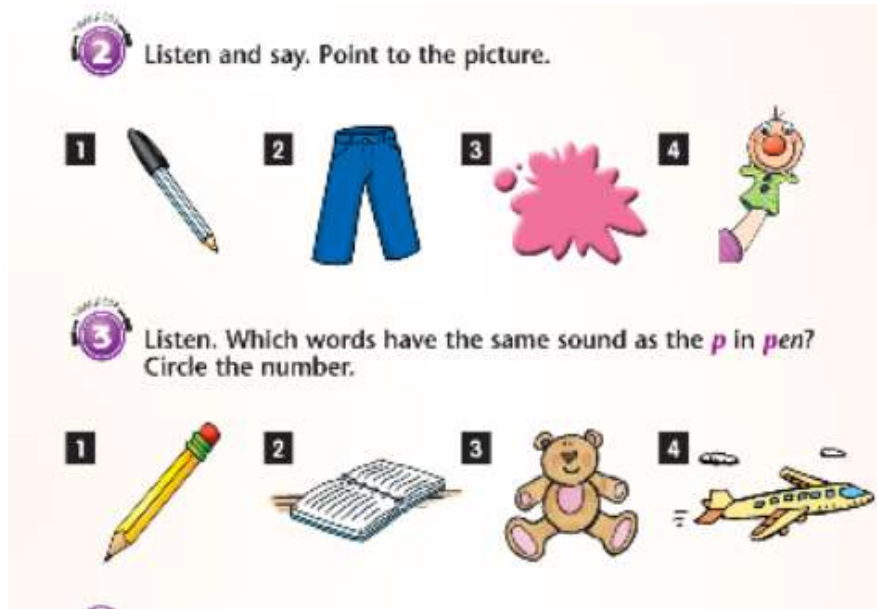


Figure 10. Phonics-based listening tasks.

Figure 11 shows an activity that teaches a value by the mere acting out and copying of the sentence “I love my family.” The activity’s simplicity makes it devoid of qualities that kindle imagination and creativity. Also, the images used in the textbook are not captivating for the students. Utilizing realistic captivating images can increase the chances that the learners enjoy the materials (Brookshire et al., 2002). Figure 12 shows an activity that is repeated numerous times in the book. These types of activities have little intellectual and aesthetic value because they do not allow any space for critical thinking, imagination nor creativity.



Figure 11. An example of values-based activity.



Figure 12. An arts-based activity.

4. Adaptation

Materials adaptations are referred to as “making changes to existing materials to better suit specific learners, teachers and contexts for the purpose of facilitating effective learning” (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2017, p.82). The rationales for the following adaptations include: making the materials more relevant to students, catering for learners’ differences, engaging and involving the students, and being at the appropriate level with challenging and varied tasks.

4.1. Multimedia and graphics

Class size has not been considered when designing Backpack 1. The major issue with the coursebook is the text and image size which could not be seen clearly in a big classroom of about 30 students. Figure 13 shows an adaptation to the vocabulary section that makes the images clearer. The students can discern details such as facial expressions, type of clothes or the action performed from the back of the classroom. Images are vital pedagogical tools that need to be clear, bright, realistic and reflective of what is being taught to enhance

students' comprehension (Brookshire et al., 2002). Small and unclear images lead the students to misinterpret the images. Students may interpret the original image in figure 13 as either a student, teacher or a principal. Therefore, using clear and realistic images relevant to the context reduce the risk of misinterpretation (Beck, 1984).

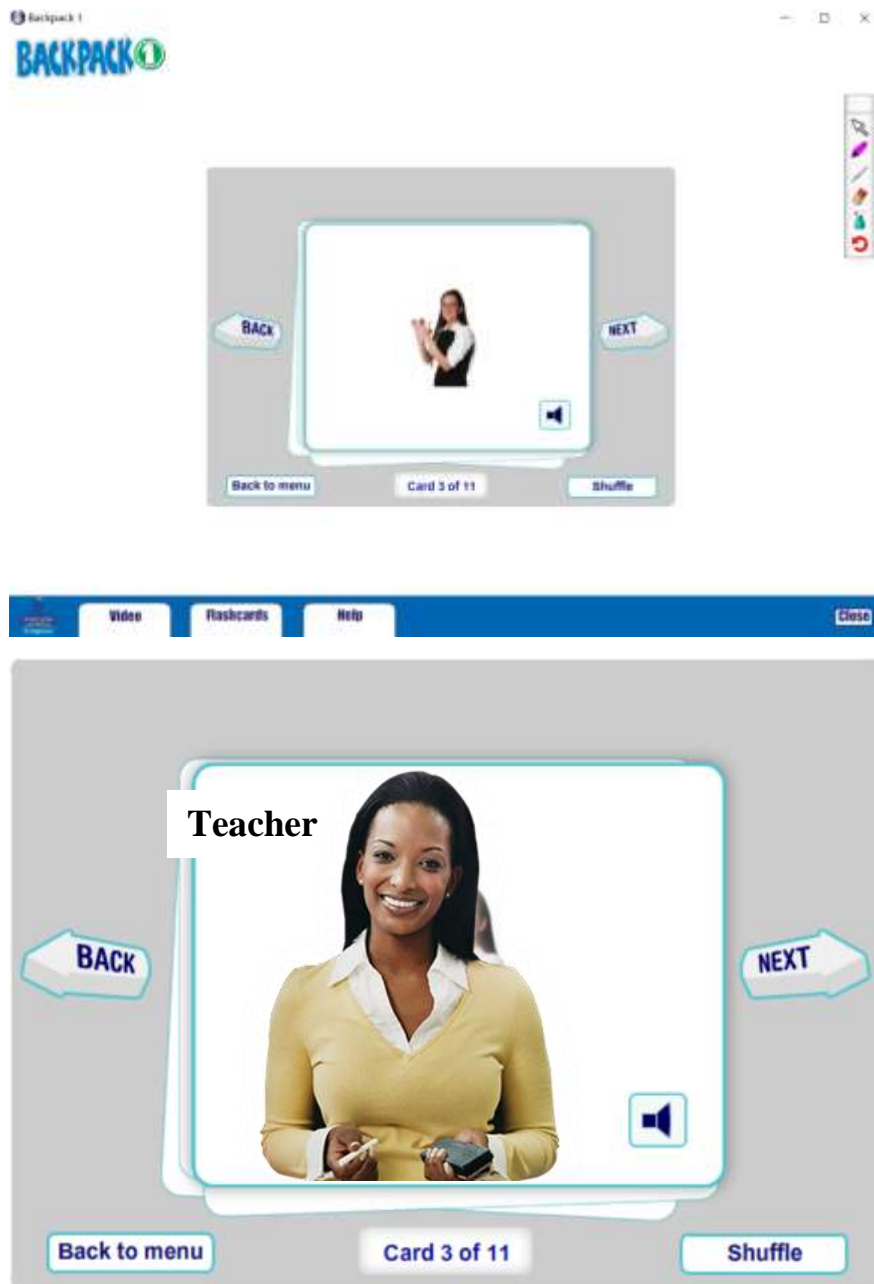


Figure 13. vocabulary, original and adaptation.

Garton and Graves (2014) mentioned a part of a publisher's guidelines that suggested keeping a 50-50 balance between the sexes and using illustrations and images with all physical types so as to avoid stereotypical associations. To keep up with this guideline, the stereotypical image of the white middle class is replaced with a picture of a teacher from the black community. This adaptation counters the incomplete and false representation of communities in the textbook by using the images that reflect diversity.

4.2. Communicative activities

The second adaptation to the coursebook is the inclusion of communicative tasks that utilize authentic texts. An essential characteristic of a communicative language approach can be seen in the use of authentic materials (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Figure 14 shows a task which relies on repetitive language

that has nearly zero communicative value. Role playing is a communicative task that does not only allow for authentic language use, but also enables learners to practice the language in different situations and contexts without worrying about making mistakes. McSharry and Jones (2000) stated that role playing is an active teaching and learning strategy that can include real-life related topics.

The task in figure 14 is adapted to include a role play task because it is a conduit for using authentic texts which then provides the means for students to fully understand the actual language that is being used and studied and prepares them for the real world of communication (Renandya & Widodo, 2016).



Figure 14. speaking activity, original and adaptation.

4.3. Interactivity

A significant aspect that the textbook is lacking and needs improvement is interactivity. The lack of interactive activities renders the textbook disengaging. Figure 15 shows a review activity in the form of a spinning wheel. The activity is adapted because it does not provide accurate instructions in that the wheel is 'unspinnable' which makes the students as well as teachers confused on how to play the game. The textbook does not allow room for making cut-outs nor does the E-version contain any interactive features. The adapted material is fun and engaging for a review task. It contains a clear instruction and interactive features. Students can spin the wheel and stop it at any time to then click on the right word that the arrow is referring to. The activity also contains question marks that can be used by the teacher to ask the players extra questions to encourage interaction and communication. Rather than just repeating the vocabulary, this game engages the students into learning the language while being entertained. Thornbury (2014, pp. 196-197) stated that "it is the way that the item is processed that is critical, not the number of times it is repeated." Boyle (2011) further states that using games increases students' self-confidence, motivation and develops their communicative skills in a supportive and collaborative environment.



Figure 15. review game, original and adaptation.

4.4. Engagement

Tomlinson (2003, p. 6) says that “most coursebooks make little attempt to achieve affective engagement. . .and they present learners with bland texts and activities in which the learners remain neutral without their emotions being engaged.” Instead of keeping the original image, adaptation has been made to include clear and realistic video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-WOj931zSU>). Instead of just putting another family picture, it is more engaging to vary the content by including a real-world video about the topic

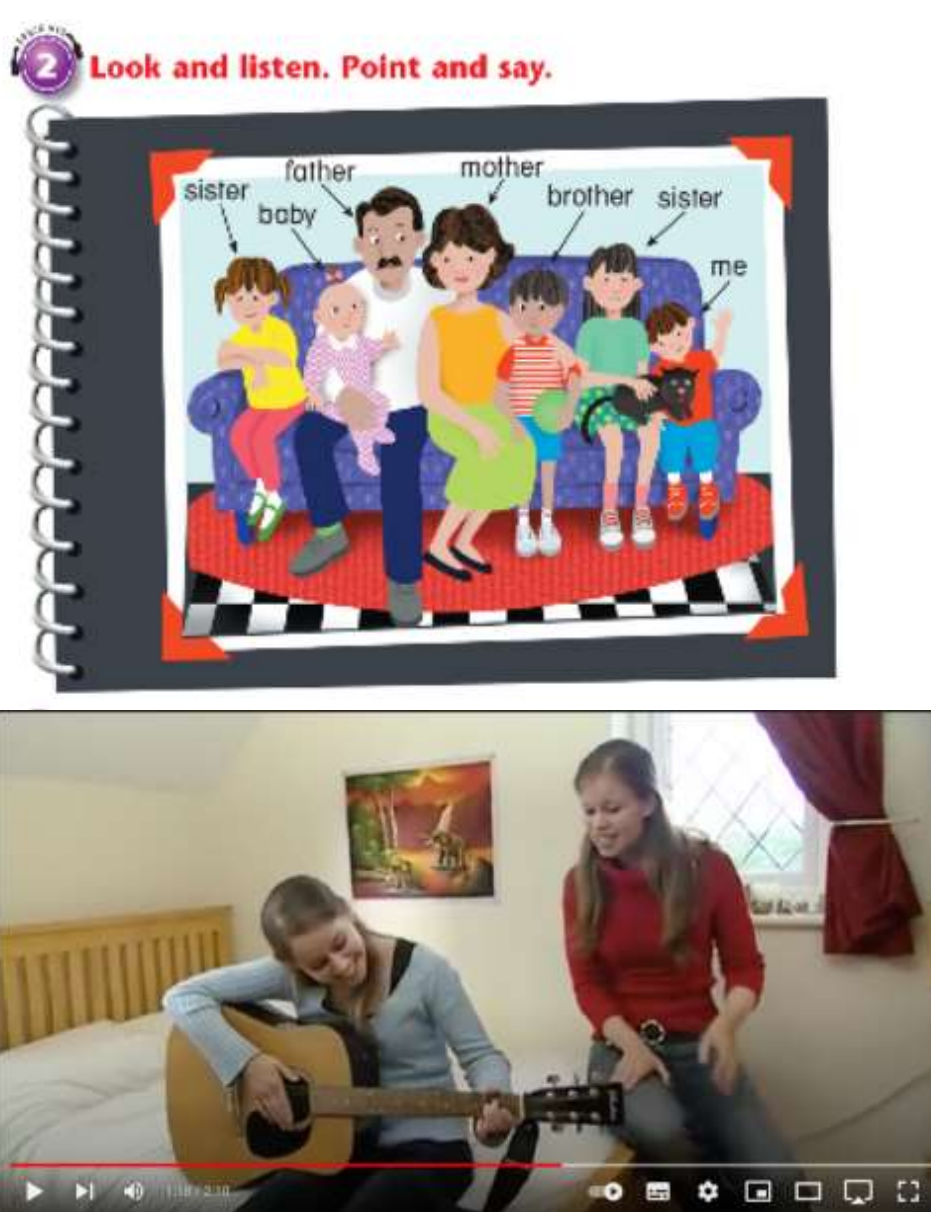


Figure 16. vocabulary introduction, original and adaptation.

The textbook can be made more interesting by incorporating imported real situations and simulations (Zheng, 2015) and by using topic-related videos. Studies have argued that utilizing clear and realistic images increases the comprehensibility of the materials for the learners (Brookshire et al., 2002). Moreover, students who are actively engaged understand, remember, and enjoy much more than those who are not (Park, 2003).

4.5. Intellectual, aesthetic and emotional involvement

A textbook has to engage learners' emotions to achieve affective involvement (Tomlinson, 2003). A change in the values section has been made to include a debate task rather than the mere drawing of lines from the words to the pets (see figure 17). The original task presents a task that demands little cognitive and

emotional involvement. The adaptation is made to include a debate which is designed to involve the students intellectually and emotionally. Debating is a student-centered technique that is effective in learning language and engaging students through interaction and collaboration (Cinganotto, 2019).

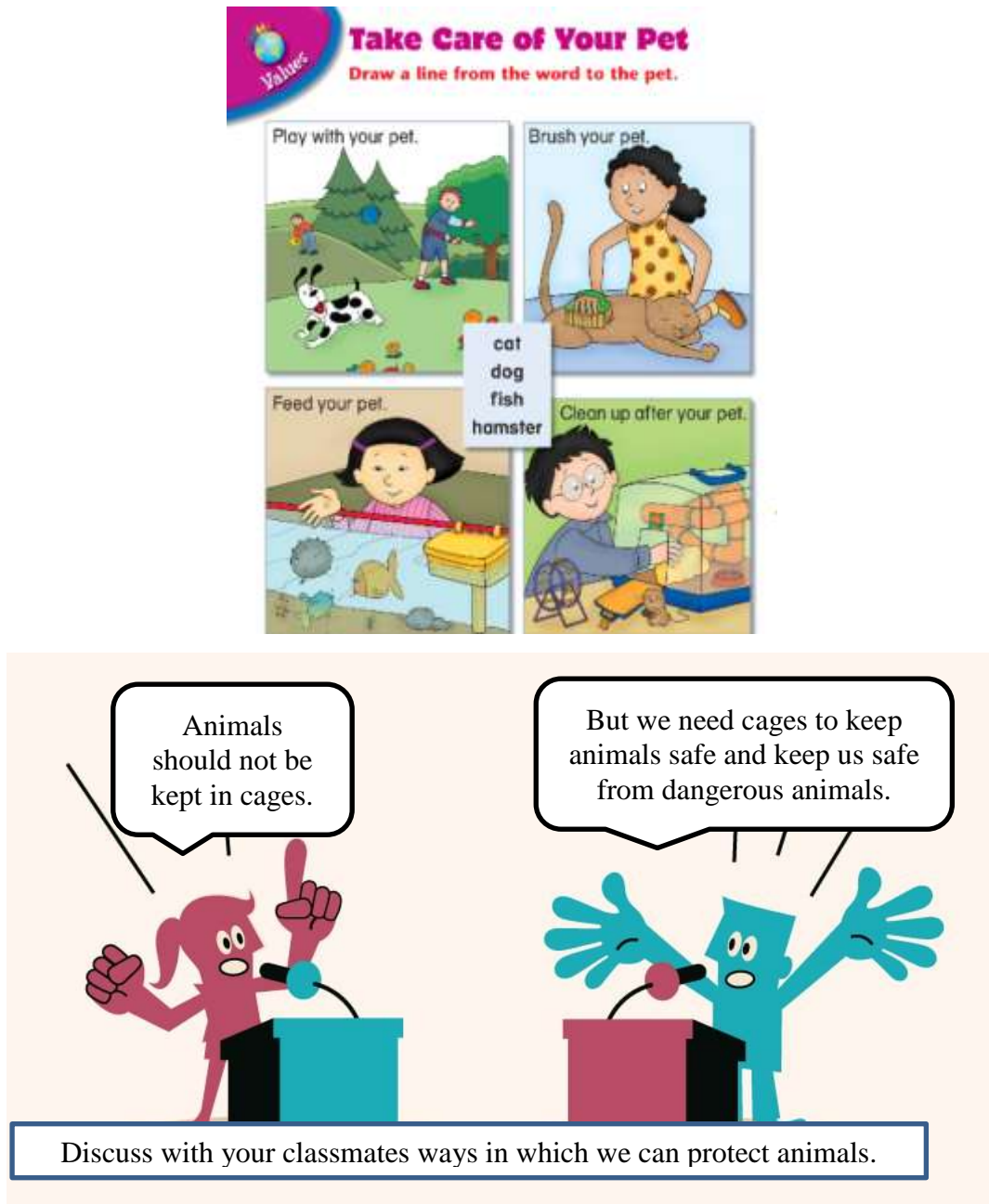


Figure 17. values section, original and adaptation.

Debating is an open-ended task that allows room for interaction and making choices. Tomlinson (1998) argued that open-ended activities promotes interaction and allows for ‘silent periods’ that emphasize comprehension over production. Thornbury (2014) argued that the use of thought-provoking language assists in improving memory and retention than the use of repetition and memorization. Including a debate is a better alternative to teach values. In addition, learners can better improve their critical thinking skills as well as their conflict resolution skills. Debating can also equip the students with the skill to control their emotions and maintain composure when they discuss real-life related topics. The original task contains ‘taking care of pets’ as a value of which most students already know and consider obvious. The adapted debate, however, contains a topic which Huber (1964) singles out as “interesting for the debaters, current, opportune, capable of being addressed in the available time, adequate for oral presentation, provocative, and limited to a single issue” (as cited in Alén et al., 2015, p. 17).

5. Conclusion

This paper has provided several adaptations to a textbook as an attempt to increase its potential for effective teaching and successful learning. Adapting materials has long been disregarded as an unurgent pedagogical need. Adapting materials is vital, now more than ever, to teachers who live in a globalized world but with locally different contexts. Material adaptation enables teachers to utilize resources properly and efficiently to respond to their respective educational needs to ensure a better learning process.

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