

*The Use of LLT Materials in China's EFL Classrooms: Making Learner Engagement in Classroom Talk Visible*

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**Abstract**

Language learning and teaching materials (LLT) are crucial parts of language classrooms. However, how these materials are used by students and teachers during EFL classroom interactions is still understudied. In response to calls for empirical research on materials use in language classrooms, this classroom-based study examined the use of LLT materials in China's integrated English classrooms for English majors and explored students' language learning engagement with materials in materials-prompted turns. Based on a conversation analytic treatment of 90 relevant episodes culled from 36-hour videotaped EFL classroom interactions, this study explores (a) the types of LLT materials used in China's English classrooms, (b) the extent to which students engage with LLT materials in terms of the different characteristics of the discourse patterns elicited by the materials. Results show that language teaching resources offered by three ELA teachers are no longer homogeneous, with all five dimensions of materials (physical entities, texts, signs, environments, and technologies) being used and synergistically generating meanings in classrooms for intermediate learners. Nonetheless, textbooks remain the most commonly used type of instructional materials in EFL classrooms. Additionally, LLT materials have been proven to have a significant impact on teacher-student classroom interaction, prompting turns in direct or indirect ways. Different materials-discourse relations provide students with various space for engagement and topic selection by offering distinct possibilities and constraints, and thereby impacting learner agency in classroom talk. This study reveals how instructional materials and classroom discourse interact to provide language learning opportunities.

Keywords: LLT Materials Use, Learner Engagement, Classroom Talk, EFL Classrooms

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## Introduction

Materials are one of the essential elements of the classroom and serve as the primary language input for teachers, both inside and outside classrooms. In the early days, the materials used in the teaching practice only took a single form, and the notion of materials was restricted to textbooks, often ignoring the complexity and diversity of the materials themselves and conflating them with the concept of textbook use. Today, the definition of materials has been expanded to encompass all artefacts used by learners to facilitate learning and language use (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018). Additionally, Guerrettaz et al. (2021) Summarized a particular classification of language learning and teaching materials (hereinafter referred to as LLT materials), as a collection of different dimensions, consisting of five broad categories: physical entities, texts, signs, environment, and technology.

In recent years, language education field has taken a materialistic turn away from a focus on human behavior or language systems to a focus on materials, with the goal of advancing the depth of research on teaching materials (Pennycook, 2018; Toohey, 2019). Previously, only a small number of scholars explored language teaching materials used in the classrooms, usually focusing on two themes: firstly, content analysis of materials, and secondly, materials development, design and evaluation. In general, materials use has not been fully explored (Harewood, 2021), hence in 2021, *The Modern Language Journal* published a column on materials use, examining the use of materials in different contexts or the resulting interactions, which has attracted academic attention.

However, over the past thirty years, the overall number of relevant studies conducted in China is still insufficient. While early studies mostly addressed the use of primary and secondary school textbooks (Luo and Xu, 2011), some researchers recently have started to focus on the use of university textbooks (Xu and Fan, 2017), online textbooks, foreign textbooks, business English or industry English textbooks (Liu & Jiao 2021), primarily using self-reporting (e.g. questionnaires and interviews) and qualitative case study methods to examine how teachers use textbooks generally or individually. And other non-commercial materials used in the teaching process were not taken into account by researchers, who equated language teaching materials to textbooks. Additionally, little is known about how teaching materials and classroom discussions interact.

A recent study on the qualitative dimensions of the textbook-discourse relationship was examined by Guerrettaz & Johnston (2013) in terms of three dimensions of classroom discourse (theme, genre and discourse structure), where the mediating role of textbooks and their influence on the structure and content of discourse were highlighted. Nevertheless, there are only few relevant research, and the majority of them focus on using a single materials (i.e. textbooks). While the conversational nature of textbook-prompted turns had been examined, little is known about the participants' dynamic behavioral manifestations in classroom discourse.

The current study, based on an ecological view of language acquisition (van Lier, 2004), aimed to explore the dynamic behaviors of both teachers and students in different turns elicited by LLT materials, and to discuss the relationship between materials use, classroom discourse and language learning, in the hope of shedding some light on the research on materials use, related ELT materials training and development of English language teaching materials in higher education. To be specific, it explored the use of LLT materials in real EFL classrooms in China and classroom participants' agentic behaviors in classroom discourse via

asking two research questions: (1) What language teaching and learning materials were used in China's EFL tertiary classrooms? (2) What agentic behaviors were displayed by both teachers and learners in the turns directly and indirectly prompted by LLT materials?

## Results and Discussion

Figure 1 shows that three teachers provided language learning and teaching materials from a variety of dimensions, such as physical entities, texts, signs, and technologies. And the classroom setting, including multimedia equipment, conventional instructional tools and rows of desks, was thought of as an additional dimension of LLT materials supplied to establish a conducive environment for language learning. It is worth noticing that, in terms of texts category, both teachers' verbal explanations and students' language work are subcategories that emerged from the coding process. Words, as one subcategory of the signs category, were presented frequently in the classroom, given the excellent fit between its usability characteristics and the type of curriculum. For English majors, *Integrated English* is a required core course, and the units of the textbook draw their themes from the two reading materials. Words or expressions from various types of learning materials are one of the primary classroom learning resources, as teachers tend to start lessons with key words and language expressions in the reading texts in order to fine-tune the text, extend their understanding of language and culture, and to repeatedly check vocabulary use.

Among the category of physical entities, students' notebooks were shown to be frequently used in classrooms. Students reported in the after-class reflections that they enjoyed taking notes on key learning points in order to organize thinking, internalize new information, and relate old and new information, either as a result of their high school study habits or on the suggestion of their current teachers. In the digital era, digital devices like Huawei, iPhones and iPads are also seen as crucial learning resources, and the language learning apps, such as electronic English Dictionaries, emerged as the primary reference material for most students.

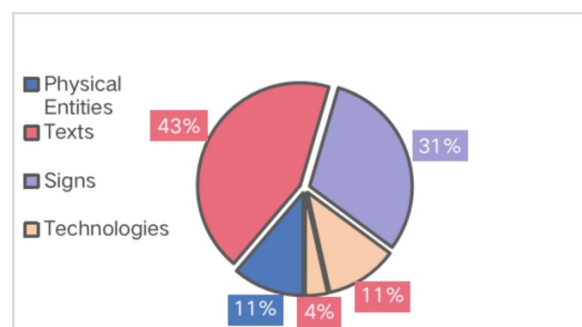


Figure 1: LLT Materials Use in Three Classrooms

In general, the language learning and teaching materials provided by the three teachers were no longer homogeneous and took on a multimodal dynamic. Textbooks continued to dominate the classroom as the primary medium for organizing lessons and providing structure and content for learning activities (Gueratazze & Johnson, 2013), and materials of various modalities were used collaboratively by teachers to optimize language learning conditions. As the way in which textual symbols are carried develops and eventually enriches the written language modality, projectors, large screens and PowerPoint were being used more and more frequent in tertiary classrooms, and students' attention was increasingly being drawn to the metaphorically presented images and electronic documents (Matsumoto, 2021).

Additionally, given the limitations of the reading materials in textbooks and classroom activities, in order to avoid demotivating students and negatively affecting their emotional involvement and language use, teachers selected modal connections to connect written text in textbooks to spoken language, utilized spoken language modalities to further or clarify language knowledge (including vocabulary, expressions, learning strategies, etc.), explained phonological or grammatical rules, provided examples to highlight cultural differences, and occasionally employed additional modalities such as gestures, images, blackboard writing, and stick drawing to support instruction. Through the collaborative use of different modalities, teachers mobilized a wide range of classroom learning resources to create a lively and effective classroom context and optimize language learning conditions.

In the classroom ecosystem, the interplay between discourse and language teaching resources is crucial, acting as a vital source of resources and sustenance, assisting in meaning-making, promoting perception and action, and ultimately affecting learner agency. In accordance with Gueratazze & Johnson (2013), the current study identified the turns prompted by LLT materials into two types: directly-prompted turns and indirectly-prompted turns. The former describes turns in which students use the same vocabulary from the text (not only from the textbook) or provide a prescribed answer directly derived from the text, whereas the latter describes turns that have no evident relationship with the text and only involve themes generated from it. It was found that teachers and students, as the agents in classrooms, demonstrated different behaviors while participating in interactions, due to the distinct discourse features and various interaction space that the turns provided. Hence the agentic behaviors of both teachers and students were examined by using the CA with video, to clearly elaborate the interaction between classroom discourse, materials and language learning.

Directly-prompted turns occurred in scenarios such as checking answers, comprehension and reviewing. Materials such as textbooks, signs, or textual discourse (spoken or written materials) were involved. As shown in extract 1, this turn was prompted directly from the language exercise question (Question 4) in the textbook. The purpose of the discourse was to gauge students' comprehension of the key word 'beam' and to try to elicit a response from the students to the language exercise. Due to the closed nature of this classroom activity, only limited discourse participation by the students was allowed.

#### **Extract 1: Language exercise - a turn elicited by key words in the reading text**

310 T: Yeah, number 4? Feng?

311 S9: There is.....

312 T: Okay, so in this sentence you can see (.) the slight a slight difference between beam and smile. So I want you to check in your dictionary. What's the illustration, explanation for smile and beam, which means, if I ask you to BEAM, if I ask you to SMILE, whether these two gestures will be SLI(..)ghtly Different. (0.2) Look up the word 'smile'↑ and beam in the dictionary to find the English explanation of these two words (.) and try to understand their gestures. Simply put, are smile and beam, the degree to which they smile, the degree to which your mouth grins, the degree to which you show your teeth, the same? Which one moves more? Which one moves less? (0.5)

(Students used their mobile phones to look up the electronic dictionary, and the teacher was waiting for students to consult it.)

313 T: [Which movement is bigger?  
*[T leaning forward*

Image 1



314 SS: Beam.

315 T: While pronouncing 'beam', the movement should be bigger, right?  
That means, in short, that [the mouth grin should be a little bigger.

*[T Pointing both index fingers to the corners of the mouth*

Suppose, for example, you're going to a photographer to take a picture ↑for your passport↑(.), for your identification card↑ (.), and then (.) would you SMILE ↑or would you BEAM?

Image 2



316 SS: [Smile.

*[T saying 'smile' with students*

317 T: Yeah, you want to show [less of your teeth, right? Okay]. But beam it

*[T lifting his left hand to his slightly parted lips means you're*

*[Genuinely happy. You're [genuinely delighted to do that,*

*[T's hands arching up*

*[T's hands arching up and and turning outwards turning outwards right?*

Image 3



Image 4



Extract 1 shows that teacher A controlled the sequence of turn, allowing limited space for learners to interact. The conventional IRF model (question-answer-evaluation) was

commonly seen in classroom interaction. Learners' responses were prescribed answers, and teachers provided direct form-focused feedback on most of these answers. The responses by learners were restricted to one or two words (lines 314 and 316) without clarification checks. Obviously, they were not free to choose and develop topics in the turns. Thus, in order to transcend the constraints imposed on the discourse by the supplying character of a single material, other LLT materials were used to enhance the classroom use of language exercises and offer more space for interaction, such as electronic dictionary software, teachers' verbal explanations (Line 315), gestures and facial expressions (figure 1-2).

Indirectly-prompted turns occurred less mostly in scenarios such as lead-in, pre-learning, and post-reading. The turn was usually initiated by the teacher, and learners do not have to give prescribed answers. Even though the IRF model still occurred, authentic communication was more likely to be achieved due to the authenticity of the topic. As a result, learners' discourse volume increased significantly, their turns were extended and their role in the discourse changed from that of a passive recipient to one that allowed for some engagement and reflection.

**Extract 2: Lead-in activity - a turn elicited by the reading-text theme 'Flowers'**

253 T: Ok, now, so <now>, you KNOW(^) a dozen huh two dozens of words for (-) the flowers, right↑? But, you know(.), actually in our daily life, we CAN have a LOT↓of occasions on (.) which we have flowers↑, right? So (.) [Have you ever sent flowers to somebody?

*[T turning body back from the right to face the class*

254 SSS: Ye (: ) s↓

255 T: [For example↑?

*[T tilting body slightly to the right in a listening position*

256 S12: My mother.

257 T: Mother↑?

258 S13: Teacher

259 T: Teacher↑, [the teacher.

[Sister?

*[T's right hand index finger pointing to the source of the sound*

*[T turning to the right and pointing the right index finger towards the source of the sound*

260 S13: Friends. [Freinds.

261 T: [Friends, yeah, ok.

Image 5



The turn topic shown in extract 2 was derived from the theme of the textbook reading text, and the reference questions and the texts in the slides involved in the turn were the textual LLT materials. The teacher initiated the turn by using a series of provided group discussion

questions a) ‘Have you ever sent flowers to somebody? b) On what occasion would you send flowers to someone? c) For what purpose?’ to recall learners’ personal experience. Learners actively participated in the ask-and-answer activity, even though the answers were only one or two words long (lines 256, 258 and 260). There was an increase in the diversity of English words used, and their oral output was no longer a mimicry of the teacher's words or a copy of ‘sister’ from the teacher.

Student participation in the co-construction of the discourse was found to be, however, minimal as they had little control over how the turn was structured and were accustomed to responding in fragments. Hence, to free learners from the constraints of general responses ('Yes'), teacher B employed signs (eye gaze, gestures, and facial expressions), or she asked, "For example? ", to extend learner turn. Additionally, teacher B used conversational strategies to direct learners’ attention and improve classroom interaction as a means of advancing classroom discourse. For instance, she used ‘teacher echo’ subtly to boost learners’ involvement in all dimensions, particularly emotional engagement (see learners’ facial expressions in image 4).

Furthermore, in addition to teachers’ active awareness of the usability of a variety of LLT materials (in oral or written form), learners, as agents in the classroom interaction, were supposed to perceive the symbolic resources in the materials, actively interpret their meaning, and take appropriate action when interacting with the environment. Extract 3 shows the oral explanations were provided by the teacher as the LLT materials to introduce the theme and language use in the poem (lines 258 and 262). Through textual and conversational importance markers, teacher B put an emphasis on key information, such as ‘Scottish dialect’ and ‘love poem’, in the lecture for learners’ perception. After perceiving the stressed points, learners took the initiative to try out using Chinese dialect words mostly used in Hebei, Henan, Shandong and Shanxi, China, in the English-Chinese translation work. For example, in lines 268 and 271, ‘俺’ and ‘妮儿’ were used to replace ‘my’ and ‘a girl’ in the Scottish poem. Also, due to the strong connection between the theme ‘love’ and their personal experiences, learners were shown to engage themselves in this activity, through applauding enthusiastically, shouting like ‘Woo’, laughing, facial expressions and heated group discussion performances.

**Extract 3: Introduction to the English poem - the teacher’s verbal explanations (materials used)**

258 T: It’s more difficult for you to defer the words in the song, right? Okay, it doesn’t matter. So anyway, you can find that (---this is a (<VERY↑ VERY↑>) famous POEM written by (.) Robert Burns↓>). >Have you ever heard of Robert Burns<? A very famous (.) SCOTLAND national poet, so a red red ROSE↓, Urh I think that in my mind this is the poem which is (.) very very popular, closely related to [a kind of flower. Maybe JUST because of this

*[T Raising the right index finger to the mouth*  
 [song, you know (.) (---why are RED RED ROSE (<is symbolizing

*[T turning around, raising the right hand and pointing to the PPT*  
 (.) [LOVE>). Clear↑?>) Yeah, [so you can find out

*[T nodding downwards [T double hand clapping*  
 [HERE (.) altogether in this poem you

*[T pointing the right index finger at the PPT*  
 can find [four stanza. Notice FOUR stanza, [(<one, two, three,

*[T's right hand pointing to [T's right hand pointing  
'stanza' displayed on the BB to the 4 stanzas on the PPT*

four>). So (.) what does stanza mean?

259 SS: 节(jie)

260 T: 节(jie), 诗歌的节(shi ge de jie). Okay, four stanza↑..So next (.) I would like you to UNDERstand the poem AND THEN translate it into (.) Chinese, I'll give you (.) 5↓ minutes, but you will do it in (<LARGE↓ groups>).

(T divided the class into four large groups)

262 T: Now, by the way, you must have noticed that some of the words are filled in a very strange way. Have you noticed that? For example, you know “luve” means “love” L O (.) V (.) E, right? Yeah, so here pay attention, urh, because just I mentioned Robert Burns was a Scottish poet, so we got a **dialect**. You know Scottish? 苏格兰 (Sugelan). So Scottish dialect, for example, L (.) U (.) V (.) E (.) means L (.) O (.) V (.) E (.) . And melody. Have you noticed how melodies spell? M (.) E (.) L (.) O (.) D (.) Y (.) . Yeah, this is somewhat we call **DIALECTS**>).

Hence it can be concluded that the teacher, learners and the environment are seen as a whole while using LLT materials, creating a space for discursive interaction, building up a classroom atmosphere conducive to the optimization of learning conditions, enhancing learner agency, and promoting and sustaining a good, highly appropriate interaction between the three.

## Conclusion

In response to calls from academics to conduct classroom-based research on the use of teaching materials, the study examined the use of LLT materials in EFL tertiary classrooms for intermediate learners in China. It also exposed the agentic behaviors of both teachers and learners to get a glimpse of how agents were involved in the interaction between LLT materials and classroom discourse. The findings show that the textbook remained the core language classroom material, and other materials were used as scaffolding to the textbook to enhance language learning. Different material-discourse relations (direct and indirect) provide various levels of affordances for language learning. Both teachers and students should take full initiative. Although the sample size is not large enough in this study, the current study has drawn EFL teachers' attention to the classroom use of LLT materials and helped to develop a more holistic multimodal view of materials. It has provided an alternative perspective for teachers to effectively use and evaluate the classroom use of teaching materials, finally offering insights into the development of English language teaching materials in China's tertiary education.

Future work can focus on certain types of materials that are frequently used in the local instructional contexts to deeply explore the interaction between the use of meaning-making resources and classroom discourse, to explore more evidence to substantiate and develop the findings in this study as understanding how the relationship between materials use, discourse, and learner agency is established, and to suggest effective strategies for classroom use of LLT materials.



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