HiLL PUBLISHING

Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science, 2025, 9(7), 1417-1425
https://www.hillpublisher.com/Journals/jhass/
ISSN Online: 2576-0548
ISSN Print: 2576-0556

Negotiating Cultural Borders: A Design-based Study of EFL Material Adaptation in Minority Education Settings

Yixi Danzeng*, Luosang Quzhen, Furong Ma

Xizang University, Lhasa 850000, Xizang Autonomous Region, China.

How to cite this paper: Yixi Danzeng, Luosang Quzhen, Furong Ma. (2025) Negotiating Cultural Borders: A Design-based Study of EFL Material Adaptation in Minority Education Settings. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 9(7), 1417-1425.
DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2025.07.026

Received: December 26, 2024
Accepted: March 30, 2025
Published: July 31, 2025

***Corresponding author:** Yixi Danzeng, Xizang University, Lhasa 850000, Xizang Autonomous Region, China.

Abstract

This study investigates the adaptation of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching materials for ethnic minority students in the Chinese educational context. Drawing on Dudley-Evans and St. John's foundational principles of material adaptation, the research employs an approach to modify web-based instructional resources, aiming to significantly enhance both cultural relevance and communicative value for target learner populations. The adaptation process involves two key modifications: first, the careful substitution of Western-centric cultural content with carefully selected indigenous elements while meticulously preserving the original pedagogical framework and learning objectives; second, the thorough redesign of classroom activities following Nunan's communicative task model, with particular attention to creating differentiated instructional approaches that effectively accommodate the diverse linguistic backgrounds and varying proficiency levels of multiethnic learners in mixed-ability classroom settings. These adaptations not only exemplify how strategic localization can bridge cultural gaps in language education but also demonstrate practical methodologies for addressing complex issues of cultural and linguistic diversity in contemporary EFL instruction, potentially offering valuable insights for educators working with similar student demographics globally.

Keywords

Material adaptation; Cultural relevance; EFL; Ethnic minority students; Communicative teaching

1. Introduction

The rapid development of the EFL industry has led to an extensive array of teaching materials catering to diverse educational programs. Nevertheless, despite this abundance and variety, educators frequently encounter challenges in identifying materials that adequately address both learners' needs and curricular requirements. To reconcile the disparity between available materials and specific pedagogical demands, it becomes imperative to adapt teaching resources based on comprehensive learner profiles, cultural and cognitive considerations, as well as local contextual factors (Prabhu, 1987; Tomlinson, 2022; Hartle, 2022).

As populations with distinctive cultural characteristics, ethnic minority students in China necessitate tailored EFL teaching materials to address the specific learning needs of its students. This paper presents an adaptation process of web-based instructional resources for EFL learners at a minority university in China, aiming to enhance their language learning experience within this unique sociocultural context.

2. Learners' Profile

Guerrettaz et al. (2021) point out that existing definitions of teaching materials often overlook the complexity of these materials, including how they impact language learners and teachers, shape language instruction and use, and are limited to a single type of material—textbooks. Crucially, learners' needs and experiences are frequently neglected in both the conceptualization and design of materials.

For this study, the target learner population consists predominantly of Han Chinese and Tibetan undergraduate students aged approximately 18-22 years. Analysis reveals distinct linguistic competencies between these groups: Han Chinese students demonstrate stronger foundational knowledge of English grammatical structures and possess adequate lexical resources for advanced reading comprehension. In contrast, Tibetan students exhibit relative weaknesses in grammatical accuracy and maintain a more limited vocabulary base for processing advanced texts. Notably, the cohorts display divergent learning style preferences, with Han Chinese learners favoring independent study approaches while Tibetan students show greater affinity for collaborative learning modalities.

3. The Materials to Be Adapted

The ESL Library was established in 2002 as an online platform for English language teaching resources. Owned and operated by Red River Press Inc., this educational website specializes in creating engaging lesson content for adolescent and adult learners (typically ages 16+). Its pedagogical approach emphasizes stimulating critical thinking through authentic, thematically rich materials.

For this adaptation study, we have selected the "Bob Marley" reading comprehension module (see Appendix 1 for complete lesson materials). This unit exemplifies the platform's methodology of developing literacy skills through culturally relevant biographical content, using celebrity profiles as vehicles for language acquisition.

4. Material Adaptation: Rationale and Necessity

The adaptation process becomes problematic when undertaken without clearly defined objectives. Cunningsworth (1995), in his seminal work *Choosing Your Coursebook*, establishes key justifications for material adaptation. He identifies several determining factors, including classroom dynamics, syllabus constraints, stakeholder characteristics, learner expectations and motivation, as well as resource availability.

The present adaptation initiative stems primarily from findings of a prior material evaluation conducted using Mukundan's (2011) framework for evaluating instructional materials. The evaluation revealed two critical shortcomings: first, while the material demonstrates strong overall organization, its task components prove largely irrelevant to the specific linguistic and cultural context of the minority students that are under study. Second, the analysis identified an overreliance on controlled practice tasks that fail to facilitate meaningful communicative language learning opportunities.

These findings necessitate substantial adaptation of the existing materials to better align with both the pedagogical requirements and the sociocultural realities of the target learner population. The adaptation aims to transform the materials into a more contextually appropriate and pedagogically effective resource that addresses these identified deficiencies.

5. Adaptation Techniques

While identifying the rationale for material adaptation offers theoretical guidance for the process, the application of specific adaptation techniques provides concrete methodological tools for implementation. McDonough and Shaw (1993) and Cunningsworth (1995) have established a framework of five principal adaptation techniques: Adding (supplementing existing materials), Deleting (removing unnecessary content), Simplifying (modifying complex elements), Reordering (restructuring the sequence), and Replacing (substituting inappropriate content).

For the current adaptation project, the primary techniques to be employed will be adding and replacing. This selection is based on the specific needs identified in the material evaluation phase, where gaps in relevance and communicative practice were discovered. The adding technique will be used to incorporate culturally appropriate content, while replacing will address the unsuitable task components in the original materials.

6. Adaptation Principles and Implementation of Material Adaptation

Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) propose four essential criteria for effective material adaptation: Judicious selection

from available resources; Creative employment of existing materials; Purposeful modification of activities to align with learners' needs; Meaningful supplementation with additional exercises. The current adaptation process gives particular emphasis to these considerations, focusing primarily on the modification and supplementation of activity components. These adjustments aim to enhance task relevance, ensuring that students' learning needs are addressed through content they can personally relate to. This approach resonates with Jolly and Bolitho's (2011) assertion that materials achieve optimal effectiveness when specifically designed to cater to specific learner groups.

The primary impetus for adaptation stems from the frequent mismatch between material content and specific learner contexts (Sheldon, 1988). This disparity is especially pronounced for minority groups like Tibetan students, as most commercially available materials are designed for global audiences with an inherent mainstream cultural bias. Given the well-documented significance of "relevance" in language learning (Nunan, 1988; Bell & Gower, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Krashen, 1982), adapting materials to reflect learners' personal experiences becomes imperative.

7. Lesson Structure and Key Adaptations

The target lesson comprises five key components: Quick Facts, Pre-reading, Reading, Vocabulary Review, and Discussion. Two principal adaptations were implemented to enhance relevance: First, the Quick Facts section, originally designed as a lead-in activity requiring students to complete basic biographical information about Bob Marley (including name, nationality, ideology, and notable achievements), presented significant challenges for Tibetan learners. Unlike their Western counterparts, who might be familiar with this cultural icon, Tibetan students often lack prior knowledge of Bob Marley, resulting in limited engagement with the task.

Richards (2001) advocates for pre-reading activities that "help relate the reading to a student's prior experiences," emphasizing their role in stimulating interest and preparing necessary vocabulary. In accordance with this recommendation, the original task was replaced with an activity where students provide information about their own favorite singers. This adapted lead-in activity serves dual purposes: it immediately captures students' interest while simultaneously expanding their vocabulary as they describe personal musical preferences in English.

Additional adaptations were applied to the warm-up questions to address their lack of relevance. Notably, the modifications were implemented selectively, while certain questions were replaced, others were retained unchanged despite their limited relevance to the learners. For instance, among the three original questions, the first inquires about Bob Marley's musical genres, the second asks whether students enjoy Bob Marley's musical style, and the third questions what Bob Marley sings about. The decision was made to retain the first two questions because, although culturally unfamiliar, they still offer valuable opportunities for exploration and discussion. To enhance relevance, instructors might play a sample of Bob Marley's music to aid student comprehension. However, the third question required replacement because the linguistic complexity of song lyrics exceeds the target learners' proficiency level. Consequently, it was substituted with a question better aligned with students' existing knowledge base.

The incorporation of culturally relevant elements, such as Tibetan songs and familiar local singers, enables students to engage in meaningful cultural reflection, thereby fostering intercultural awareness as conceptualized by McKay (2000). Beyond the adaptations made to enhance cultural relevance, further modifications were implemented to improve the task components. The original lesson contained merely two principal tasks: vocabulary preview and vocabulary review. While the website describes these as communicative activities promoting student-centered learning in line with Tomlinson's (2011) principles, in practice, these vocabulary matching exercises fail to facilitate genuine learner interaction, instead consisting primarily of written responses.

Nunan's (1989) communicative task framework provides a comprehensive approach for evaluating such activities. This analytical model examines five key dimensions: Goals: the intended learning outcomes of the task; Input: the content material supporting these goals; Activities: the specific procedures learners follow; Roles: the dynamic between teachers and students; Settings: the physical learning environment's impact on interaction.

According to Nunan, effective communicative task design must incorporate all these interrelated elements. Guided by this framework, a new post-reading task was incorporated at the lesson's conclusion, designed to be both culturally relevant and genuinely communicative. This activity requires students to share personal narratives about their favorite musical artists with the class. Following Richards' (2001) pedagogical principle, the task aims to prompt learners to "reflect on, synthesize, or evaluate what they have read," while simultaneously encouraging them to utilize vocabulary, phrases, and grammatical structures encountered in the main text.

The final adaptation focuses on the vocabulary review component. Although this section effectively reinforces

newly acquired lexical items from the reading passage, its original design failed to accommodate the distinct learning preferences and proficiency levels between Tibetan and Han Chinese students.

As previously established, these learner groups demonstrate marked differences: Han Chinese students typically exhibit stronger language proficiency and favor independent study approaches, while their Tibetan counterparts often prefer collaborative learning methods and require additional linguistic support. Recognizing the vocabulary review's crucial role in achieving lesson objectives, the adaptation preserves the task's core content while modifying its implementation strategy to ensure all students in this mixed-ability classroom derive maximum benefit.

These strategic modifications in task sequencing and implementation not only accommodate the distinct learning preferences of Han and Tibetan students but also create valuable opportunities for peer learning by pairing students of different proficiency levels, thereby maximizing learning potential for all participants.

In essence, the material adaptations adhere to McDonough and Shaw's (2003) fundamental principle of "personalizing and localizing" instructional content from their seminal work, Materials and Methods in ELT. Furthermore, the modifications address diverse learner needs while enhancing engagement through increased learner autonomy (Islam & Mares, 2003). The supplementary materials maintain thematic coherence by focusing on students' personal musical preferences while preserving the original text's emphasis on Bob Marley. This deliberate integration of global and local elements, combined with differentiated difficulty levels, significantly enhances both the relevance and communicative value of the content while effectively addressing the varying language competencies of Tibetan and Han Chinese learners.

8. Conclusion

Given the pivotal role of instructional materials in language education, careful selection is essential to ensure they "satisfy both external standards and local contextual requirements" (McGrath, 2002). However, the diversity of learner profiles and educational contexts makes it virtually impossible to find materials that perfectly align with specific local needs. Consequently, teachers must develop the capacity to "mediate between prescribed materials and their students, skillfully adapting and supplementing content as required" (McGrath, 2002).

Through comprehensive consideration of learner characteristics and contextual factors, this study demonstrates the adaptation of web-based materials informed by prior evaluative findings. While the modifications may appear modest in scope, their pedagogical implications for educators at the minority University are substantial. It must be emphasized that such adaptations represent an ongoing process rather than a final product - as learner needs evolve, so too must the materials. As Jolly and Bolitho astutely observe, material adaptation constitutes a perpetual, cyclical endeavor, mirroring the continuous refinement of lesson plans and teaching approaches. The ultimate objective remains the creation of resources that genuinely enhance instructional effectiveness and learning outcomes.

References

Bell, J., & Gower, R. (1998). Writing course materials for the world: A great compromise. Materials development in language teaching, 117.

Cunningsworth, A. (1995). Choosing your coursebook. Heinemann.

Guerrettaz, A. M., Engman, M. M., & Matsumoto, Y. (2021). Empirically defining language learning and teaching materials in use through sociomaterial perspectives. *The Modern Language Journal*, *105*(S1), 3-20.

Hartle, S. (2022). Developing blended learning materials. In J. Norton & H. Buchanan (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Materials Development for Language Teaching* (pp. 399-413). Routledge.

Hutchinson, T., & Waters, A. (1987). English for specific purposes. Cambridge University Press.

Islam, C., & Mares, C. (2003). Adapting classroom materials. Developing materials for language teaching, 86-100.

Jolly, D., & Bolitho, R. (2011). A framework for materials writing. In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *Materials Development in Language Teaching* (pp. 107-134). Cambridge University Press.

Krashen, S. (1982). Principles and practice in second language acquisition. Pergamon.

McDonough, J., & Shaw, C. (2003). Materials and methods in ELT: A teacher's guide. Blackwell.

McGrath, I. (2002). Materials Evaluation and Design for Language Teaching. Edinburgh University Press.

McKay, S. L. (2000). Teaching English as an international language: Implications for cultural materials in the classroom. *TESOL journal*, *9*(4), 7-11.

Mukundan, J., Hajimohammadi, R., & Nimehchisalem, V. (2011). Developing an English language textbook evaluation checklist. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research*, *4*(6), 21.

Nunan, D. (1988). The learner-centred curriculum: A study in second language teaching. Cambridge University Press.

Nunan, D. (1989). Designing tasks for the communicative classroom. Cambridge University Press.

Prabhu, N. S. (1987). Second language pedagogy (Vol. 20). Oxford University Press.

Richards, J. C. (2001). Curriculum development in language teaching. Ernst Klett Sprachen.

Sheldon, L. E. (1988). Evaluating ELT textbooks and materials. *ELT journal*, *42*(4), 237-246.

Tomlinson, B. (2011). Materials development in language teaching. Cambridge University Press.

Tomlinson, B. (2022). The discipline of materials development. In J. Norton & H. Buchanan (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Materials Development for Language Teaching* (pp. 3-16). Routledge.

Appendix 1. Sample Lesson of ESL Teaching Materials

ESL library.com

Famous People

Bob Marley

Quick Facts

Name: _____

Nationality: _____

Ideology: Rastafarian

Famous for: _____

Pre-Reading

A. Warm-Up Questions

1. What type of music is Bob Marley known for?
2. Do you like Bob Marley's style of music? Why or why not?
3. What does Bob Marley sing about? If you don't know, guess!

B. Vocabulary Preview

Match the words on the left with the correct meanings on the right.

____	1. reggae	a)	an opportunity that helps one to become successful
____	2. Third World	b)	origins
____	3. roots	c)	a type of music that was born in Jamaica and inspired by the Rastafarian movement
____	4. split up	d)	the words in a song
____	5. rough	e)	violent and dangerous
____	6. make a name for oneself	f)	an underdeveloped nation
____	7. tempo	g)	a sect that believes in bringing African descendants back to the homeland
____	8. lyrics	h)	to stop playing music together
____	9. Rastafarian movement	i)	to end a relationship, divorce
____	10. disband	j)	to get back together
____	11. reunite	k)	to become famous
____	12. big break	l)	to fall suddenly due to illness or inury
____	13. collapse	m)	the speed of the music

ESL library.com

Bob Marley
Famous People

Reading

1. Bob Marley was a Jamaican singer and songwriter who popularized **reggae** music around the world. He is sometimes called the **Third World**'s first pop superstar.
2. Nesta Robert Marley was born in 1945 in Saint Ann, Jamaica. He had a white father and a black mother, but he was proudest of his African **roots**. Bob Marley's parents **split up** when he was just a young boy, and he never got to know his dad.
3. When he was a teen, Marley moved to Kingston and settled in the planned community of "Trench Town." The Trench Town streets were **rough** but also culturally rich. The community became known as the Hollywood of Jamaica because it was full of artists trying to **make a name for themselves**. Bob Marley fell in love with the sounds and beats of "ska" music. This was a form of dance music with an upbeat **tempo**. It combined Caribbean mento and calypso with American soul and R & B.
4. Marley and his friend "Bunny" began taking vocal classes with coach Joe Higgs. In music class, Bob and Bunny joined up with Peter Macintosh and formed a band called the Wailing Wailers. Their **lyrics** were about the struggles of Jamaica's poor. At this time, music in Jamaica slowed down a bit. It became known as "rocksteady" and, later, "reggae" music. Unlike the ghetto lyrics that came before, reggae music was more spiritual and connected to the **Rastafarian movement**.
5. In the mid-1960s, the Wailers **disbanded**. Bob Marley got married and moved to the US to work in a factory. He returned to Jamaica shortly after, and the Wailers **reunited**. The band got their **big break** in 1972 when they were signed to Island Records. Bob Marley and the Wailers began touring internationally. Before long, the world fell in love with reggae music, and a legend was born.
6. In 1980, Bob Marley **collapsed** while he was out for a jog in New York's Central Park. He died of cancer eight months later at the age of 36. His hits like "Buffalo Soldier" and "Get Up Stand Up" continue to fill nightclubs and living rooms around the world.

"Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery, none but our selves can free our minds!"

—Bob Marley

Did you know...

THE RASTAFARIAN MOVEMENT

Bob Marley supported and popularized Jamaica's "Rastafarian movement." This is a sect that believes that Ethiopia's former emperor (Haile Selassie) was a living god who would bring all of the people of African **descent** back to their homeland. People like Bob Marley liked to remind black Jamaicans that they were **descendants** of African slaves who deserved to be freed. Rastafarians call Ethiopia "Zion," the *homeland*. Most of Bob Marley's hits are about the Rastafarian movement.

ESL library.com

Bob Marley
Famous People

Vocabulary Review

Match each sentence to the paraphrased version on the right.
One letter will not be used.

____ 1. Destiny's Child broke up and Beyoncé pursued a solo career.

____ 2. A director saw the child actress perform on a children's TV show.

____ 3. The nation does not have clean water and proper sewage facilities.

____ 4. A few members of the band got back together to do a concert.

____ 5. The song starts off slow but gets faster in the middle.

a) The tempo changes.
b) She got her big break.
c) They reunited.
d) They disbanded.
e) It's a Third World country.
f) They made a name for themselves.

Discussion

1. How does music evolve over time?
2. What contributes to new music genres?
3. Do you think music has been getting better or worse in your lifetime?

Appendix 2. Comparison between the Original and Adapted

Original	Adapted
Part 1. Quick Facts	Part 1. Quick Facts
Name:	Name:
Nationality:	Nationality:
Ideology:	Music types:
Famous for:	Best works:
Part 2. Pre-Reading	Part 2. Pre-Reading
1.What type of music is Bob Marley known for?	1.What type of music is Bob Marley known for?
2. Do you like Bob Marley's style of music?	2. Do you like Bob Marley's style of music?
3. What does Bob Marley sing about?	3. What does your favorite singer sing about?
Part3.	Part3.
Readings	Readings
Part4. Vocabulary Review	Part4. Vocabulary Review
Individual task	Group task/mixture of the strong and the weak
Part5. Discussion	Part5. Discussion
	Part 6. Share with the group about your favorite singer and present it to the class using some of the vocabulary and pharases we learned in the reading text.