Secondary English Straitjacket Textbooks: Why Practitioners Cannot Loosen the Straps

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Abstract

The Algerian educational system imposes on both secondary English teachers and learners institutional textbooks which, as widely noticed by practitioner teachers, cannot match all the different teaching/learning contexts. Creative teachers continuously engage themselves in evaluating the teaching/learning material in their hands and adapting it when necessary to match their learners' level and interests. The present work investigates teachers' practices in adapting the content of Algerian secondary English textbooks, and the constraints that prevent them from undergoing such task. It also aims at providing suggestions to overcome the restraints. 217 closed ended questionnaires were administered to secondary English teachers from Mascara, Mostaganem, Oran, and Relizane. The investigation reveals that most teachers rarely adapt the contents of secondary English textbooks due to many administrative and pedagogical constraints.

Key words: Secondary English Textbooks, Textbook Adaptation, Constraints

ملخص:

يفرض النظام التربوي الجزائري على كل من أساتذة اللغة الإنجليزية للتعليم الثانوي والتلاميذ على حد سواء كتبا مدرسية مؤسسية التي لا يمكن أن توافق جميع سياقات التعليم/ التعلم المختلفة بإجماع الأساتذة الممارسون. الأساتذة المبدعون ينخرطون باستمرار في تقييم المواد التعليمية/ التعلمية بين أيديهم وتكييفها عند الضرورة لمطابقتها مع مستوى المتعلمين واهتماماتهم. هذا العمل يحقق في ممارسات الأساتذة فيما يخص تكييف محتوى الكتب المدرسية الجزائرية لمادة اللغة الإنجليزية للتعليم الثانوي، والقيود التي تمنعهم من ممارسة هكذا نشاط . كما يهدف هذا البحث إلى تقديم اقتراحات لتجاوز العراقيل. 217 أستاذ من معسكر، مستغانم، وهران، وغليزان شاركوا في هذا البحث بإجابتهم على أسئلة استبيان ذات خيارات. يكشف البحث أن معظم الأساتذة نادرا ما يكيفون محتوى الكتب المدرسية بسبب العديد من القيود الإدارية والتربوية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكتب المدرسية للغة الإنجليزية للتعليم الثانوي، تكييف الكتاب المدرسي، العراقيل.

Introduction

Nobody can argue that the textbook is an efficient teaching/learning material. In some cases, however, the textbook is far from being efficient due to the incompatibility of its content with the target teaching/learning context. Such incongruence would lead to the failure of the programme that the textbook was designed to implement. Yet, creative teachers would never reach that ending. They continuously strive for bridging the gap by adapting the incompatible textbook content.

As no textbook is perfect, dissatisfactions with the content of secondary English textbooks have been expressed by many practitioner teachers. Many of them, for example, think that the reading texts are incongruent with their pupils' level. Others believe that the listening scripts are not interesting to their learners. However, despite the proclaimed existing gap between the textbooks and the target learners' level and interests, most of the teachers continue to use them without any modification or replacement. Thus, this research aims at investigating the constraints that prevent secondary English teachers from adapting the incompatible content of secondary English textbooks, and explores the possibility of overcoming the hindrance.

To achieve the purpose of the study, the following research questions are addressed:

1 Is textbook adaptation practised by secondary English teachers?

2 What hinder teachers from adapting the contents of secondary English textbooks?

As an attempt to answer the research questions, we put forward the following hypothesis:

Textbook adaptation is narrowly practised due to both secondary schools' administrative regulations, which neither help nor motivate teachers to engage in such task, and some pedagogical constraints.

The Textbook

The textbook plays a decisive role in the success or failure of any English language teaching programme. In most countries, the textbook is an institutional teaching/learning map to be followed by both teachers and learners. It reflects the official status that English enjoys within an educational system and its future prospects within the society as a whole. Moreover, the institutional textbook is a unifying teaching/learning material to be used by all teachers and learners belonging to different schools.

The textbook is one of the main components in the teaching/learning process. Graves defines textbooks as "prepackaged published books used by the students and teachers as the primary basis for a language course" (226). In her 'loose' definition, Sheldon regards the pedagogical function of the textbook as an

"explicit aim" (*ELT Textbook and Materials* 1). This implies the implicit aim that the textbook is a celebration of the designers' beliefs and perceptions of the teaching/learning activity. Such aim is viewed by Hutchinson and Torres as a prior criterion for the "accountability" of a textbook; as both educational authorities and parents "claim the right to influence what is taught in the classroom in terms of content, methodology, and cultural or ideological values" (320). Textbooks are published in the form of packages that, as put by Graves, "may include audio-cassettes or CDs, videos, workbooks, CD-ROMs, test packages and Internet materials. They almost always include teacher's guide" (226).

The Textbook as a Boon

The strong positive perceptions from the part of many ELT specialists towards the textbook are mainly due to the functions that a single book could accomplish, the needs it could fulfil, and both short-term and long-term objectives it could help achieve. Hutchinson and Torres touch on a very important advantage of the textbook by referring to both teachers and learners' need to be guided by a map or plan which a textbook manifests through its structure. They discuss three reasons behind the necessity of the textbook, as a "clear and complete" map, in any teaching/learning setting. First, the textbook provides all parties including teachers, learners, parents, educational authorities and school administrators with "something to negotiate about". Second, it enables other parties than the teachers to participate in the teaching/learning process. Third, it helps teachers, learners and school administrators assess their progress compared to "what goes in other classrooms" either locally or in a different context. This helps maintaining "a degree of standardization across different classes and institutions" (319-320).

The comprehensive plan that a textbook may provide is a very useful "structuring tool" in fostering the process of "social routinization" which aims at stereotyping the classroom interaction "to reduce the unpredictability and, thereby, the stress" (Crawford 83). Moreover, with such framework, the textbook allows learners "to look forward and back, giving them a chance to prepare for what's coming and review what they have done" (Harmer, *How to teach English* 152). Thus, the textbook fosters autonomous leaning and enables learners "to organize their learning both inside and outside the classroom" (Hutchinson and Torres 318).

Like other humans, teachers have other obligations to fulfil in their personal lives than teaching. Crawford comments on the efficiency of the textbook in saving teachers' time to be devoted to teaching what has been carefully researched and planned in the textbook and its accompanying materials rather than preparing, to use Harmers' words, "brand new material" (82 [*How to teach English* 152]),".

Another advantage of the textbook is the guidance and support it provides to "teachers who are inexperienced or occasionally unsure of their knowledge of

the language" (Ur 184). Williams highlights the strong presence and constant use of the textbook in "situations where there is a shortage of trained teachers". Thus, the textbook, as "a vehicle for teacher and learner training" (251), is intended not only to implement a teaching/learning programme, but also to equip its users, mainly the teachers, with methodological and linguistic knowledge. This may enhance teaching and learning performances, and, in most cases, help "introduce changes gradually within a structured framework enabling teachers and learners to develop in harmony with the introduction of new ideas" (Hutchinson and Torres 323).

For learners, the textbook, as opposed to teacher-produced materials, is far more attractive and "convincing" due to the use of computer-aided publishing equipments which teachers have no access to (Crawford 82). Furthermore, Ur stresses the practicality of the textbook being used regularly. She writes:

A book is a convenient package. It is bound, so that its components stick together and stay in order; it is light and small enough to carry around easily; it is of a shape that is easily packed and stacked; it does not depend for its use on hardware or a supply of electricity. (184)

The Textbook as a Burden

Despite the fact that textbooks facilitate, to some extent, the teaching/learning process, they are viewed as, to use Sheldon's words, "necessary evils" ("Evaluating ELT Textbooks and Materials" 237) being imposed on the classroom parties, i.e. learners and practitioner teachers. The latter are, in many cases, not involved in the process of textbook production as such an activity should be carried out by those who have the 'expertise'. This "lack of communication" between textbook designers and educational administrators on one side and teachers and learners on the other side may be one of the reasons behind the ignorance of all parties "of one another's true priorities and constraints" (Sheldon, *ELT Textbook and Materials* 2).

The need for a teaching/learning framework that guides both teachers and learners is undeniable. Such 'scaffold', however, provided by most textbooks is criticised for its inflexibility imposing on teachers and learners a 'rigid' prescription to be followed for it was set by, in Hutchinson and Torres's words, "the wise and virtuous people" (315). The textbook structure straightjackets and exerts pressure on teachers as pointed out by Williams: "The textbook can be a tyrant to the teacher who, in his or her preoccupation with covering the syllabus, feels constrained to teach every item in exactly the same sequence and context in which it is presented by the textbook writer" (251).

Though it is required to encourage creative teaching, the textbook has been accused by Ur of constraining "teacher's initiative and creativity" (185). Arguing for the textbook's role as an agent of change, Hutchinson and Torres acknowledge the fact that "ready-made textbooks" make teachers, who are misled by a feeling

of security and trustworthiness, totally dependent on the textbook rather than "participating in the day-to-day decisions that have to be made about what to teach and how to teach it" (315). In the same respect, Harmer cautions against both teachers and learners' total dependency on the textbook which "may become like a milestone around the necks of all concerned, endangering the engagement which a student-centred classroom might otherwise create" (*How to teach English* 152-153).

Crawford highlights the idealization of the textbook content that "has little to do with reality". Such idealization is twofold. First, for commercial and socio-political reasons, textbook designers avoid dealing with contemporary contentious issues. Second, textbook writers often adapt authentic reading and listening texts to integrate teaching points making the textbook language far from being authentic (80).

Designing a textbook that meets the target learners' level, needs and interests is one of the most important criteria on which the appropriateness of the textbook will be evaluated. However, as stated by Sheldon, "most textbooks are tantalizingly vague about target learners, especially in regard to the definition of entry and exit language levels" *(ELT Textbook and Materials* 3). Such vagueness is mainly due to the differences among the learners in terms of their ability, learning needs, and learning styles that no single textbook can cater for (Ur 185).

Whatever the reason, textbooks, in many different teaching/learning contexts around the world, are used for several years without being modified or replaced. This may lead to routine teaching and generate boredom among teachers, and thus, reduce their enthusiasm and creativity. The 'ever-lasting' textbooks are named by Sheldon as "end-products". She argues that "textbooks do not admit the winds of change from research, methodological experimentation, or classroom feedback" ("Evaluating ELT Textbooks and Materials" 239).

Textbook Adaptation

Most EFL experts, including those who argue against teacher-produced materials, agree on the basic assumption that no textbook can suit all the teaching/learning contexts. Therefore, as stated by Hutchinson and Torres, "a textbook can never be more than a workable compromise" (325) whose writers aimed at approaching the requirements of the different teaching/learning settings, that can never be achieved if teachers abandon their role as active textbook adapters. Textbook adaptation is defined by Tomlinson as:

Making changes to materials in order to improve them or to make them more suitable for a particular type of learner. Adaptation can include reducing, adding, omitting, modifying and supplementing. Most teachers adapt materials every time they use a textbook in order to maximise the value of the book for their particular learners. (xi)

Reasons for Textbook Adaptation

Why do teachers adapt a textbook? Answering such question, Sheldon states that the adoption of a teaching/learning material must be followed and supported by supplementation and adaptation as such activities would enable teachers cope with the adopted material's "gaps" ("Evaluating ELT Textbooks and Materials" 242-243). Therefore, "any textbook should be used judiciously, since it cannot cater equally to the requirements for every classroom setting" (Williams 251).

The earliest attempts of textbook adaptation date back to the introduction of the communicative approach. At that time, most textbooks were designed on the principles of Grammar Translation Method which does not match the principles of the new adopted approach that gives more importance to communication and views "learning as a developmental process". As a response to such methodological change, teachers carried out the responsibility of adapting the existing textbooks as a vital need (Islam and Mares 87).

Teachers resort to textbook adaptation for many reasons. They may supplement the grammatical content of a textbook due to a lack of coverage or practice. They may also adapt a reading passage or its comprehension questions for their inappropriateness to the level of the target learners. Additionally, the textbook listening scripts and dialogues may lack authenticity which induces their adaptation. Furthermore, teachers may find that the textbook does not provide "enough guidance on pronunciation". Moreover, the textbook topics may be incongruent with the target learners' "age and intellectual level". In addition, a textbook may contain illustrations which are not "culturally acceptable". Besides, teachers, due to time constraint, may omit some textbook lessons. Last but not least, teachers may supplement the textbook with activities, "vocabulary list", and "accompanying tests" in order to create variety and help the target learners assess themselves (McDonough et al. 67-68).

Sheldon highlights the cultural inappropriateness of some textbooks as one of the major reasons for textbook adaptation. She asserts that textbooks "fail to recognize the likely restrictions operative in most teaching situations" ("Evaluating ELT Textbooks and Materials" 239).

Block discusses "timeliness" as one of the reasons for textbook adaptation. Textbooks may contain outdated reading or listening texts that teachers, and even learners, find "unusable" due to the information or the viewpoints they contain. Moreover, Block argues for the importance of teachers' "personal touch" as another reason for textbook adaptation. He maintains that learners may appreciate the work and effort done by their teachers to prepare a different teaching/learning material than the one presented in the textbook. Thus, textbook adaptation may foster learners' confidence in their teachers' ability and help creating a motivating teaching/learning atmosphere (214-215).

There is no fixed list of reasons for textbook adaptation. A teacher may adapt a textbook lesson as a result of "an intuitive feeling or an articulated thought" that has nothing to do with a previous systematic textbook evaluation (Islam and Mares 89). Other teachers may feel the need to adapt a textbook not for its inappropriateness to their teaching/learning contexts, but to break their teaching routine and create a kind of novelty as creative use of the textbook is, in Harmer's words, "one of the teacher's premier skill". Hence, textbooks must be seen as "proposals for action, rather than instructions for action" (*How to Teach English* 147, 153).

Techniques of Textbook Adaptation

Teachers' choice of the appropriate technique for adapting a particular textbook lesson depends on the type of the material to be adapted, the objectives to be achieved, teachers' free time, their access to supplementary material, and their experience and ability. Maley enumerates eight techniques of textbook adaptation. First, teachers may omit a textbook lesson that they find unsuitable, "offensive", or "unproductive" for their learners. Second, they may add other teaching/learning materials to supplement the textbook. Third, they may reduce a textbook lesson by, for example, shortening an activity "to give it less weight or emphasis". Fourth, they may decide to extend a textbook activity to "give it an additional dimension". Fifth, they may rewrite or modify a textbook lesson to increase its appropriateness, accessibility to their learners, etc. Sixth, they may replace an unsuitable textbook lesson by a more appropriate one. Seventh, they may change the order and grading of the textbook lessons. "Branching", the last technique, allows teachers to "add options to the existing activity or to suggest alternative pathways through the activities" (381-382).

Harmer suggests five stages to be followed by any teacher willing to produce a home-made teaching/learning material for classroom use. The first stage is "Planning" which includes stating the aims and the objectives of the course, choosing the course content, and grouping learners. The second stage is "Trialing" which includes piloting the material among colleagues in order to avoid potential problems, "spot spelling mistakes", and clarify ambiguities. The third stage is "Evaluating" which includes while-use and post-use evaluation that help teachers making future decisions about the kind of modifications to include in the homegrown materials. The fourth stage is "Classifying" which includes storing the material for possible future use. The last stage; "Record-keeping", includes making a diary for the material used and its evaluation (*The Practice of English Language Teaching* 151-152).

Constraints on Textbook Adaptation

In spite of its benefits for both teachers and learners, textbook adaptation is not a practice to be accomplished easily due to many constraints. Time is one of

the main constraints on textbook adaptation as such activity induces hours of preparation that teachers cannot devote because of their overloaded timetables and other professional and personal obligations. Moreover, teachers need to make copies for their learners every time they adapt a textbook lesson which, according to O'Neill, "cause enormous production and storage problems" (107).

Sheldon highlights learners' negative perception of teacher-produced materials as opposed to textbooks ("Evaluating ELT Textbooks and Materials" 238). Such perception is due to many reasons. First, learners prefer using a textbook in a "linear, cover-to-cover way" rather than using "selections from a variety of printed sources". Second, learners may think of the pieces of home-made materials as a reflection of a lack of teacher's organization, expertise, and "course direction" (Sheldon, *ELT Textbook and Materials* 3-4). Furthermore, Harmer claims that "omitting or replacing coursebook material becomes irksome for many students if it happens too often" (*The Practice of English Language Teaching* 305).

Many teachers feel the necessity of adapting the incompatible textbook lessons to match their learners' level and interests. However, they lack the necessary skills to do so. This pedagogical constraint is mainly due to the lack of pre-service and in-service training of teachers. It is also due to the absence or lack of cooperation among practitioner teachers.

Methodology

Teachers' questionnaire is used in the study as data collection tool. In addition to three personal and professional items, the questionnaire contains 7 multiple choice questions that investigate teachers' practices and the constraints they face in adapting textbooks. 217 secondary teachers of English from different schools in Mascara, Mostaganem, Relizane and Oran participated in the study.

Results and Discussion

Results of the teachers' questionnaires are presented and discussed in the following table and figures.

Table 1

The distribution of the sample in terms of the variables

Variables		N	%
Gender	Male	126	58.07
	Female	91	41.93
Age	Less than 30	62	28.58
	30-50	133	61.29
	Over 50	22	10.13
Teaching Experience (years)	1	00	00
	2-5	27	12.44
	6-15	116	53.46
	16-25	53	24.43
	Over 25	21	9.67
Total		217	100

Table 1 demonstrates that 58.07% of the respondents are females, whereas 41.93% of them are males. It also shows that the majority of the informants (61.29%) are aged between 30 and 50. Sixty-two respondents are under the age of 30 and only 22 participants are aged over 50. Additionally, more than half of the respondents (53.46%) have been teaching for 6 to 15 years. Nearly one-fourth of the informants have been teaching for 16 to 25 years. Furthermore, the teaching experience of 12.44% of the respondents ranges from 2 to 5 years. Only twenty-one respondents have been teaching for more than 25 years.

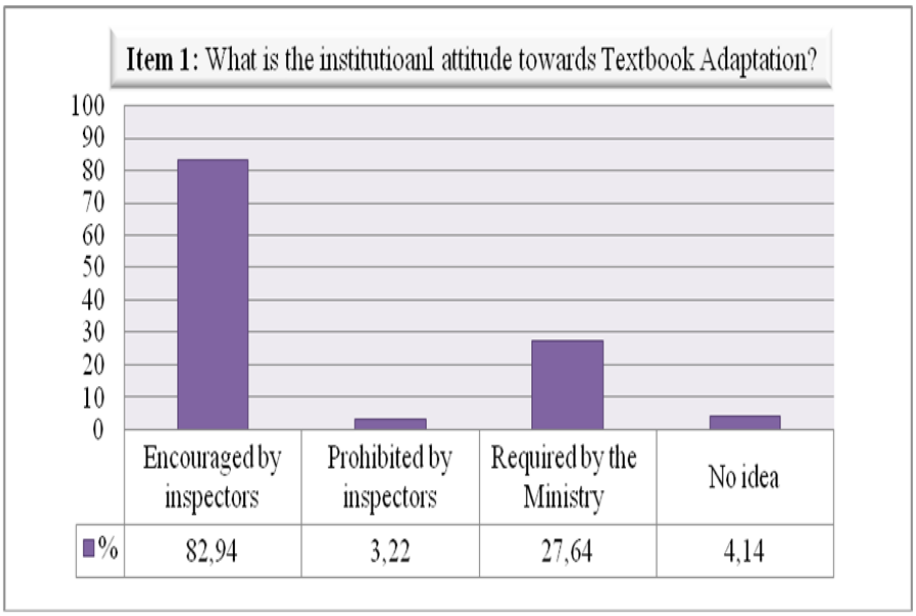

Fig. 1. Institutional attitudes towards textbook adaptation

Figure 1 demonstrates that the great majority of the informants (82.94%) state that textbook adaptation is encouraged by the inspectors, whereas only 3.22% of them assert that inspectors prohibit such practice. 27.64% of the respondents state that textbook adaptation is required by the educational institution and only 4.14% of them have no idea about the institutional attitude towards textbook adaptation.

Few respondents state that the adaptation of textbooks is required by the Ministry of National Education. At this stage, it should be mentioned that the secondary English inspectors represent the Ministry of National Education. They are not supposed to take the risk of encouraging the teachers to adapt the textbooks without being authorized by the educational institution. However, no official measures are taken by the Ministry to facilitate textbook adaptation.

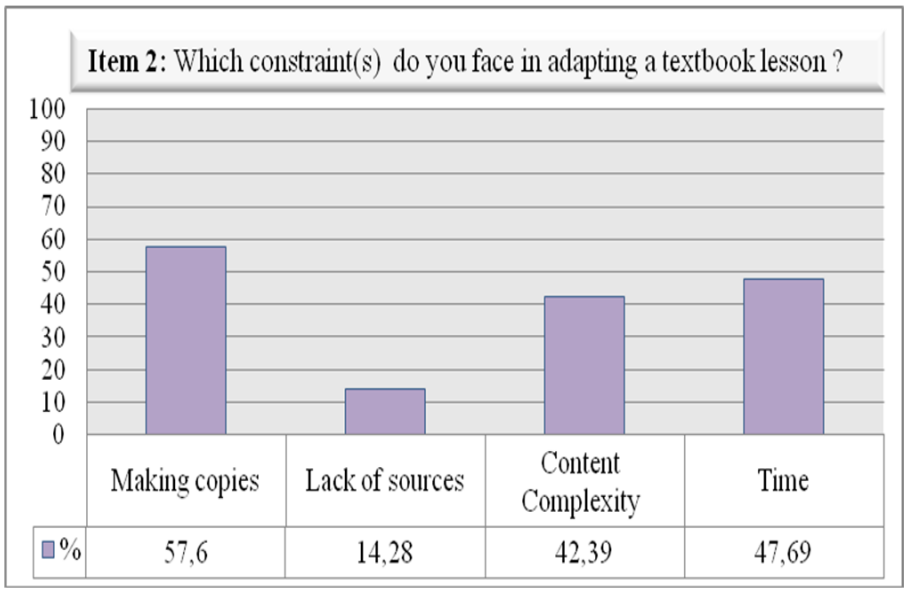

Fig. 2. Constraints on textbook adaptation

Figure 2 shows that nearly half of the respondents (57.6%) think that making a large number of copies for learners is a major constraint on the adaptation of textbooks. 47.69% of the respondents think that adapting textbooks is constrained by time. Additionally, 42.39% of the informants think that the complexity the texts' accompanying tasks hinders the adaptation of textbooks. One-fifth of the respondents (14.28%) think that the lack of sources hampers their adaptation of textbooks**.**

In most Algerian schools, teachers are not allowed to make a large number of copies for pupils on a regular basis. Time is another hindrance to the adaptation of textbooks as many teachers complain from having no time to adapt textbooks due to the overloaded timetables. The third constraint that hampers teachers from adapting textbooks is the complexity of their contents. For

example, teachers cannot adapt a reading text without adapting its accompanying tasks. Therefore, they need more time to adapt the accompanying tasks and subsequently making large number of copies for pupils, which is not always possible as discussed previously. The fourth limitation is the lack of educational sources as many schools' libraries lack the sources that teachers need in adapting textbooks.

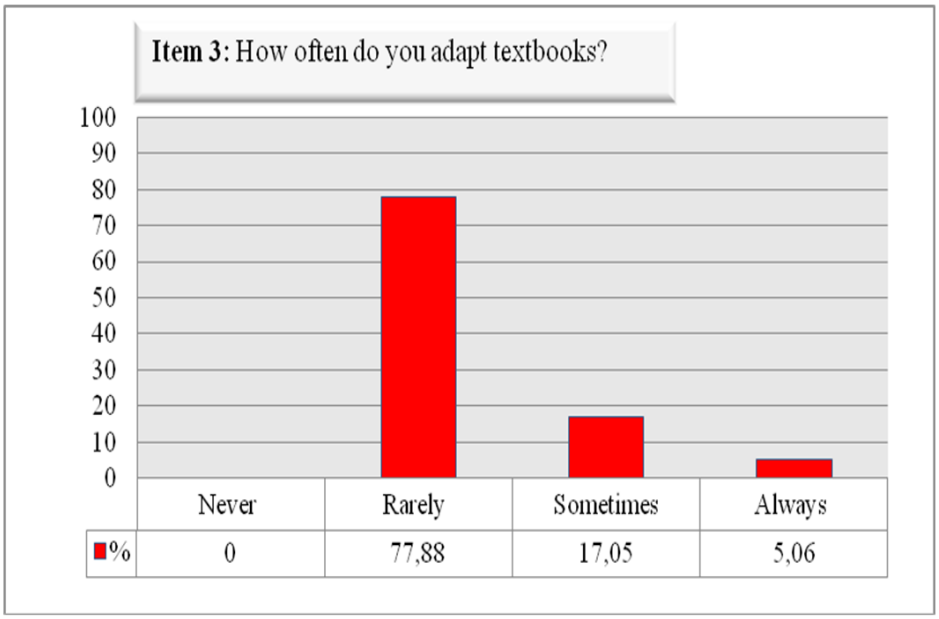

Fig. 3. Informants' textbook adaptation frequency

Figure 3 shows that the majority of the informants (77.88%) rarely adapt textbooks. 17.05 % of the respondents assert that they sometimes adapt textbooks. Only 5.06% of the informants state that they always adapt textbooks.

Because of the constraints discussed previously, textbooks are rarely adapted by most secondary English teachers.

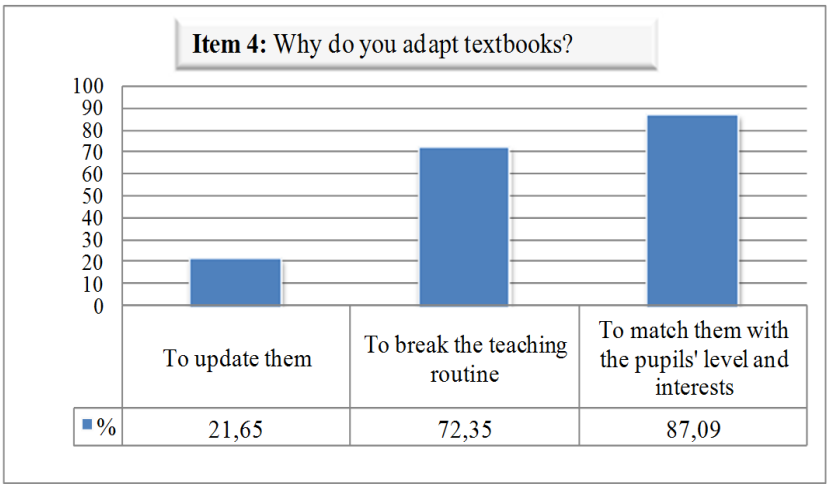

Fig. 4. Informants' reasons for textbook adaptation

Figure 4 demonstrates that 87.09% of the respondents adapt textbooks to match them with the target learners' level and interests. 72.35% of the informants adapt textbooks to break the teaching routine. Only 21.65% of the respondents adapt textbooks to update their content.

Many teachers feel the need to adapt a textbook lesson that is beyond the level of the target learners or out of their interests. Moreover, most textbooks are used for many years routinely. Breaking the teaching routine is not a priority of many teachers who either lack creativity or the will to do so. Furthermore, textbook writers usually include recent information during a textbook writing. Nevertheless, what was recent during the production of a textbook may become outdated after its publication. Therefore, teachers must be aware of the type of information presented in the textbook content.

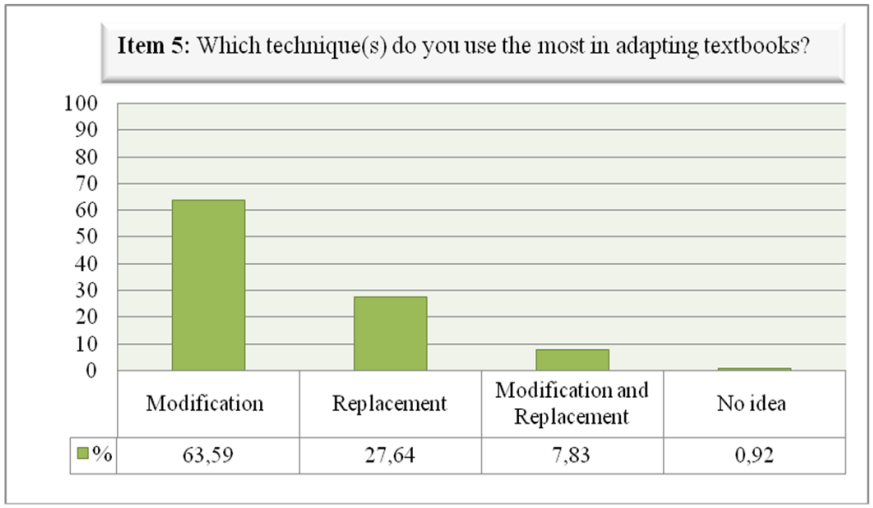

Fig. 5. Informants' techniques for textbook adaptation

Figure 5 illustrates that 63.59% adopt the technique of modification to adapt textbooks. 27.64% of the informants state that they replace the lessons in adapting the textbooks. 7.83 % of the respondents use both techniques to adapt the textbook. Only 0.92 % of the respondents have no idea about the question.

For many teachers, modifying a textbook lesson is easier than replacing it. For instance, modifying a reading text by making it shorter or longer does not necessarily induce modifying all the accompanying tasks. On the other hand, replacing a textbook reading text is more difficult and time consuming. It induces the integration of specific language points in the text, and the replacement or modification of the accompanying tasks.

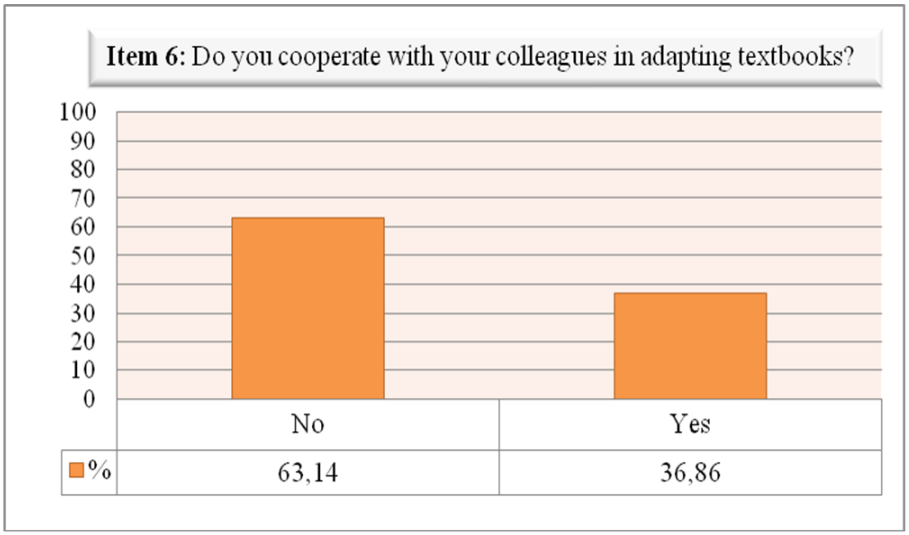

Fig. 6. Informants' cooperation in adapting textbooks

Figure 6 shows clearly that 63.14% of the respondents depend on themselves when they adapt textbooks. By contrast, nearly half of the respondents (36.86%) cooperate with their colleagues when they adapt textbooks.

Teachers' cooperation is a very crucial educational practice. Teachers who totally depend on themselves in adapting textbooks may miss both the help and advice of their experienced colleagues. Furthermore, teachers may save time and energy through cooperation as they can exchange their adapted versions of the textbooks that may fit their learners' level and interests.

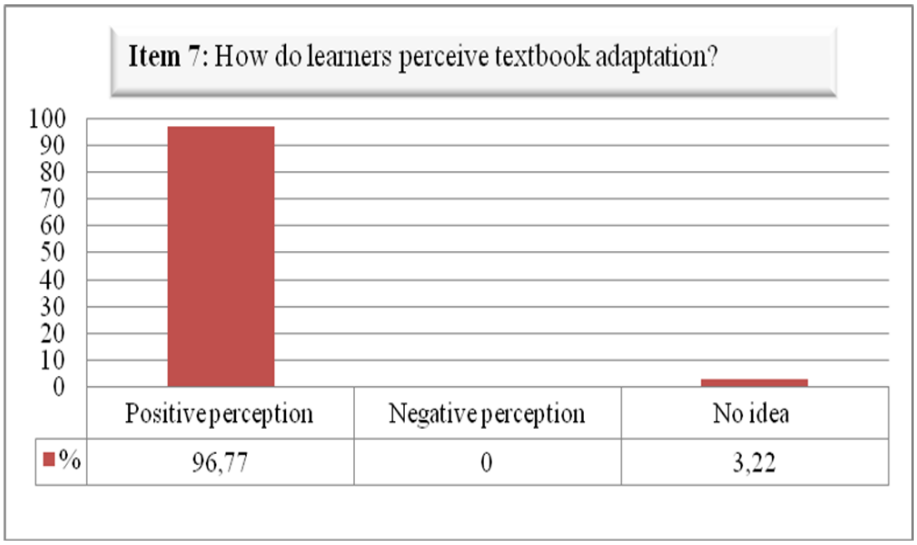

Fig. 7. Target learners' perceptions of textbook adaptation

Figure 7 shows that the great majority of the respondents (96.77%) think that textbook adaptation is positively perceived by learners. Only 3.22% of the informants have no idea about the question. None of the respondents think that textbook adaptation is negatively perceived by the learners.

The total dependence on the textbook makes learners feel bored and expecting no creativity from their teacher who cannot teach without the textbook. On the other hand, an expression like 'Keep your textbooks in your schoolbags, we do not need them today' may break the learning routine and attract the learners' attention. By the end of the new learning experience, learners may respond positively when asked by the teacher whether they like the lesson. However, learners' positive feedback may not be primarily based on their understanding of the lesson. Therefore, regardless of their positive perceptions of the adapted lesson, the teacher has to check the learners' understanding through subsequent activities.

Conclusion

The results of the teachers' questionnaires reveal that despite secondary English inspectors' encouragements and the learners' positive perceptions, most of the teachers rarely adapt textbooks due to the constraints imposed on their access to school facilities. They are also constrained by the overloaded timetables, the lack of sources, and the complexity of the contents of textbooks. Furthermore, most of the teachers do not cooperate with each other in adapting textbooks. This may deprive novice teachers, who may lack the necessary skills to adapt textbooks, from being trained by more experienced teachers.

Teachers should be encouraged to adapt the incompatible textbook lessons by 'legalizing' textbook adaptation and facilitating teachers' access to school facilities including printers, photocopiers, overhead projectors and computers

connected to the Net. Moreover, schools' libraries should be enriched with authentic materials such as newspapers, books and encyclopaedias that would help teachers adapt the textbooks. Furthermore, many teachers, especially novice ones, have very limited knowledge about textbook adaptation due to the absence or lack of training programmes. Thus, teachers' training on textbook adaptation should be given much importance through the organization of workshops, seminars and study days. Additionally, teachers should be encouraged to cooperate with each other on a regular basis inside and outside schools. Their cooperation will provide novice teachers with the opportunity to learn from more experienced teachers about textbook adaptation.

It would be impossible to design a textbook that matches all the different teaching/learning contexts. Thus, decision makers should recognize the fact that textbook adaptation is part and parcel of the processes of textbook production and textbook use. Furthermore, teachers should continuously engage themselves in adapting the textbooks in their hands not only to achieve congruency between their contents and the target learners but also to break out of the classroom routine with creative adapted textbook lessons.

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