

The Use of Supplementary Materials by Iranian EFL Teachers at High Schools for Talented Students

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Abstract

One of the main concerns of teachers in modern learner-centered approaches is whether published teaching materials can meet the needs of students at a particular learning situation or the teachers ought to prepare their own materials. This dilemma gets worse when the teaching situation includes a textbook prescribed by an authority such as the Ministry of Education. In such cases, the teacher has to compensate for the deficiencies of the textbook by providing the students with supplementary materials. The aim of this study is to see whether Iranian EFL teachers are aware of and cater for the needs of their students by providing them with supplementary materials. In this study, teachers teaching at high schools for talented students were chosen because their students have definitely different needs from others. Forty teachers at 23 high schools for talented students in different parts of Iran were interviewed in person or through the telephone. The teachers who taught at other schools too (21 teachers) were also asked whether they used the same supplementary materials at other schools. Moreover, the teachers who used supplementary

Received: August 2011; Accepted: January 2012

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materials were also asked about the types of materials they used. The results showed that 33 (82.5%) teachers used supplementary materials at schools for talented students.

Out of 21 teachers who taught at other schools, 14 (66.66%) teachers used no or different supplementary materials at other schools. It indicates that teachers adjust supplementary materials to the needs and abilities of their students. Considering the types of materials, teachers used different types of materials at different grades of high school, indicating their awareness of different needs of students at different grades.

Keywords: Supplementary materials, needs analysis, talented students, EFL, textbook.

1. Introduction

In current learner-centered language programs, one of the main dilemmas the teacher faces is the concern whether pre-prepared materials can meet individual learner needs (Crawford, 2002). Crawford explores two opposing views about the use of teaching materials, including textbooks. One view is that pre-prepared materials deskill the teachers and prevent them from thinking professionally and responding to their students. Others believe in a more positive role for these teaching materials. Crawford concludes that the issue is not whether teachers should use pre-prepared materials, but rather how they should use them so that the outcomes are positive for teachers and learners rather than restrictive.

McDonough and Shaw (2003) have distinguished between “adopting” and “adapting” materials. According to them, we can make a decision about whether to use a particular textbook in a specific teaching situation based on a number of evaluation criteria. However, a decision about using a textbook doesn’t always mean that no further action can be taken about it. Even when the design of the materials and evaluation processes are so careful, some changes have to be made in some teaching contexts. In cases where teachers do not have direct involvement in evaluation – or in preparation – of textbooks, for instance, when the Ministry of Education makes these decisions, then teachers can resort to adaptation of materials.

However, adaptation of teaching materials or the use of supplementary materials cannot be done at random. Rather, the selection of materials involves matching given materials with the context in which they are going to be used and the needs and interests of learners and teachers (Rubdy, 2003). Therefore, needs analysis can be helpful in deciding about the types of supplementary materials to be used in a particular teaching situation.

Needs analysis is usually associated with English for specific purposes (ESP) and is neglected in General English classroom (Seedhouse, 1995). However, it does not mean that students at general English classes do not have identifiable needs. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987, pp. 53-54), “what distinguishes ESP from General English is not the existence of a need as such but rather an awareness of the need”. Not only is needs analysis rarely conducted in General English classes at universities or in EFL classes at language institutes, but also it is absent from English classes at Iranian schools.

Seedhouse (1995) sees two reasons for the fact that needs analysis is rarely carried out in General English classes. Firstly, there is a wrong belief that it is not possible to specify the needs of General English learners. Secondly, General English teachers do not know what to do after carrying out needs analysis, i.e. how to interpret the data and how to convert them in practical terms into courses or materials. Besides these reasons, the researchers believe that there are two more reasons for the non-existence of needs analysis in English classes at Iranian schools. The first reason is the lack of time. Iranian middle and high school teachers have to cover the textbook predetermined by the Ministry of Education for each grade because the students will be evaluated based on that book. Conducting needs analysis takes some time and may impede the full coverage of the textbook by the

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teacher. The next reason is the lack of facilities. If the results of needs analysis indicate the need to use extra materials or teaching methods which need such facilities as CD players, computers, etc., it will be difficult to act upon the results because such facilities are not available to the students at many schools.

Although Iranian EFL teachers do not carry out formal needs analysis in their classes, they may be aware of their students' needs as a result of interaction with them. In other words, many teachers become aware of their students' needs and abilities during the first few sessions of the class. Sometimes, this awareness is translated into choosing specific teaching materials and/or teaching methods. This study investigates the level of awareness of Iranian high school EFL teachers which is manifested in their using of supplementary materials. For the same purpose, the teachers at high schools affiliated with the National Organization of Development of Exceptional Talents (NODET) were interviewed. The reason for choosing these schools was that the students at these schools have definitely different needs and abilities from students at ordinary schools.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The history of schools for talented students in Iran

In 1965, the first school for talented students was founded in Tehran. It was a coeducational elementary school. The next year, the Bureau of Exceptional Students was established as a part of the Ministry of Education. In 1967, the first official school for talented students was established. It was an elementary school too. In 1972, the first grade of middle school was added to it. In the two following years, the second and third grades of middle school were also added. However, 1977, was the last year in which this school admitted elementary students. After that, it was limited to middle

school grades. In 1976, the National Organization of the Development of Exceptional Talents (NODET) was established as an organization separate from the Ministry of Education. In 1979, when the Islamic Revolution happened in Iran, there were three coeducational middle schools in Tehran, Kerman (1976), and Mashhad (1978).

After the Islamic Revolution, this organization was dissolved. However, there were two schools (one for girls, and the other for boys) for talented students in Tehran which were under the supervision of the Bureau of Exceptional Students which was a part of the Ministry of Education. In 1987, the National Organization of the Development of Exceptional Talents was established again. It started to found schools for talented students in different cities. For the time being, there are middle and high schools in 57 major cities of Iran. According to Iranian laws after the Revolution, the schools are not coeducational anymore. (More information in www.nodet.net).

2.2 The survey

Needs analysis is seen as a part of the process of curriculum development and syllabus design in language teaching which is followed by developing goals and objectives, planning a syllabus, selecting teaching approaches and materials, and deciding on assessment procedures and criteria (Richards and Renandya, 2002). Considering EFL classes at Iranian schools, teachers cannot carry out all of the above procedures because teaching materials and assessment procedures and criteria are determined by the Ministry of Education. Therefore, to use McDonough and Shaw's (2003) terms, Iranian English teachers at schools cannot "adopt" materials; they can only "adapt" them. Adaptation of materials is carried out through five techniques: adding, deleting, modifying, simplifying, and reordering. Since the students will be evaluated based on the book developed by the Ministry of Education,

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teachers cannot delete any part of it even if they think some parts are not necessary for their students. On the other hand, due to the fact that the students at NODET schools are talented students, the content of the book is already simple for them, so there is no need for simplifying, modifying, or reordering the content from simpler to more difficult. Therefore, the only remaining technique is adding new materials.

NODET has already catered for the needs of its students. It has chosen a book, called “Cambridge English for Schools”, to be taught at its schools. However, some teachers feel that even this book is not enough for the needs of talented students. Furthermore, many students at these schools attend English classes outside school which leads to their higher proficiency in English and their need to learn materials beyond what they already know. Considering all of the above-mentioned points, teachers at high schools for talented students were interviewed and were asked whether they used materials beyond the books determined by the Ministry of Education and by NODET. The purpose of this interview was to know whether these teachers were aware of their students needs and whether they did something to address those needs. To make sure that the use of supplementary materials was due to students’ needs not due to the teacher’s invariant method of teaching which is used at every school, the teachers who taught at other schools too were asked whether they used the same materials at those schools too. The teachers who didn’t use any supplementary materials at NODET schools were not asked any questions about whether they taught at other schools or not because it was considered as irrelevant to the present study. Therefore, whenever we talk about teachers teaching at other schools, we mean teachers who did use supplementary materials at NODET schools and taught at other schools too. The teachers were also

asked about the type of supplementary materials they used to see whether it also reflects the needs of students at different grades.

The interviews were conducted mainly through the telephone due to the long distance of the high schools at different cities. However, in a few nearer cities, the teachers were interviewed in person. The total number of interviewed teachers was 40 from 23 high schools in 16 Iranian cities. The rationale for choosing 23 high schools was that it makes about twenty percent of all Iranian high schools for talented students (two high schools, one for girls and one for boys, in 57 Iranian cities, which makes a total of 114 high schools). Out of these 23 high schools, 12 schools were for girls and 11 were for boys. The schools were randomly chosen from different parts of Iran. Of course, the researcher talked to the head masters of a number of schools in other cities too. But because they were not willing to cooperate, they were replaced by other schools.

The interviewed teachers taught at different grades of high school. At some schools, only one of the teachers was willing to cooperate. Yet at other schools, all EFL teachers (two, three, or even four teachers) were interviewed. Half of the interviewed teachers were male, and half of them were female. The results of the interviews are discussed in the following sections.

2. Results

In this study, forty EFL teachers at Iranian high schools for talented students were asked about their use of supplementary materials at school. The results of the study are discussed in two sections. In the first section, it is mentioned whether the teachers used any supplementary materials at all, and if yes, whether they used the same materials at other schools they taught. In the second section, the types of the materials the teachers used are mentioned

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with regard to the grade of the students.

2.1 The use of materials

Out of the 40 teachers interviewed, seven teachers didn't use supplementary materials, while the other 33 did so. Among these 33 teachers, twelve teachers didn't teach at other schools. So there were 21 teachers who taught both at schools for talented students and other schools. Out of these 21 teachers, fourteen teachers used either different or no supplementary materials at other schools. Seven teachers used the same supplementary materials at all schools they taught. Table 4.1. summarizes these results and shows the percentage of each category.

Table 1. Summary of the use of supplementary materials

	Interviewed teachers	Teachers using no supplementary materials	Teachers using supplementary materials		
			Teachers teaching only at NODET schools	Teachers teaching at different schools	
				Teachers using the same materials at other schools	Teachers using different or no materials at other schools
Number	40	7	12	7	14
Percentage of the interviewed teachers	100	17.5	30	17.5	35
Percentage of the teachers using supplementary materials	----	----	36.36	21.21	42.42
Percentage of the teachers teaching at different schools	----	----	----	33.33	66.66

2.2 The types of materials

The interviewed teachers used different types of supplementary materials in their classes. There were seven categories for these materials: workbooks,

multiple choice tests, grammar books, reading comprehensions, short stories, films, and extra vocabulary. By “workbooks”, we mean a book consisting of different types of exercises, including multiple choice as well as other types of exercises. These exercises are based on the content of the EFL textbook prescribed by the Ministry of education and don’t introduce any new points. They are just a kind of practice for consolidating the contents of the textbook in students’ minds. Moreover, by “multiple choice tests”, we don’t mean that the teachers used multiple choice tests as a kind of classroom assessment. Instead, multiple choice tests are used as a kind of practice in classroom to prepare the students for future exams, and usually for the university entrance exam. It is also worth mentioning that the phrase “extra vocabulary” refers to the vocabulary introduced by the teacher in addition to the vocabulary of the main book. None of the teachers used a specific vocabulary book in their classes. They just introduced new vocabulary related to the topic of the lesson.

There is a point to consider before going any further. Not all teachers use additional pre-prepared materials to supplement the main materials. Use of supplementary materials can range from using published materials alongside the existing course book, compiling one’s own resources using photocopies from existing publications, or writing one’s own materials (Mol & Tin, 2008). In the present study, there were a few teachers who used their own pamphlet, whether it was a compilation of existing materials or they had written it themselves. But these kinds of pamphlets were not considered as separate material types in this study. Rather, when teachers said that they used their own pamphlets, they were asked what types of materials were included inside the pamphlet, and the answer became the basis of categorizing the pamphlet. These pamphlets were usually

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categorized as more than one type because of containing different types of content. For instance, where a teacher used only his own pamphlet in the class, but his pamphlet contained grammar points, extra vocabulary, and multiple choice tests, the teacher was assumed to use three types of materials, namely grammar books, extra vocabulary, and multiple choice tests.

The types of supplementary materials are mentioned in relation to the grade of the students. The aim of doing so is to see whether the teachers chose supplementary materials based on the needs of students or on an arbitrary bases. Thus, before dealing with the types of materials, we should know how many teachers teach at each grade. Among the interviewed teachers, there were 13 teachers of the first grade, 18 teachers of the second grade, 22 teachers of the third grade, and 18 teachers of pre-university grade. Since most of the teachers taught at more than one grade, the sum of these numbers is more than forty. Moreover, since some teachers used more than one type of supplementary materials in their classes, the sum of material types is also more than the number of teachers at that specific grade.

At the first grade with 13 teachers, the order of the material types from the most frequent to the least frequent was as follows: reading comprehensions (6 cases), workbooks (5 cases), grammar books and short stories (2 cases each), and films and extra vocabulary (1 case each). There was no case of using multiple choice tests at this grade.

The order of the material types from the most frequent to the least frequent at the second grade with 18 teachers was as follows: workbooks (6 cases), reading comprehensions (5 cases), grammar books (3 cases), films and extra vocabulary (2 cases each), and short stories (1 case). There was no case of using multiple choice tests at the second grade.

Twenty two teachers teaching at the third grade used the following types

of supplementary materials: workbooks (10 cases), multiple choice tests (6 cases), reading comprehensions and grammar books (4 cases each), extra vocabulary (2 cases), and short stories and films (1 cases each).

Table 2. The number of each material type at each grade as well as the number of teachers at each grade. The first percentage at each cell shows the percentage of teachers, and the second percentage at each cell shows the percentage of the total number of extra materials.

	Number of teachers	Work books	Multiple choice tests	Grammar books	Reading comprehensions	Short stories	Films	Extra vocabulary	Total number of extra materials
First grade	13	5	0	2	6	2	1	1	17
		38.46%	0%	15.38%	46.15%	15.38%	7.69%	7.69%	
Second grade	18	6	0	3	5	1	2	2	19
		33.33%	0%	16.66%	27.77%	5.55%	11.11%	11.11%	
Third grade	22	6	10	4	4	1	1	2	28
		27.27%	45.45%	18.18%	18.18%	4.54%	4.54%	9.09%	
Pre-university grade	18	2	13	1	2	0	1	1	20
		11.11%	72.22%	5.55%	11.11%	0%	5.55%	5.55%	
		10%	65%	5%	10%	0%	5%	5%	

At pre-university grade, the 18 teachers used supplementary materials with the following order of frequency: multiple choice tests (13 cases), workbooks and reading comprehensions (2 cases each), and grammar books, films and extra vocabulary (1 case each). There was no case of using short stories at this grade. Table 4.2 shows the frequency and percentage of use of each material type.

3. Discussion

In this section, the reasons for the above results are discussed. Some of the interviewed teachers mentioned the reasons why or why not they used supplementary materials or the reasons why or why not they used the same materials at different schools. Some of them also explained why they taught specific types of supplementary materials in their classes. The researchers have also suggested some reasons. As in the results section, discussion section is also divided in two parts.

3.1 The use of materials

As you can see in the results section, the majority of teachers used supplementary materials at NODET schools, while a few of them didn't. Here are the explanations of teachers for this trend.

Most of the teachers who did use supplementary materials at schools for talented students didn't mention any reason for it. When asked whether they used supplementary materials at NODET schools, many of the teachers answered, "Of course". It seems that these teachers took it for granted that supplementary materials were necessary for talented students. However, some of the teachers mentioned such reasons as the willingness of students to be taught extra materials, the boringness and low level of the main textbook, and the lack of enough exercises in it. Two teachers said that their students were so interested in learning more English that they had arranged extracurricular classes for them.

Most of the teachers who used no supplementary materials in their classes said that the reason was the lack of time. One of the teachers taught at pre-university grade. At his school, pre-university students went to school only for six months so that they would have enough time to study for the university entrance exam. Therefore, the teacher is really in shortage of

time to cover the whole textbook.

Another teacher said that he didn't use supplementary materials in the middle of the year. He said that if he could cover the whole textbook before the end of the year, he would use supplementary materials near the end of the year.

Two teachers said that they didn't use supplementary books because of the lack of time. But they told students useful points beyond what was mentioned in the book. For example, they taught students extra vocabulary or extra grammar points related to the subject of the lesson. They said that they didn't say these extra points to students of other schools.

A teacher, who taught at second, third, and pre-university grades, said that she didn't use supplementary materials at second grade because she thought that the supplementary book prescribed by NODET was enough. However, at pre-university grade she did use supplementary materials in order to prepare the students for the university entrance exam.

In this study, there were teachers who taught at both NODET schools and other schools. Two third of these teachers used different supplementary materials at other schools, and one third of them used the same materials. Before discussing the reasons why teachers used same or different materials at different schools, we should have some brief information about the types of schools in Iran because some explanations are related to this point.

The majority of schools in Iran are classified as governmental and non-governmental. Governmental schools and some non-governmental schools register any students without giving them any selection test before registration. Some other non-governmental schools accept only good students. The students who want to enroll at these schools have to either have a high grade point average of the previous year or take and pass a selection test. Therefore, the students of these schools are studious or talented, but not as talented as

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students of NODET schools. A small number of Iranian schools are for really talented students. These are the schools of the National Organization of Development of Exceptional Talents and special governmental schools. Special governmental schools also accept talented students by giving them a selection test. The common belief among people is that the students of NODET schools are more talented than the students of special governmental schools. However, this belief needs to be proved by research.

Teachers who used the same materials at different schools gave different reasons for doing so. A teacher said that she believed we have to give equal opportunities to all students. Then it is up to them to take advantage of these opportunities. She believed that even in governmental schools, there are some talented students who hadn't been able to go to other schools for different reasons, such as tuition of these schools. She said that we shouldn't deprive these students of learning opportunities.

Two teachers said that they used the same books at different schools, but they covered fewer and easier parts of those books at other schools.

Two teachers said that they taught at high-level schools, such as special governmental schools or non-governmental schools with selection tests. Therefore, their students at other schools were good enough to be able to cope with the same supplementary materials. A teacher also said that he taught at a high-level school and he also believed in giving equal opportunities to different students. In general, the explanations of the teachers show that even the teachers who used the same materials at different schools did so based on the abilities of the students.

Most of the teachers who used different or no supplementary materials at other schools said that the main reason was the weakness of students at

other schools. Some teachers implied that the students at other schools were so weak that teaching extra materials to them was of no use and they didn't learn much. Some other teachers said that due to the lower abilities of students at other schools, teaching the main textbook to them took a long time and there wasn't enough time for supplementary materials.

A teacher said that in addition to the lower abilities of students at other schools, they didn't ask for any extra materials while the students of NODET did so. Another teacher gave proficiency tests to his students at the beginning of the year, and then he chose supplementary materials based on the test results. However, as he said, the level of students at governmental schools was rarely high enough to use any supplementary materials at all.

3.2 The types of materials

The types of supplementary materials used by the teachers vary at different grades. This variation is based on a logic rather than being random. As you can see in Table 4.2., at the first and second grades, the two most frequently used material types are workbooks and reading comprehensions. It shows that at these grades, teachers have two intentions of using supplementary materials. First, they want the students to master the main book by practicing its content through exercises of workbooks. It makes the students ready for the final exam. Second, they intend to improve their students' general knowledge of English through practicing reading comprehensions as well as grammar books, short stories, films, and extra vocabulary.

As Table 4.2. shows, there is no use of multiple choice tests at the first and second grades. The reason is that at these grades, students and teachers are not very much concerned about the university entrance exam which consists of multiple choice questions only. This lack of concern about the university entrance exam is due to two main reasons. First, the content of

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the first grade textbook is not included in the university entrance exam, and the content of the second grade textbook comprises a small percentage of this exam. Of course, the teachers are aware that the contents of these two books form a foundation for the contents of the third and pre-university grade. However, they consider workbooks as enough practice for these contents. The second reason is the time span between these grades and the university entrance exam. Teachers think that it is too soon to start practicing multiple choice tests. Moreover, the multiple choice tests that teachers use in the third and pre-university grade usually contain some tests about the contents of books of previous grades.

At the third grade, the use of reading comprehensions decreases and the use of workbooks increases. Moreover, multiple choice tests are also used at this grade. This is consistent with the concerns of teachers and students about the university entrance exam.

At pre-university grade, the use of multiple choice tests increases to 65 percent of all materials used, and the use of other types of materials decreases to a minimum. It is worth mentioning that some teachers of the third and pre-university grades explained that although they used other types of materials than multiple choice tests, they allocated most of the class time to multiple choice tests and less time to other material types.

According to McDonough and Shaw (2003), adding new materials to the existing ones is of two kinds: extension and expansion. While extension is a quantitative change and means to supply more of the same, expansion is both quantitative and qualitative and means providing different types of materials. In this study, the use of workbooks and multiple choice tests can be considered as examples of extension, and the use of other types of material can be considered as expansion. As the results show, expansion

is dominant at the first and second grades. As we move to the third grade, expansion decreases and extension increases. At the pre-university grade, extension constitutes the majority of supplementary materials.

As the teachers explained themselves and as it can be logically inferred, the reason for this trend is the needs and preoccupations of students at these grades. As the students get nearer to the university entrance exam, they become more and more preoccupied by it. Of course, the teachers know that general English is necessary for students during their rest of life, especially in their academic and vocational life. However, their short-term need is the university entrance exam. After all, they should be able to enter the university in order to use general English in their academic or even vocational life. The use of supplementary materials by NODET only at the first and second grades of high school is a manifestation of the same concerns.

4. Conclusion

The results of this study showed that Iranian teachers at high schools for talented students don't restrict themselves to the textbook determined by the Ministry of Education. They know that this book is intended for average students, while their students are above the average. The ideal for these students is to pass the university entrance exam and enter university in high-status majors such as medicine and engineering. Therefore, their needs are different from those of average students. First, they need to master the contents of their course books in order to be able to pass the university entrance exam. Then, they need to have a good command of English to be successful in their academic and vocational life.

Although teachers of NODET schools don't conduct a formal needs analysis, they respond to these needs by using supplementary materials

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at these schools. The fact that two third of teachers who taught at other schools too used different or no supplementary materials at those schools indicates that they use these materials based on the needs and abilities of their students, not arbitrarily.

The use of different kinds of materials at different grades of high school shows that the teachers care about both the short-term needs and the long-term needs of their students. The short-term need of students is passing the final exam and the university entrance exam. By using workbooks and multiple choice tests, teachers respond to these needs. The long-term need of these students is to have a good command of English to use in their lives. The teachers' awareness of this need is manifested in use of grammar books, reading comprehensions, short stories, extra vocabulary, and films.

A pedagogical implication of this study is that teachers should try to cater for the needs of their students by choosing appropriate teaching materials. In cases where a textbook is determined by an authority, ranging from the Ministry of Education to the institute management, as the case in this study, teachers shouldn't restrict themselves to the pre-determined textbook. They should use supplementary materials based on the needs, abilities, and interests of their students. Even in the cases where it is impossible or difficult to conduct a needs analysis, teachers can understand students' needs based on the information they have about the type of school they teach in. The teacher's experience can also act a guide to help teacher realize the abilities of students through interaction with them in a few sessions at the beginning of the semester. As Rubdy (2003) states, teachers should make major strategic decisions based on informed judgment and professional experience.

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