

Bridging Global Pedagogy and Local Practice: Pre-Service EFL Teachers' Textbook Adaptation Strategies

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Abstract

English language education globally promotes communicative teaching approaches, yet implementation in local contexts often faces practical constraints. This qualitative study with descriptive quantification investigates textbook adaptation strategies commonly employed by pre-service EFL teachers during lesson planning and factors influencing their adaptation decisions, addressing the critical gap between global pedagogical theories and local classroom applications. To do so, eight female final-year students were selected on a voluntary basis from a cohort of 33 in an English teacher education program at a university in Vietnam. Drawing on pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) and EFL textbook adaptation frameworks, data from lesson plans and semi-structured interviews during their mandatory 8-week teaching practicum at four local high schools were analysed thematically. The findings reveal that pre-service teachers employ cautious adaptation approaches, primarily adding supplementary activities rather than fundamentally modifying existing textbook content. Three primary strategies emerged: Addition as the most common approach, followed by combined Addition and Change, and Change alone. The principle of Variety dominated adaptations, while more sophisticated principles like Personalization and Humanizing were minimally applied. Supervisors' requirements significantly constrained adaptation decisions, requiring the participants to maintain core textbook content. Despite theoretical training in Communicative Language Teaching, adapted activities showed increased focus on controlled practice compared to original materials, revealing implementation challenges in translating global pedagogical approaches to local institutional contexts. This study contributes to understanding how global English teaching methodologies are adapted in local settings and highlights the need for innovative teacher training approaches that better bridge global pedagogical theories with classroom realities.

Keywords English language education, teacher training, textbook adaptation

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INTRODUCTION

Lesson planning plays a vital role in language teacher professionalism (Pang, 2016), forming the bridge between curricular intentions and classroom realities. Over the past decade, research has shifted from viewing planning as a technical procedure to recognizing it as a sophisticated, context-sensitive process that demands ongoing professional judgement and flexibility (Krepf & König, 2023; Pang, 2016; Tagle et al., 2020).

For pre-service EFL teachers, lesson planning, particularly the adaptation of materials, remains especially challenging. Novice teachers often struggle to move beyond prescribed routines and curriculum templates, finding it difficult to adjust materials to meet diverse learner needs and classroom realities (Dang, 2024; Lestari & Siwi, 2022). Adaptation practices among pre-service teachers are shaped by a combination of internal factors, such as beliefs, prior experience, and confidence, and external pressures, including supervisory expectations, mandated curricula, and resource constraints (Krepf & König, 2023; Li & Zou, 2017; Pang, 2016).

Although the adaptation practices of in-service teachers have received growing research attention (Hanifa et al., 2024; Mede & Yalçin, 2019; Yen, 2022), much less is known about the specific adaptation strategies employed by pre-service teachers, who are still developing their professional identities and decision-making skills (Tran et al., 2024). Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the textbook adaptation strategies and influencing factors among pre-service EFL teachers during their teaching practicum. By clarifying how pre-service teachers engage in context-sensitive textbook adaptation, this study aims to inform more meaningful and effective EFL instruction and to better support teacher development at the entry to the profession.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Knowledge Demands and Challenges in Lesson Planning

To understand what teachers must know for effective instruction, Shulman (1987) identified several essential knowledge bases: content knowledge (CK), pedagogical knowledge (PK), pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), knowledge of learners, and knowledge of educational contexts. Although originally conceptualized to explain classroom teaching, these domains are also crucial during lesson planning, when teachers must transform curricular content into coherent learning experiences. Empirical studies confirm that pre-service teachers draw on these knowledge types when designing lessons, though with varying depth and integration (König et al., 2020; Tagle et al., 2020).

However, mobilizing these knowledge bases poses particular challenges for novice teachers. Lesson planning requires interpretive and transformative work, especially when teachers must adapt prescribed textbooks to the needs of specific learner groups. Unlike experienced teachers who engage in holistic pedagogical reasoning, pre-service teachers often approach lesson design as a linear sequence of activities (Krepf & König, 2023), relying on textbook structures for guidance. This dependence limits their ability to make informed pedagogical choices, resulting in difficulties such as sequencing activities, anticipating learner needs, and contextualizing materials (Lestari & Siwi, 2022).

Recent studies highlight persistent struggles in bridging theoretical understanding with classroom enactment. Many pre-service teachers possess conceptual awareness of communicative principles such as scaffolding or promoting interaction, but face obstacles in transforming this awareness into procedural strategies within their plans (Hanifa et al., 2024). Drawing on Shulman's (1987) model of pedagogical reasoning and action, these difficulties reflect underdeveloped competence in the transformation phase, which requires teachers to interpret, represent, and adapt content based on learner characteristics. Without strong pedagogical reasoning, lesson planning remains knowledge-oriented rather than procedurally actionable, revealing a gap between knowing what to teach and knowing how to teach it effectively.

Textbooks and EFL Pre-Service Teachers in Vietnam

ELT textbooks are professionally developed resources that integrate language input, pedagogical activities, and curricular sequencing, serving as both teaching tools and curriculum frameworks (McGrath, 2016; Miller, 2011; Wong, 2017). In Vietnam's EFL context, lesson planning is shaped by the intersection of prescribed textbooks and communicative language teaching (CLT) principles. Teachers are expected to balance controlled practice, which builds accuracy, with free communicative practice, which promotes fluency and interaction (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2013; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Achieving this progression from control to freedom requires sophisticated pedagogical reasoning to manage time, interaction, and task coherence effectively.

Given these demands, textbooks provide a pedagogical scaffold for novices: they model task sequencing, ensure curricular legitimacy, and reduce planning uncertainty. As authoritative materials within a centralized education system, textbooks also signal alignment with institutional expectations, making reliance both practically and strategically advantageous. However, this dependency can limit teachers' ability to transform materials into communicative lessons. Textbooks' emphasis on declarative knowledge and accuracy-oriented tasks gives limited support for interactive pedagogy (Li & Zou, 2017). Consequently, pre-service teachers often remain within textbook boundaries, emphasizing transmission over transformation (Krepf & König, 2023).

Adaptation as Interpretive Practice

Material adaptation has emerged as a critical bridge between prescribed curricular materials and classroom teaching realities. The literature identifies three interrelated dimensions. First, adaptation reasons stem from matching materials to learner needs, creating meaningful connections, stimulating engagement, providing achievable challenges, ensuring rich language exposure, offering authentic communication opportunities, facilitating language discovery, and recycling linguistic elements (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2017).

Second, adaptation principles provide implementation direction. McGrath (2013) articulates seven core principles: localisation (adapting content to local cultural contexts), personalisation (connecting content to learners' lives), individualisation (addressing different proficiency levels and learning styles), modernisation (updating outdated content), humanising (incorporating affective and relational dimensions), offering appropriate challenge (matching task difficulty to learner ability), and ensuring variety (diversifying task types and interaction patterns). These principles serve as benchmarks for aligning adapted materials with pedagogical goals and contextual realities, each serving distinct pedagogical purposes.

Third, adaptation is enacted through specific strategies: omission (removing content), addition (supplementing materials), and modification (rewriting, reorganizing, or simplifying tasks) (Tomlinson, 2019; Zhang et al., 2024). Research suggests these strategies exist along a developmental continuum, with novices predominantly employing addition strategies while experienced teachers utilize more sophisticated omission and replacement techniques (Mede & Yalçın, 2019).

Despite theoretical frameworks, empirical research finds that pre-service teachers' adaptation practices are shaped more by immediate constraints, such as time pressure, student engagement, and limited experience, than by systematic principle application (Hanifa et al., 2024; Mede & Yalçin, 2019).

Practicum Supervision

The teaching practicum is a crucial stage in teacher education where pre-service teachers internalize professional norms and begin forming teacher identities (Nguyen, 2021; Wang et al., 2022). Yet, studies consistently reveal it as a highly mediated and stressful learning context. Mahmoudi (2016) identified supervisors and mentors as the most significant sources of practicum stress, while Kourieos (2019) highlighted how prescriptive mentoring, unclear roles, and weak mentor-mentee relationships can constrain teacher learning. Other studies emphasize pedagogical and contextual challenges, such as aligning lessons with learner needs and managing linguistic demands (Aydın & Ok, 2020; Loo et al., 2019).

Research also shows that the nature and quality of mentoring shape professional identity formation. Limited pedagogical feedback or rigid guidance may restrict reflective growth (Orsdemir & Yildirim, 2020; Yuan, 2016), whereas constructive interaction fosters professional transformation (Gan, 2014). Collectively, these studies portray the practicum as a complex site of supervision and socialization, where learning, adaptation, and professional agency are continually negotiated.

Despite recent curriculum reforms and the nationwide adoption of communicative-oriented textbooks in Vietnam, little is known about how pre-service EFL teachers actually adapt these materials during lesson planning, or about the factors that shape their adaptation decisions. To address this gap, the present study investigates:

1. What textbook adaptation strategies are commonly employed by pre-service EFL teachers during lesson planning in the teaching practicum?
2. What factors influence pre-service EFL teachers' decisions to adapt textbooks during lesson planning in the teaching practicum?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design, supported by basic quantitative categorization to enhance data interpretation. Data were collected from participants' lesson plans and semi-structured interviews. All data were coded thematically, drawing both on themes identified in the literature and on new themes that emerged from the data. Adaptation strategies, underlying principles, and activity types were categorized and their frequencies calculated to contextualize and support interpretation of the qualitative findings.

Participants

The study involved eight final-year female ELT students from a university in central Vietnam, each undertaking an eight-week teaching practicum at local public high schools. All participants (PT1-PT8) submitted lesson plans and participated in a semi-structured interview. PT2 submitted three lesson plans, PT3 and PT4 submitted two each, and the remaining participants submitted one lesson plan each.

While modest in size, the sample comprised approximately 24% of the practicum cohort (8 out of 33) and included participants placed at four out of five available public high schools, ensuring diverse practicum settings and experiences.

FINDINGS

The Textbook Adaptation Strategies Commonly Applied by Pre-Service EFL Teachers During Lesson Planning in The Teaching Practicum

Across 11 lesson plans, 66 activities were identified, with 46 (69.7%) adapted. Analysis revealed three main strategies: Addition was most frequent (33 activities, 72%), followed by Addition combined with Change (10 activities, 22%) and Change alone (3 activities, 6%). Although PT7 reported assigning textbook content as homework, these were not evident in lesson plans, likely due to supervisory requirements to retain core textbook content. Thus, omission was excluded from classification.

Regarding principles, Variety was most applied (44 activities), followed by Simplification/Complexification/Differentiation (5 activities), Humanizing (4 activities), and Personalization (2 instances). No instances of Localization, Individualization, or Modernization were found.

The study also examined whether textbook activities and adaptations balanced free and controlled practice to support CLT. Across 9 textbook lessons, 34 original activities were identified: 67.6% (23) controlled practice and 32.4% (11) free practice. Among 46 adapted activities in lesson plans, 82.6% (38) were controlled practice, whereas only 17.4% (8) were freer activities.

A specific example illustrates the shift. In a Reading lesson, Task 4 originally required students to “work in groups and discuss the advantages of online learning and face-to-face learning”, promoting free communicative practice. However, the pre-service teacher adapted it into a controlled brainstorming task: assigning Group A to list advantages of online learning and Group B advantages of face-to-face learning, with representatives writing ideas on the board. Although this encouraged participation, it restricted spontaneous interaction, typifying how pre-service teachers simplified communicative tasks for easier classroom management.

In summary, supervisory expectations strongly limited flexibility. Within these constraints, Addition emerged as the most common strategy, guided primarily by Variety principles. However, adaptations remained largely control-focused, raising questions about alignment with CLT principles.

Factors Influencing Pre-Service EFL Teachers’ Textbook Adaptation Decisions During Lesson Planning

Situational factors

Supervisory expectations. Strict textbook adherence was required in most cases. PT3’s supervising teacher stated, “Because this is a MOET program, we can’t remove things.” PT5 shared, “She’s open

to adding new tasks...but I'm not allowed to change the ones in textbook." PT7 reported all textbook activities had to be included. In some cases, requirements were implied. PT8 observed, "She doesn't clearly state requirements, but the activities in her demo lesson are the same as all those in the textbook, thus, I follow her."

However, some experienced more flexibility. PT1 commented, "My supervisor doesn't interfere in my lesson planning." PT7 reflected, "my supervisor is open-minded to textbook adaptation." Overall, supervisory expectations set clear boundaries, though experiences varied.

Textbook limitations. Some adaptations addressed perceived textbook limitations. PT3 observed, "There weren't enough words for practice." PT6 added, "The present textbook isn't very exploitable... I can't go deeper or expand further. So I have to come up with other activities to provide more relatable and authentic knowledge."

Student needs. Student needs shaped adaptation. PT6 emphasized scaffolding: "These guiding questions help students know what to focus on in their speaking." PT4 explained, "Many students still get nervous and shy when presenting, so I changed this task into making dialogue activities between two students, which reduces anxiety."

Internal factors

Familiarity with teaching context. Context familiarity emerged as one internal factor. PT4 emphasized differences between classes of varying proficiency. Yet participants expressed differing views on its impact. PT1 stated "I don't think familiarity has impacts on lesson planning", while PT7 believed it "definitely made a difference", leading to more tailored activities.

Individual teaching beliefs. Teaching beliefs guided adaptation. PT1 reflected, "I design lessons as I see fit my students." PT2 reported, "I go by my own feelings to plan lessons. I think about if it's fun, easy to organize and to lead into the main lesson." PT5 emphasized, "I add more new words as I think the more inputs students have, the better they understand the lesson."

In summary, supervisory expectations were the most significant external factor. Internal factors also guided decisions, though to varying degrees. Overall, external expectations tended to dominate internal considerations, resulting in cautious and compliance-oriented adaptations.

DISCUSSION

From Addition to Omission: Understanding Strategy Selection through a Developmental Lens

The findings show that Addition dominated (72%) while Omission was virtually absent, consistent with Mede and Yalçın's (2019) observation that pre-service teachers tend to add rather than remove tasks. This pattern reflects not only a developmental stage but also institutional constraint. Interview data attribute the absence of omission to supervisory expectations, as PT3 explained: "Because this is a MOET program, we can't remove things." What appears as a developmental limitation thus often represents strategic compliance within a tightly structured practicum.

According to Shulman's (1987) model of pedagogical reasoning and action, effective adaptation involves transforming content through interpretation and selection. While pre-service teachers may know that adaptation can include omission, many lack the transformative competence (König et al., 2020) to evaluate what can be removed without undermining objectives. Combined with supervisory control, this creates a dual constraint: teachers are both discouraged from omitting and uncertain how to do so appropriately.

A participant described supervisors narrowing their ideas to maintain safety and structure, illustrating a tension between emerging pedagogical agency and institutional authority. Consequently, additive adaptation reflects a negotiated outcome between developing competence and compliance, rather than a cognitive deficit.

The Dominance of Variety and the Absence of Localization, Individualization, or Modernization

The data show a strong emphasis on Variety (44 instances) and a complete absence of Localization, Individualization, and Modernization in all 11 lesson plans. According to McGrath's (2013) framework, these principles serve distinct pedagogical purposes: Variety enhances engagement through task diversity, Localization links content to learners' sociocultural contexts, and Individualization accommodates differences in proficiency and learning needs.

The absence of Localization and Modernization appears partly contextual. Lesson topics such as *Vietnam and international organizations* or *New ways of learning* were factual and already familiar to urban students, leaving little scope for localization. Yet, as PT6 noted the input was not very "exploitable", reflecting a desire to expand the topic but uncertainty about how to do so. Pre-service teachers tended to accept the textbook's predictable, and also difficult-to-expand, arguments, such as the claim that online learning limits teacher support. In today's context, this view could be challenged by recognizing AI tools as virtual learning supporters that provide feedback and autonomy. Although such reinterpretation would modernize the content and promote critical discussion, it requires technological awareness and contextual insight that are still developing among pre-service teachers.

Similarly, Individualization was underrepresented. PT2, who taught classes of differing proficiency, adjusted task difficulty across groups but not within them, overlooking variation among individual learners.

The dominance of Variety thus reflects a strategic and developmental choice. Adding or modifying activities is visible, low-risk, and aligns with supervisory expectations, allowing teachers to demonstrate initiative without challenging curricular boundaries. However, as PT2 commented "if it's fun, easy to organize", it can be understood that some prioritize logistical manageability over pedagogical intent.

In sum, the pattern indicates a stage where pre-service teachers favour safe, procedural adaptations over conceptually demanding, context-responsive ones.

The theory-practice gap: Unpacking the shift from free to controlled practice

A clear pattern emerged in lesson adaptations: controlled practice increased from 67.6% to 82.6%, while free practice decreased from 32.4% to 17.4%. This shift does not necessarily indicate pedagogical regression. In communicative lesson design, especially within scaffolded sequences, controlled activities often prepare learners linguistically and cognitively for subsequent communicative tasks. From this perspective, a relatively high proportion of controlled practice can be acceptable as long as it functions as scaffolding that leads toward meaningful interaction.

However, analysis suggests that pre-service teachers' additions of controlled tasks were not always strategic scaffolds, but frequently defensive adaptations. Interview data reveal concerns about lesson manageability, time control, and student confusion. Many teachers feared that without additional structured steps, students might "get lost" or that free practice could become "out of control." Consequently, they inserted more controlled or semi-controlled activities before communicative ones, often disguised as support, but effectively diluting opportunities for authentic communication.

This pattern reflects a pedagogical reasoning gap rather than philosophical rejection of CLT. While pre-service teachers understand, at a declarative level, that lessons should culminate in communicative use, they struggle to judge how much scaffolding is sufficient and how to design transitions from control to freedom. Their adaptations reveal limited transformative competence (König et al., 2020) and in language class, it refers to the ability to balance linguistic support with interactional openness.

The Reading lesson adaptation illustrates this. The original task, "Work in groups and discuss advantages of online learning and face-to-face learning," invited negotiation of meaning and spontaneous exchange. The adapted version in which each group was given a list advantages was intended to structure thinking but instead transformed interaction into categorization, reducing opportunities for authentic dialogue. The pre-service teacher likely believed the revision improved clarity and control, consistent with PT2's planning criterion, "easy to organize."

Contextual pressures reinforced this cautious approach. PT8's replication of the supervisor's demo lesson, PT4's concern for reducing student anxiety, and general awareness of evaluation standards and time constraints reveal a practicum environment that rewards order and predictability. In such settings, open communicative tasks, where teachers need to deal with unpredictable discourse, variable timing, and spontaneous language, can appear risky.

Thus, the dominance of controlled activities is best interpreted as a developmentally appropriate response within a high-stakes practicum context, where teachers aim to scaffold learning yet also secure lesson control. The challenge lies in advancing from supportive structuring to intentional transformation, which means using scaffolding to enable, not replace, communicative practice. Mentorship that emphasizes reflective justification of task purpose and sequencing, rather than procedural fidelity, would better cultivate the pedagogical reasoning needed to balance control with communicative authenticity in Shulman's (1987) transformation cycle.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how pre-service EFL teachers adapted textbooks within the realities of the practicum. Despite CLT-based preparation, their adaptations largely favoured controlled practice

over communicative use, revealing a persistent theory-practice gap. Supervisory expectations and institutional norms shaped decisions more than teachers' own pedagogical beliefs, while adaptation strategies remained limited, dominated by additions rather than localization or personalization. Although familiarity with learners and context enhanced teachers' awareness of classroom needs, restricted autonomy and the desire to maintain lesson control often narrowed the space for communicative experimentation. Teachers' efforts to be creative were frequently redirected toward safer, more structured adaptations that prioritized manageability over interaction.

IMPLICATIONS

For teacher education, adaptation should be recognized as a core professional competence, not an intuitive act. Training should integrate principled adaptation strategies within CLT-oriented courses, combining theory with guided practice in lesson planning. Building pedagogical confidence will help novices move beyond safe, control-based routines toward purposeful communicative teaching.

For practicum design, supervision should balance guidance and experimentation. Assessment criteria need to value innovation and reflective risk-taking, encouraging teachers to justify adaptation choices in relation to CLT goals. Collaborative reflection on these decisions can help narrow the theory-practice gap.

For materials development, textbooks should incorporate freer communicative practice alongside accuracy work. Teacher guides should model adaptation pathways for personalization, localization, and extension so that materials function as flexible frameworks rather than rigid scripts. Clear scaffolding would empower pre-service teachers to use textbooks with greater creativity and communicative intent.

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