

Research Article

English Textbook Selection in Taiwan: Voices of Two Book Sales Representatives

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This qualitative case study explores the experiences of two book sales representatives when introducing textbooks to university English teachers in Taiwan. The participants were two experienced book sales representatives working for two large book companies. Analysis of semistructured interviews showed that the two sales representatives had considerable influence on teachers' decision-making concerning textbook evaluation and selection. These two representatives not only used information from previous users and publishers to introduce textbooks to teachers and students, but they also used their professional positions and social networks to connect teachers across institutions. They collected feedback from previous users (teachers and students) to aid their introduction of textbooks to prospective users. By analyzing the needs of students and teachers across institutions, the two representatives helped teachers choose the right textbooks for students. This study sheds new light on research investigating the views and experiences of key stakeholders in English textbook evaluation, promotion, and consumption.

1. Introduction

English language teaching (ELT) material development has received increasing research attention for the past decade [1–4]. Most of the research has focused on the analysis and evaluation of materials [3–8] and teachers' perceptions and adaptation of textbooks in their teaching practices [9–14]. Many studies have analyzed the appropriacy of cultural representations presented in textbooks, revealing a tendency that there is an imbalance in the representations and promotion of Anglo-American culture and local culture [5, 15–17]. In a recent position paper, Mishan [2] argues that despite many critiques on textbooks, especially global textbooks, from applied linguistics researchers (e.g., [3, 16, 18]), textbooks “remain the default language learning resource and that teachers and learners worldwide need, want and value them as ready-made language teaching materials” (p. 1). Due to the influence of textbooks on teachers' teaching and

students' learning, selecting an appropriate textbook is critical to both teachers and learners.

How teachers select textbooks has received less research attention. Within this modest literature, Kiai and Maroko [19] investigated the experiences of textbook selection by secondary school teachers of English in Kenya. They found that teachers were not involved in the textbook selection as rigorously as advocated by the Kenyan Ministry of Education. Instead, the teachers based their decisions on factors such as brand recognition, marketing by publishers, and teacher-to-teacher exchanges. In a study investigating teachers' criteria for selecting textbooks for the technology subject in South Africa, Makgato and Ramaligela [20] found that technology teachers at secondary schools mainly used criteria related to field knowledge such as the nature of the content of the text and the mode of delivery (how the content is presented) to select appropriate texts for students. The teachers did not pay much attention to how textbooks

support teachers in designing lesson plans or how textbooks would influence their students' learning process and outcome.

Among various factors mediating the teachers' choices of textbooks (e.g., recommendations from research, top-down policy pressure, and students' needs), voices from textbook sales representatives may influence teachers' decisions in textbook evaluation and selection. In Kiai and Maroko's [19] study, the teachers mentioned that they relied on publishers' information to choose their textbooks, but it is not clear how and what kind of information they were presented by the publishers. In Asian contexts, Taiwan included, the voices of third parties such as book sales representatives may even be more influential than recommendations from researchers and textbook developers because of the collectivistic culture. However, the voices of book sales representatives have been missing in research on the development, promotion, evaluation, and consumption of teaching and learning materials. This study is, therefore, timely. It explores the voices of two English textbook sales representatives in Taiwan. It discusses how sales representatives introduced textbooks to local university English teachers, their perceptions of the teachers' choices of types of textbooks, and the kind of information that teachers sought from them. This study sought to address the following research questions:

- (1) What kind of textbooks do book sales representatives introduce to university English teachers in Taiwan?
- (2) How do the book sales representatives introduce textbooks to university English teachers?
- (3) What information do book sales representatives provide teachers?

2. Methods

This study was set out to gain in-depth insights into the experiences of two book sales representatives in introducing ELT textbooks to teachers. Therefore, we adopted a qualitative case study approach [21] to realize our research objectives. According to Burns [22], "case study is used to gain in-depth understanding replete with meaning for the subject, focusing on process rather than outcome, on discovery rather than confirmation" (p. 460).

2.1. Context and Participants. The study was conducted in the Taiwan higher education context where English is taught as a compulsory subject usually in one or two courses during the first and sometimes second year of university [23]. Generally, university English teachers have autonomy over the textbooks used in their English classes that may or may not be guided by a university-level body such as a Language Center [24]. The teachers usually work in close liaison with book sales representatives to negotiate a price and purchase textbooks for students from the publisher or distributor. The language needs of students can vary from university to university depending on whether it is a research-oriented or technical university [25]. Universities in Taiwan are increasingly using local (e.g., General English Proficiency Test

(GEPT)) and/or global English language tests (i.e., International English Language Testing System (IELTS)) as a graduation benchmark [23].

The participants were recruited using convenience and purposive sampling methods [26]. Within the limited scope of this qualitative and exploratory study, we selected only two participants for our study to gain in-depth insights into their perspectives about textbook evaluation and selection in a Taiwanese local context. The two selected participants were two sales representatives (one male and one female) who were working for two large book sales companies in Taiwan at the time of the data collection. In order to ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms of the two sales representatives were employed. The male representative (Chun-chieh, pseudonym) had three years of experience working in the book sales sector, while the female (Mei-ling, pseudonym) had over ten years of experience. They had extensive experience in introducing, promoting, and selling textbooks to ELT teachers at universities, colleges, and some secondary schools in Taiwan.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis. Before the data were collected, the participants were ensured that the data were collected for research purposes only, and their safety, privacy, and confidentiality were protected. The data of the current study were collected using in-depth semistructured interviews. The interview questions were formulated based on the extensive review of the literature in textbook evaluation and analysis (e.g., [2, 4]). Also, informal interviews with four university teachers (which were not used as the data sources of this current paper) were referenced. A set of five broad questions were used to guide the interviews (see Appendix). The interviews were conducted individually with the two participants in Chinese, the shared first language of the participants, and the interviewer (one of the authors). The interviews were conducted in the staff rooms of the companies. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour. The interviews were audio-recorded (with participants' consent) for subsequent data transcription and analysis. The participants were explained clearly that the interviews were used for research purposes only with no right or wrong answers, and they were encouraged to express their thoughts fully and honestly.

The data were analyzed thematically [27]. Firstly, the recordings were transcribed verbatim into Chinese. Then, the transcripts were read many times for a thorough understanding of the data set. Phrases and sentences which conveyed similar meanings were grouped together into codes. These codes were then revised and refined to avoid repetition, redundancy, and overlap. Finally, these codes were reorganized to create broader themes which were reported and discussed in the following sections. The quotes used in this paper were translated into English and cross-checked by all the authors.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. What Kind of Textbooks Do Book Sales Representatives Introduce to University English Teachers in Taiwan? Global textbooks were reported to be more popular than local textbooks. Both of the book sales representatives (i.e., Chun-

chieh and Mei-ling) stated that their companies mostly sold global textbooks, with only a small number of locally published textbooks being sold by Chun-chieh. These local textbooks were mainly related to English language proficiency test preparations or English for specific purposes (ESP) courses taught in local universities. There were no locally published textbooks for the mainstream university English courses in Taiwan. The comments of the sales representatives and images taken on our visits to their bookstores showed that the availability of textbooks for university English courses in Taiwan was restricted to global textbooks. The predominance of global English textbooks was reflected in previous studies [3, 15, 28, 29]; for example, Masuhara and Tomlinson [30] claimed, “the shelves in the English Language Teaching (ELT) section of bookshops in major cities anywhere in the world seem to be dominated by global course books” (p.17).

Regarding the teachers’ preference for the textbook type, both sales representatives commented that teachers preferred global textbooks to local ones. Chun-chieh said, “according to the figure of sales in the past few years, global textbooks represent a commercial success.” Similarly, Mei-ling stated, “If you have a look at the bookshelves of university English language teachers, the shelves are full of imported textbooks, with very few or no locally published textbooks.” The two sales representatives explained that, based on the sales figures for the past few years, teachers tended to choose imported books rather than locally produced books. Moreover, the sales representatives explained that teachers were in favour of global textbooks because of the accompanying online resources for test preparations. This preference of the teachers in this study context was in line with that of the majority of teachers in other contexts reported in previous studies [2, 28], even though applied linguistics researchers recommend the use of locally published textbooks for various reasons, including more appropriate representation of culture, identities, and lifestyles [3, 4, 15, 16, 31].

3.2. How Do the Book Sales Representatives Introduce Textbooks to University English Teachers? The sales representatives’ comments showed that they introduced textbooks to teachers selectively and strategically. The sales representatives commented that they prioritized introducing “the best-selling textbooks” to teachers first. They claimed to base recommendations to new teachers on previous teachers’ feedback on the books. They said that some textbooks were popular only because teachers had already used them, and reusing them would reduce teachers’ preparation time and effort. This finding suggests that teacher to teacher feedback on textbook use has a strong impact on teachers’ selection of textbooks, especially for new teachers. This impact might be more predominant in such collectivist cultures as Taiwanese where teachers tend to seek help from peers more often than exploring the content and appropriacy of books using research recommendations.

When asked about specific textbooks that they preferred to introduce to teachers, the two sales representatives said

they would prefer books published by the *National Geographic Study* (pseudonym, for confidentiality purposes) publisher. Chun-chieh explained that previous teachers felt satisfied with the content of these books because they covered cultural diversity topics. Mei-ling also said that her customers (i.e., teachers) preferred textbooks which represented diverse cultural contexts. Mei-ling commented:

Teachers usually tell me that they want their students to learn something new, such as content about different cultures, which will be useful for them when they go abroad in the future.

Through the voices of the two sales representatives, it seems that teachers believed that diverse cultural input from global textbooks helped students understand cultural diversity and contexts. This belief was contradictory to the views of material development researchers who critiqued global textbooks for not including cultural values relevant to local teaching needs [2, 4, 15]. This suggests a need for a culturally responsive teaching approach [32, 33] in teachers’ selection and use of textbooks to incorporate culturally relevant materials in their teaching practices [16, 17]. Thus, it appears that the two sales representatives were very strategic in their selection of books to introduce to teachers, which were based on the practical needs of teachers and students.

When asked about whether local publishers should produce textbooks for local teachers, both sales representatives showed their doubts. They commented that the publication of a set of local textbooks was not easy due to the lack of competent writers and financial resources. These reasons were frequently cited in the literature [34]. McGrath [28], for example, claimed that the decision to publish a textbook was a major commitment in terms of both time and money. The sales representatives also showed their scepticism about the quality of the local textbooks and were concerned about the sales figures. They believed Taiwan was a small market; therefore, local textbooks could not compete with global textbooks. Although global textbooks are usually produced with rigorous procedures and are internationally recognized, the use of locally produced textbooks is encouraged because they can be tailored to meet the needs of local students [2, 3, 16]. However, in this context, whether favouring global textbooks or not, teachers did not seem to have many alternatives. Still, teachers in Taiwan have been shown to skillfully adapt native-speaker and US-centric lingua-cultural resources to local student needs [35].

3.3. What Information Do Book Sales Representatives Provide Teachers? The two sales representatives described several criteria that teachers used in evaluating and selecting textbooks. They summarized several questions that teachers usually asked when considering textbook selection.

The essential information for teachers to evaluate and select textbooks included prices, content, and accompanying digital resources. Mei-ling commented, “Selling textbooks now is very different from 10 years ago.” She added that one of the teachers’ major concerns was whether and how the latest related digital resources were compatible with their computers and university learning management systems (e.g., interactive whiteboard and computer hardware).

According to the sales representatives, teachers were concerned about whether textbooks and related digital resources could help “monitor students’ working progress and results of doing test preparations through the university independent learning progress systems” (Chun-chieh), or “how compatible the textbook’s PowerPoint presentations would be with the computer operating system in their classrooms” (Mei-ling). These enquiries illustrated the local teachers’ desire to evaluate the textbooks and related resources in relation to the needs and the available resources of their specific teaching contexts.

Notably, the purpose of the teachers’ seeking to use technology in this context might differ from that of teachers in other contexts. For example, Kneen [36] found that most texts presented through interactive whiteboards to secondary school students in the UK were produced by the teachers. However, in the current study, teachers primarily used technology as a time-saver, with the main purpose being for students to practice test preparation exercises. This finding suggests that Taiwanese English teachers’ textbook selection is influenced considerably by their exam-oriented teaching culture and practical constraints such as time limit and heavy workload.

According to the two sales representatives, teachers also relied heavily on the feedback of previous users of the books within and outside of their institutions. Chun-chieh, for example, said:

If teachers are recommended by teachers from other institutions who taught in similar contexts, they are likely to consider those recommendations for their purchases. For example, if those teachers recommend *American English Book* (pseudonym), they are likely to buy *American English Book* for themselves and their students.

The results presented above suggest that the two sales representatives were very active in helping teachers evaluate and select textbooks. The sales representatives used their professional positions and social networks to exchange information about textbooks with teachers and documented teachers’ prospective and retrospective evaluations of textbooks. They integrated the obtained information into the information exchanges with prospective consumers concerning how teachers or students from other institutions felt about those textbooks. This finding showed that retrospective evaluation of textbooks by teacher consumers from different institutions could be collectively conducted through sales representatives. The two sales representatives went beyond their normal duties of introducing textbooks to teachers or answering teachers’ questions about a particular set of textbooks. These findings show an influential role of sales representatives in introducing, promoting, and persuading teachers to choose certain textbooks for use in the Taiwanese ELT context.

4. Conclusion

While this study is timely and has played an instrumental role in highlighting the book sales representatives’ position in the English teachers’ evaluation and selection of textbooks and the English learning of students in Taiwan, this study is not without limitations. As a case study, the research has

provided insights that could be helpful in the creation of a large-scale quantitative questionnaire study that could be conducted within Taiwan and similar contexts to further uncover the roles of unacknowledged stakeholders in university students’ English learning such as those of the book sales representatives; however, the results of the current study should be delimited to the Taiwan learning context (and arguably that of central Taiwan) as only two book sales representatives’ experiences were collected and analyzed. Therefore, readers should take this caveat into account when interpreting the findings of this research. With these thoughts in mind, conclusions based on the findings are drawn.

The current paper explored the voices of two sales representatives regarding the process of introducing textbooks to university English teachers in Taiwan. The results showed that the two sales representatives played a critical role in teachers’ decision-making regarding textbook evaluation and selection. Notably, they went beyond their normal duties of a salesperson, using their professional positions and social networks to connect teachers of different institutions, collecting feedback from retrospective teachers and students to introduce to prospective consumers. Interestingly, it seems that they were not only concerned about the commercial targets, but they also took into account the needs of students and teachers across institutions in helping teachers evaluate and select the right textbooks for teachers and their students. This study sheds new light on research investigating the views of key stakeholders in textbook evaluation, promotion, and consumption.

This study, therefore, raises a critical issue in ELT material development research, that is, the missing voices of an important party connecting textbook producers and users in Taiwanese university ELT contexts. Future studies may need to investigate the voices of such intermediaries in various contexts. This line of research may be important to bring about implications for textbook writers, publishers, and consumers.

Appendix

A. Guidelines for Semistructured Interviews

- (1) How do you evaluate the textbooks for prospective customers (i.e., university teachers)? Why do you evaluate the textbooks in this way?
- (2) What do you focus on when you introduce textbooks to university teachers (e.g., language skills presented in the textbooks, purposes of teaching, and curriculum)? Why do you focus on those aspects?
- (3) How do you connect the textbook levels with students’ English language proficiency, learning needs, interests, workload, etc., when introducing textbooks to teachers?
- (4) What components are important in a textbook (e.g., the resources for cultural diversity input and the relevance of content to local students)? Why do you think these components are important?

- (5) Do you collect and use previous users' feedback for use when introducing textbooks to new users? How do you do that? Why do you do that?

Data Availability

The qualitative interview data used to support the findings of this study are included within the article.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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