English Language Teachers' Maxims in Evaluating Materials: A Case Study from Iran

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Abstract

While research on second language teacher cognition (SLTC) has significantly developed over the past three decades, this line of inquiry has not paid adequate attention to material development/evaluation as compared to the key role that materials play in teachers' daily practice. In response to this gap, in this study we adopted the theoretical stance of teacher maxims as part of SLTC, and explored eight Iranian English language teachers' maxims in relation to material evaluation. Data were collected from a researcher-adapted questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, and analyzed based on content analysis. Data analyses revealed that the teachers evaluated their implemented material in light of both positive and negative aspects, with the positive sides being more pedagogical and the negative dimensions being more institutional and sociocultural. Additionally, the teachers' maxims indicated that materials should not only serve pedagogical issues, but they should also embrace emotions and sociocultural particularities so that educational stakeholders, especially students, develop socio-educational capitals. Based on the findings, we provide implications for teacher educators to run professional development courses that embrace personal, interpersonal, and sociocultural particularities in the courses to enhance teachers' awareness of the role materials play in their SLTC growth.

Keywords: material evaluation, material development, language teacher cognition, language teacher practice, case-study research

Since the 1970s, scholarship on teaching and teacher education has been consistently concerned with examining teachers' mentalities and how they inform practice, a field that is commonly known as teacher cognition. Teacher cognition started to appear in applied linguistics in the 1990s and since then has become a central line of thinking and research. Second language teacher cognition (SLTC) has, thus, been concerned with unpacking teachers' knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs (Borg, 2003) and how those processes come to contribute to teachers' professional performances (Basturkmen, 2012; Borg, 2019; Burns et al., 2015; Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015). In light of this growth of theory on SLTC, research has started to explore how SLTC relates to different dimensions of teachers' professionalism, including skills and sub-skills, intercultural understandings, socio-educational particularities, and technology-based advancements (e.g., Borg, 2019; Li, 2020).

One such area that has been underrepresented in scholarship on SLTC is material development/evaluation. As Tomlinson (2018) inclusively argued, research on SLTC in relation to material development is relatively underdeveloped, a gap that still dominates the field. The central point that necessitates conducting research on teachers' cognitions in relation to materials is the key role that materials play in teachers' daily practice, which is how teachers adapt, develop, and evaluate those materials for instructional purposes (e.g., Choi & Lo, 2022; Littlejohn, 2011; Tomlinson, 2012; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018). In light of this stance, in this study we adopt the theoretical framework of teachers' maxims as part of their cognition (Richards, 1996) to report on a case study of Iranian English language teachers' evaluation of materials, a point that has received little attention in comparison to the body of knowledge on teachers' role in using materials.

This line of inquiry is particularly helpful in EFL contexts because teachers in such contexts may face various restrictions from institutional policymakers (see Banegas et al., 2020; Tomlinson, 2018) regarding how to perceive and practice materials, which could provide a suitable context for exploring how context shapes teachers' evaluation of materials. Specifically, Iranian school managers (see Karimi & Nazari, 2017) have been shown to strictly adhere to their preferred materials, which leaves little room for teachers' voice in relation to textbooks and is likely to influence their evaluations as well. Thus, the study unpacks how various personal, interpersonal, and sociocultural dimensions feature as significant components of SLTC in relation to materials, which provides a holistic understanding of the role of materials in teachers' cognitions and performances. In seeking this agendum, the present study provides implications for school managers and teacher educators regarding how to enhance teachers' awareness of using materials in a way that responds to their own and institutional needs, particularly via teacher education courses.

Literature Review

Language teacher maxims

SLTC, as the unobservable dimension of teachers' professional lives, has been the focus of significant theoretical and empirical interest in language teaching (Borg, 2019; Li, 2020; Sun et al., 2022). Research in mainstream education and applied linguistics has widely recognized the impact of SLTC on teachers' professional lives and pedagogic performances (Burns et al., 2015; Kubanyiova, 2020). Moreover, SLTC is the established term for describing personal, unseen aspects of teachers' work, which seeks to not only describe what teachers know and believe, but also to understand the influence of such concepts on what teachers do and how

they develop (see Borg, 2003; Crookes, 2015; Feryok & Oranje, 2015; Golombek, 2015; Johnson & Golombek, 2018). The argument here is that language teachers' practices are shaped in unique and often unpredictable ways by SLTCs that have emerged from teachers' diverse personal and language learning histories, teacher education experiences, and the specific contexts in which they are positioned (Borg, 2019; Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015). In this regard, in his renewed definition of SLTC and with a specific focus on the research dimension of SLTC, Borg (2019) defined such research as "Inquiry which seeks, with reference to their personal, professional, social, cultural and historical contexts, to understand teachers' minds and *emotions* and the role these play in the process of becoming, being and developing as a teacher" (p. 20, emphasis added), which shows how cognitions relate to teachers' affective-pedagogical performances. In this study, we also focus on this emotional side, which is an under-explored dimension of language teachers' professionalism in relation to material evaluation.

The main strand of research on SLTC has typically been concerned with identifying the range of attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, and values that language teachers have about different aspects of language teaching and learning (e.g., Golombek & Doran, 2014; Karimi & Nazari, 2021; Mohammadabadi et al., 2019). Another strand of research has highlighted the relationship between teachers' cognition and their instructional practices (e.g., Basturkmen, 2012; Golombek, 2015; Karimi & Nazari, 2017; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2017). This body of knowledge has shed light on the fact that teachers' cognitions develop as a result of their history, present performances, and future understandings, which serve as translational mechanisms for their practices (Basturkmen, 2012). In addition, a recent strand of research on SLTC has concentrated on participation-oriented views of teacher cognition, focusing on teachers' situated and dynamic knowing-in-action and, thus, places the study of teacher cognition in the contexts of participation in practice (e.g., Johnson & Golombek, 2018; Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015; Skott, 2014). This line of inquiry highlights that teachers' practices are understood "not as spaces in which reified mental constructs, such as beliefs, may or may not be applied, but rather as dynamic and evolving outcomes of individual and communal acts of meaning-making", which contact with their practices and sense-making processes in a dynamic loop of (re)defining cognitions (Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015, p. 10).

The role of cognitions in language teachers' instructional practices has been described in various ways in the literature, including the instructional decisions teachers make, principles or maxims they implement, thought processes about different levels of context, and the pedagogical knowledge teachers possess (for a complete discussion see, Borg, 2003). Our focus in this study is on teachers' maxims. Richards (1996) suggested teacher maxims as teachers' personal working principles that reflect their individual philosophies of teaching. In this sense, teachers develop personal principles that inform their approach to teaching. These principles function as rules or maxims and guide many of teachers' instructional decisions and practices (Richards, 1996). Richards argued that teachers' maxims could be grouped into eight categories, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Teachers' Maxims Based on Richards (1996)

Maxim	Description
Involvement	To follow the learners' interests to maintain student involvement

Planning	To plan the teaching and try to follow the plan
Order	To maintain order and discipline throughout the lesson
Encouragement	To seek ways to encourage student learning
Accuracy	To work for accurate student output
Efficiency	To make the most efficient use of classroom time
Conformity	To make sure the teaching follows the prescribed method
Empowerment	To give the learners control

Teachers' maxims can be viewed as outcomes of their evolving theories of teaching (Borg, 2003). Additionally, maxims can be regarded as images that have been transformed into models for practical action. Thus, the development of personal working maxims can be viewed as an important goal in teacher development (see Borg, 2003, 2019; Richards, 1996). Maxims have received attention regarding how they reflect teachers' belief systems, prior knowledge, cognition, and experiences (e.g., Farrell, 2007; Kandel, 2018), although specific attention to maxims has been overshadowed by the broader investigations on teacher beliefs. For example, in a case study, Farrell (2007) examined how one pre-service English language teacher in Singapore failed her practicum and was encouraged by the researcher (as her supervisor) to reflect by having her identify the maxims she used to guide her teaching. The findings highlighted how important it is that pre-service teachers articulate their expectations of the practicum before they go on teaching practice and to engage in critical reflection throughout the practicum. It was concluded that identifying the maxims teachers use to guide their teaching may be useful because these maxims are an indication of teachers' evolving theories of teaching.

Although research on SLTC has grown exponentially over the past decades, one area that plays a key role in teachers' instructional effectiveness (i.e., material evaluation) has not been adequately recognized in the literature, which is the point we seek in this study.

Material evaluation and language teacher beliefs

In recent years, language teaching materials have become a more prominent area of research (see Banegas et al., 2020; Choi & Lo, 2022; Tomlinson, 2012, 2018; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018). Material development, as a practical undertaking, refers to procedures done by writers, teachers, or learners to provide resources of language input, to exploit those resources in ways that maximize the likelihood of intake, and to stimulate purposeful output (Tomlinson, 2011). Tomlinson and Masuhara (2018) suggested that since English teachers use textbooks in their classes, they have the right to be involved in the process of evaluation in order to provide the relevant textbook for their learners. As "agents of methodological change" (Harmer, 2007, p. 181), teachers are often faced with the task of choosing the teaching materials to use (Choi & Lo, 2022; Inderawati et al., 2022). To this end, they are required to carry out both a predictive and a retrospective evaluation of the materials available to them in order to determine which are best suited to their purposes and to determine whether the materials have worked for them (Banegas et al., 2020; Ellis, 1997).

Ellis (1997) argued that material evaluation could be conducted at three stages of (1) 'predictive' evaluation, which is designed to examine the future or potential performance of a textbook, (2) 'in-use' evaluation, designed to examine material that is currently being used, and (3) 'retrospective' evaluation, which is concerned with the evaluation of textbooks after they have been pedagogically used. Sheldon (1988) also suggested that there are numerous reasons for the evaluation of textbooks; that is, the selection of an English language teaching textbook often demonstrates an important administrative and educational decision which involves considerable amount of professional investment, a point also emphasized by Ansary and Babaii (2002). Similarly, Littlejohn (2011) proposed a framework for material evaluation that involves two publication (i.e., physical properties) and design (i.e., thought processes underlying the materials) dimensions.

One essential consideration in the intersection between SLTC and materials is how teachers view, practice, and evaluate those materials. A growing body of research has examined teachers' material development/evaluation beliefs and their continuing professional development (e.g., (Banegas et al., 2020; Bouckaert, 2018; de Laurentiis Brandão, 2018; Guerrettaz & Johnston, 2013; Harwood, 2021; Z. Li, 2021). For example, Banegas et al. (2020) examined the extent to which 16 university EFL teachers from a Colombian university developed professionally as they engaged in developing materials for content and language integrated learning courses. Drawing on data from a survey, group discussions, and individual interviews, the study findings indicated that engaging the teachers as material developers boosted their professional knowledge, motivation, identity, and agency as teachers and material designers.

Moreover, Bouckaert (2018) explored how material development can be used to support teachers in their continuing professional development. The study findings showed that by developing one's own materials to supplement the course book, reflecting on them as artefacts, using them in practice, and evaluating their effects, teachers uncover their pedagogic principles and experience more positive emotions. In other words, material development could be regarded as a potential professional development strategy if accompanied by appropriate and effective tools for reflection. While this body of knowledge has intermittently explored SLTC in relation to materials over the past decades, it needs more attention from SLTC researchers because materials form an indispensable component of teachers' daily practice and thus of their associated cognitions and professional performances. More importantly, most of the previous studies have focused on how teachers develop and implement materials, and how they evaluate materials along with the way such an evaluation unpacks their cognitions is open to further scrutiny.

The present study

An exploration of the SLTC literature shows that (1) maxims are a component of teachers' cognition that play a key role in their professional understandings and sense-makings, (2) such maxims play an important role in different dimensions of teachers' professional growth, including pedagogical practices related to the content they teach, and (3) the exploration of teachers' cognitions in relation to material evaluation has not received adequate attention. Considering that maxims can profoundly guide teachers' mentalities and professional performances and that the SLTC literature is under-developed in relation to teachers' material evaluation cognitions, the present study reports a case study of Iranian EFL teachers' evaluation of materials to fill part of the gap. Besides the geographical descriptions defining

our positionality in the Iranian context, we focused on Iranian teachers because most of the schools in this context follow top-down policies in specific relation to materials (see Karimi & Nazari, 2017), which could carry implications for the way teachers perceive, practice, and evaluate materials. The study is, thus, significant because by qualitatively unpacking the teachers' maxims about material evaluation, we provide implications for teachers and teacher educators to run professional development courses that can enhance teachers' awareness of material development, implementation, and evaluation. The study addressed the following questions:

1. How do Iranian EFL teachers' maxims inform their evaluation of the materials they teach?

2. How do the teachers' maxims define their cognitions regarding material evaluation?

Method

Context and participants

This study was conducted in a city in the northwest of Iran where people were multiethnic and multilingual. The study setting was a private language school that provided English language classes. The school had educational policies that aimed for developing students' language skills and sub-skills. It had around 1000 students and 20 teachers. We chose this school because its policymakers (i.e., managers and supervisors) and teachers had already showed openness in participating in other research projects and the teachers were familiar with the first author. This familiarity situated the first author's positionality in a nested understanding of the sociocultural-educational atmosphere of the setting, which provided a deeper understanding and contextualization of the teachers' cognitions (see Kubanyiova & Feyok, 2015). While the first researcher collected the data, all the authors engaged in analyzing the data to avoid any biased perceptions of the first researcher in data analysis.

For the purposes of this study, we chose to conduct the research with teachers of intermediate proficiency level because we could have access to a greater number of teachers. Moreover, this proficiency level had teachers who had shown more criticality in relation to the implemented materials based on personal communication with the first author. The material implemented at this level was Big English from 1 to 6 (Herrera, 2012), yet we limited the study to the teachers' evaluation of the third book because the teachers' understanding could differ across different textbooks (Tomlinson, 2013) and most of the school teachers taught at this proficiency level (i.e., intermediate).

In this regard, exploring the maxims that the teachers held in relation to this specific textbook could uncover how a dominant group in the school (i.e., teachers of the intermediate level) perceive and practice a specific textbook that has similarities to the other series of the same material (i.e., Big English). We detail this point further in the findings of the study. Thus, exploring this issue could unpack how teachers view their own identity and cognitions in relation to the materials as situated within the broader character of the school. And across this path, maxims could untie the configurations of the teachers' identities and cognitions as they are intertwined with conceptual (i.e., cognition) and instructional (i.e., practice) dimensions of teachers' professional career, both of which are inextricably connected to materials and their evaluation.

The third version of Big English had characteristics similar to the other textbooks of the same series. That is, it involved listening activities, as followed by a focus on speaking tasks and glossed pronunciation tips. Moreover, the grammar and vocabulary activities were integrated into the listening and reading tasks. Using pictures to describe the contents of the activities and input enhancement (i.e., boldfacing the points) to teach lexical items were other features of the textbook. Generally, the textbook aims to hone the learners' various skills and sub-skills and aims to do so by drawing on visual, auditory, and interactive approaches in terms of design of the textbook. The textbook had been selected by the school manager as it fit the purposes that he had in mind regarding updated materials that develop students' multimodal skills. However, this textbook was not used commonly in other language schools because they aimed to adhere to the other materials they had been practicing for years.

Our participants were eight teachers whose demographic information has been presented in Table 2. We selected the participants based on convenience sampling and based on their experience in teaching the third book of Big English. Furthermore, we obtained the approval of the school policymakers and teachers before starting the project in accordance with ethical considerations. It must be mentioned that the teachers had taught other textbooks either in the focal language school or other educational institutions, but they were teaching the third version at the time of the study.

Table 2. The Teachers' Demographic Information

Participant	Age	Gender	Experience (years)	Education level	Degree	Level of teaching
T1	20	Female	1	BA student	ELT	Intermediate
T2	22	Male	1	BA	Translation	Intermediate
T3	25	Male	3	BA	ELT	Intermediate
T4	25	Female	4	BA	ELT	Intermediate
T5	27	Female	4	MA student	ELT	Intermediate
T6	24	Female	2	BA	ELT	Intermediate
T7	22	Male	2	BA	Psychology	Intermediate
T8	23	Male	2	BA	ELT	Intermediate

Design and data collection

This study was situated in a case-study design, which provides a detailed understanding of how focal individuals make sense of contextual phenomena (Ary et al., 2014). A case-study approach was particularly useful in the context of this study because other schools in the city implemented materials different from those used in the study setting. It was a common practice in the schools to implement materials that corresponded to the broader policies their higher decision-makers legislated in the central branches in Tehran (capital of Iran). With this perspective in mind, we collected qualitative data from the eight teachers in two stages.

The first stage of data collection involved obtaining the teachers' maxims in relation to materials. We used the theoretical framework of Richards (1996), which involves eight components: involvement, planning, order, encouragement, accuracy, efficiency, conformity, and empowerment. We adapted this framework with Littlejohn's (2011) principles of material evaluation, which involves the two components of publication and design. Publication was operationally defined as the cosmetic dimensions of the textbooks and design was defined in light of Richards' maxims since they covered the areas Littlejohn proposed in relation to the design of materials in terms of pedagogical aspects. These two theoretical stances were in high conformity because Richards' set of maxims could be tailored to evaluating materials in relation to teachers' sense-making of the content of those materials, which is the focus of Littlejohn's framework.

Moreover, Littlejohn argues that his proposed framework has a more pedagogic perspective. The literature of SLTC has also extensively discussed the necessity of emphasis on cognitions and practices as two pillars of SLTC (see Basturkmen, 2012; Borg, 2019). The outcome of mixing the two theoretical stances was an open-ended questionnaire that asked the teachers to evaluate their teaching materials based on the components of the questionnaire (see Appendix A). Thus, we asked them to provide open-ended responses to their evaluation of the materials per question. The teachers could provide their responses in either Persian (L1) or English and they did so in Persian.

In order to gain a more detailed understanding of the teachers' cognitions and maxims in relation to materials, the first researcher then ran semi-structured interviews (Appendix B) with the same teachers. The interviews expanded on the questionnaire and moved beyond them as we wanted to obtain the teachers' material-related cognitions beyond the textbooks they teach. Thus, we invited the teachers to take part in interviews that covered questions based on the developed questionnaire (i.e., materials in relation to the eight maxims). The teachers were asked the questions and relevant follow-ups when queried so that a better understanding of the teachers' material-related maxims could be obtained. The interviews lasted on average 40 minutes and were run in Persian. The interviews were also audio-recorded for further analysis. It must be emphasized that although the questions of the questionnaire and interview were similar, we could track in the interviews traces of sociocultural and emotions dimensions that provided novel findings in relation to how teachers evaluate materials against such dimensions. This is a point that particularly helped us expand on the questionnaire responses through the interviews.

Data analysis

Our dataset, thus, involved eight completed questionnaires and eight semi-structured interviews. To analyze the data, we used content analysis as it facilitates extracting codes and categories, especially when used in relation to theoretically-developed standpoints (Cohen et al., 2007), which resonated with the questionnaire we developed in this study. Thus, we transcribed the data and engaged in developing familiarity with the nature of the data so that we could proceed to developing codes and categories.

Initially, we coded the data from the teachers' questionnaire responses per component. For example, when the teachers referred to the helpfulness of the materials in assisting teachers with establishing order by including engaging activities, it was coded as "facilitating classroom management through the activities". Next, the interviews were coded by seeking

intersubjective (i.e., teachers) maxims and the associated connections of maxims to sociocultural-pedagogical dimensions that emerged in the responses. For example, when a teacher referred to learner involvement through the speaking activities of the textbook, this was sought across other teachers' responses to verify the codes. This constant-comparison and iterative process was done until we reached saturation in that novel categories did not emerge from the data. Besides the first author's familiarity with the context which enhanced the trustworthiness of our interpretations, we engaged in peer discussions over the codes and categories to enhance the credibility of the developed codes and categories. The findings of the study are reported below in relation to the teachers' evaluations and maxims defining their material-related cognitions.

Findings

The analysis of the data revealed that the teachers generally evaluated the material they taught relational in terms of strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, the teachers referred to various sociocultural and educational characteristics related to evaluating materials that are discussed below.

Strengths and weaknesses of the material

Our analysis showed that the teachers evaluated the textbook differentially across the components of the questionnaire. The teachers' coded responses have been shown in Table 1. Across all of the components, the teachers' personal maxims were emphasized in tandem with how the textbook facilitates or challenges their professional performances.

Table 3. The Teachers' Maxims in Evaluating the Material

Component	Codes
Involvement	• Engaging learners through attractive activities • Facilitating teachers' work in engaging the learners
Planning	• Little incongruity in teachers' mental and enacted plans • Unnecessarily excessive activities
Order	• Facilitating classroom management through the activities • Interaction with other materials in complicating time management
Encouragement	• Motivating the learners through attractive cosmetics • Demanding too much from the students
Accuracy	• Emphasis on grammar across the textbook series • Emphasis on pronunciation through input flooding
Efficiency	• Affordable for the students to use for personal purposes • Providing multiple affordances to engage the learners
Conformity	• Alignment with institutional demands • Little focus on sociocultural issues
Empowerment	• Easy instructions for personal use • Fostering autonomy across different (sub)skills

Table 3 shows that regarding involvement, the teachers (n = 7) referred to two positive features of the textbook. The first one pertained to having attractive activities that help engage the learners, as T4 mentioned regarding learners' interest: "The book has really interesting activities that learners can use personally to become interested in English learning" (T4, questionnaire). A corollary point here was that the attractive activities of the textbook are not only useful for students' personal engagement, but they also facilitate teachers' work in engaging the learners, a point T1 referred to in relation to the affordances of the textbook: "I think that the book has such interesting activities that make our teaching easy in terms of engaging all the students, such as group-works, games, and peer conversations" (T1, questionnaire).

As to planning, the teachers (n = 7) argued that the textbook has two positive and negative points. The positive point was that the design of the textbook reduces the gaps between teachers' mental plans and how they practice the textbook, a point T8 stated regarding the gap between mental plans and practices: "I like the way the book has been designed because it is quite common to face tensions in your mental plans and how you actualize it in the class. But this little happens in the case of this book" (T8, questionnaire). However, they also argued that the textbook is replete with activities of different kinds, which complicates covering all of them, as T7 noticeably referred to in relation to classroom progression: "This is a good book but it has so many activities and you have to exclude some of them because you certainly face problems such as time management or learner engagement" (T7, questionnaire).

The teachers (n = 6) stated that the textbook is positive in terms of order because it helps them strike order in the class by engaging the learners in the activities, which is what T2 mentioned about using the textbook for engaging disruptive students: "Whenever I face problems in managing the class, I know that using the book is one of the effective ways because sometimes the students are just uncontrollable. So, I use the book to engage the students and thus have a better management by assigning them to the students" (T2, questionnaire). Conversely, they lamented that as they have to cover several materials during the semester, the textbook clashes with those materials and they often lose the management of time: "One consistent problem for me is that if I want to cover all the book activities, I can't cover the story book. I think that the book has so many activities that are the major source of this problem for me" (T3, questionnaire).

Regarding encouragement, the teachers (n = 7) held that the textbook both encourages the learners by its attractive cosmetics and demands too much from them. For example, T5 stated that the point about the effective design of the textbook for age-specific particularities: "I think that the book has been professionally designed because the pictures, colors, and audio files attract the learners by being designed for their age level" (questionnaire). On the other hand, they held that the textbook puts too much burden on the students' shoulders because some of the activities are beyond their proficiency level, a point T6 mentioned about the listening contents of the textbook: "One problem that I have faced in teaching this book is that some of the activities are difficult for the students. For example, the listening audios sometimes read too fast or they have an accent that students may not understand" (T6, questionnaire).

An area upon which all of the teachers agreed was the focus of the textbook on students' accuracy. In this regard, the teachers (n = 8) referred to the diverse activities that focus on students' grammar and pronunciation not just in the third version of the textbook, but also across other versions. Regarding grammar, T4 stated how textbook series build on each other

to hone learners' grammar skills: "The book has enough focus on grammar and I see that the same grammatical point is also covered in the, for example, fifth book as well" (questionnaire). The same focus was also highlighted in relation to pronunciation by T6 regarding the sound system of English: "The book provides very good exposure of students to pronunciation. For example, the students cover issues like vowels and consonants in the previous and upper versions of the book" (T6, questionnaire).

Besides the point that the teachers (n = 8) found the textbook efficient for their own purposes, they underlined two issues in this regard for the students. The first one was that students can easily buy and download the book because it affordable: "I find the book quite efficient for the students because they can easily work with the book and it is not expensive and they can download the book online to prepare themselves" (T8, questionnaire). Moreover, the teachers argued that the book provides multiple affordances that can respond to students' style differences and needs, a point T2 underlined in relation to auditory, visual, and kinesthetics stylistics: "Some students may be more into listening and some others into reading and so on. I think that the book provides ample activities and facilities like workbook, CDs, games, etc. so that learners can be easily engaged" (T2, questionnaire).

Most of the teachers (n = 7) argued that the textbook seems to respond well to the way proficiency level has been operationally defined in the language school because they have faced few problems in this regard, as T7 underscored regarding the suitability of the textbook for learners' proficiency level and in the eyes of the school manager: "I think that the manager is content with the book because they have selected the book after a lot of caution. So, the book conforms with what the intermediate level needs in terms of different skills and sub-skills" (T7, questionnaire). Nonetheless, they objected to the lack of representation of sociocultural issues in the textbook, a point focally underlined by T1 regarding the importance of including contents are that specific to the present context: "The book covers issues like the environment, climate change, interpersonal relationships, etc., but what I like is also a focus on social issues like justice, hijab, women in the society, etc. I understand that the book has not been designed for our context, but this is what I find lacking in the book" (T1, questionnaire).

Finally, the teachers (n = 6) argued that the textbook has the potential to positively contribute to student empowerment by providing easy instructions and fostering students' autonomy in different skills and sub-skills. Regarding the provision of easy instructions, T5 stated how students can work effectively with the textbook by themselves: "If there is no teacher there, still the students can easily work with the book because it has been designed in a way that students can depend on their own understanding to proceed" (questionnaire). As to autonomy dimensions, T6 added how the textbook enables students to become self-regulated by working on different dimensions of it: "In my opinion, this is a good book for the students to become autonomous because it works so good on different activities that students can become totally self-regulated in various dimensions of English" (questionnaire).

Maxims of material evaluation

The analysis of the interviews revealed four major categories in relation to the teachers' maxims and cognitions about materials. These four categories pertained to the role materials should play in teachers' professional performances: (1) materials as a source of emotionality between teachers and students, (2) materials as sites for sociocultural growth, (3) materials as tools for praxis, and (4) materials as needs-responsive instruments.

One of the major points in the teachers' maxims and broadly cognitions in evaluating materials was whether the textbook facilitates developing emotionality (i.e., mutual emotional sense-making) between teachers and students. In this regard, T5 stated that she pays close attention to the emotional dimensions of materials when she considers evaluating them, especially the textbook tasks: "To me, the extent to which the book helps me connect with the students emotionally is very important. Most of our time is spent on the book and it should have activities and tasks to facilitate developing such emotional bond between us" (T5, Interview). T2 added a similar point in relation to how in-class engagement of students and the associated emotion work is guided by textbooks and serves as a factor in his evaluation of materials: "I believe that when a book is to take most of the class time, it should carry features that affect students' emotions as these emotions influence our interpersonal emotions as well. I consider this as an important factor when I evaluate a textbook" (T2, Interview). Thus, emotionality featured as a significant factor in the maxims teachers hold when evaluating materials.

Another point in the teachers' maxims while evaluating materials was the extent textbooks contribute to students' sociocultural growth. In this sense, sociocultural growth was believed to feature in how students gradually perceive different surrounding phenomena: "I think that a book that does not focus on developing students' understanding of social issues is very boring. Books should change the way one looks at the world and educational books more importantly. This is an important criterion I keep in mind when I want to judge a book" (T1, Interview). T3 referred to a similar point with regard to the significance of materials in students' growth: "We always learn many things from books and what we learn becomes part of who we are. I think that textbooks should shape students' growth by focusing on content that prepares students for those issues. Issues like justice, fairness, discrimination, gender, etc. are some of such things that I should see to say that a book is good" (T3, Interview). Thus, the way materials contribute to students' sociocultural growth was considered as a key criterion in the teachers' maxims in relation to materials.

The teachers also stated that materials can function as a strong tool in exercising praxis. Such a characteristic of materials in reducing the gap between theory and practice stemmed from the teachers' claims regarding the mediating role materials play in balancing institutional policies with teacher-student sense-making processes and the general atmosphere of the school: "I see materials as a glue in the way we connect to students and become influenced by the policies of the school. So, I gradually evaluate the textbook I teach based on the extent to which it helps reduce the gaps among these issues in the school" (T8, Interview). T6 made mention of a similar point regarding how the divide between theory and practice decreases by using appropriate materials that influence the school environment, which is also a criterion she keeps in mind in evaluating materials: "What we think should be there is always different from what really happens. I think that materials can reduce the gaps between them and this is certainly something I keep in mind as time passes and I want to evaluate a material. This is so because I think that textbooks influence the atmosphere of the school and our relationships very much" (T7, Interview). Thus, materials were also considered as a tool for exercising praxis, which was a key maxim for the teachers in evaluating them.

The last category of the teachers' responses pertained to the responsiveness of materials in relation to needs. Need was in this sense defined as related to students, teachers, and institutional demands. That is, the teachers argued that materials should be able to respond to the needs of these stakeholders to be gauged as effective. For example, T4 argued for such a

responsiveness of materials in relation to teachers' and students' needs: "Textbooks should be able to satisfy our needs. I always see whether a book responds specially to speaking activities or not. And I keep this factor in mind … this focus facilitates my own practice as well" (T4, Interview). T1 mentioned the need for striking balance between teaching and institutional policies as it stops facing further problems: "It is clear that no one wants to experience tensions. And when a book does not cover what we need, it may become as a source of problems. So, when I want to evaluate a book, I consider whether it responds to both the managers' and my and students' needs. When I find it good enough, I develop positive attitudes toward it and this makes my teaching more enjoyable" (T1, Interview). Thus, responsiveness of materials to various stakeholders' needs was considered as a key criterion the teachers held in evaluating materials.

Discussion

As the findings presented above indicate, the teachers evaluated their teaching materials in light of both strengths and weaknesses. They argued that the material provides effective affordances to involve the learners. This feature of materials has been consistently argued for in the literature of material development/evaluation (e.g., Choi & Lo, 2022; Tomlinson, 2012). However, the teachers argued that the materials not only help students engage in personal reading, but they also facilitate teachers' professional practices. This finding positions materials as a practical alternative, which has been argued to underlie the effectiveness of lack thereof of textbooks (e.g., Tomlinson, 2012), which shows the effectiveness of the implemented material at the school. Moreover, such an effectiveness was argued to happen in terms of reducing the gap between mental and enacted plans as well. This finding responds well to the persistent call for educational agenda that reduce the divide between SLTC and practice (see Borg, 2003, 2019; Kubanyiova & Feyok, 2015). That is, materials could be a major source of congruity/incongruity between teachers' cognitions and practices. Nevertheless, the use of excessive activities and the associated complexities attests to the concern that materials should facilitate rather than complicate teachers' instructional practices (see Harmer, 2007; Tomlinson, 2012; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018), which seems not to have happened to the teachers of this study and has challenged other dimensions of their practice.

The teachers' statements regarding the use of materials for classroom management shows that they have been able to employ the textbook strategically. This finding is particularly novel when interpreted in light of the point that the teachers were not highly experienced and that classroom management is difficult, even for experienced teachers (Harmer, 2007). The reason might be that the teachers have engaged with the textbook so effectively that they have been able to tailor the textbook for dealing with the complicated dimensions of their practice. However, this finding needs further research to unpack its different dimensions. Moreover, the teachers argued that the textbook they teach clashes with other textbooks and leaves them little time for covering all the contents. We argue that, based on this finding, material evaluation should not be viewed as atomistic and unidimensional; rather, as Tomlinson (2011, 2012) also argued, textbook evaluation should be a dynamic process that heeds contextual considerations. The dynamicity for our teachers featured in the way a material clashes with other materials to complicate their work, which adds novel aspects to the discussion of material evaluation.

Besides attractive cosmetics, which are necessary for the marketization of materials (see Banegas et al., 2020; Bouckaert, 2019; Littljohn, 2011), the teachers argued that students have to shoulder heavy responsibilities in covering it. One practical alternative here may be that

teachers attempt to balance their own and students' responsibilities by performing selectively, that is, choosing textbook tasks that are deemed more effective in enhancing students' proficiency level, which we assume teachers already do. This way, students may also face fewer socio-emotional problems, which has been documented as a significant feature that textbooks should have (see Ellis, 1997; Littlejohn, 2011; Sheldon, 1988). That the teachers found the textbook effective in terms of accuracy shows that they have been able to track emphasis on accuracy not just in one material, but also across different versions. This finding aligns with the scholarship on SLTC in that when teachers pay focal attention to an issue, it manifests in their cognitive makeup markedly, which, more importantly, helps them think, believe, and know inter-contextually (Borg, 2003; Karimi & Nazari, 2017). We believe that materials have the potential to trigger such inter-contextual sense-making across different skills and sub-skills because they are a collection of different educational and extra-educational issues.

Discussions of material development/evaluation have persistently highlighted the efficiency of materials, especially in terms of being affordable and multi-faceted (Guerrettaz & Johnston, 2013; Harwood, 2021; Li, 2021; Tomlinson, 2013). Our teachers also evaluated the textbook efficient in terms of these two dimensions. However, they highlighted such efficiency in terms of students' style differences relative to their visual, auditory, and/or kinesthetic styles. This finding shows that (1) the textbook has been efficiently designed to respond to different styles and (2) our teachers are aware of the importance of style differences when evaluating materials. Thus, like the other dimensions discussed above, such a sensitivity to style differences seems to have become a central maxim for the teachers. It would be particularly useful for future research to explore such a sensitivity in the teachers' classroom instruction, which can expose interesting findings in relation to the role of textbooks in teachers' attention to style differences in practice.

The teachers held that the textbook aligns with institutional demands because it has little been a source of professional challenges. While it might be simply argued that because the school managers have selected the textbook and it is crystal clear that it could not be otherwise a source of problems, the teachers also found the textbook appropriate for the intermediate level. In the Iranian context, Karimi and Nazari (2017) have discussed how teachers experience tensions between their listening beliefs/practices and institutional demands that have roots in the way materials are implemented. However, the present finding shows that the teachers have experientially found the textbook useful for the intermediate level, which shows the strength of the material in this specific regard. Nevertheless, the teachers argued that the textbook lacks adequate focus on sociocultural issues. The teachers' emphasis that the textbook may not have been specifically designed for the Iranian context shows the situated nature of maxims in particular (Richards, 1996) and SLTC in particular (Borg, 2003; Crooks, 2015; Feryok & Oranje, 2015; Golombek, 2015). In this regard, situatedness meant including in the textbook contents that respond to teachers' expectations. One effective alternative here could be adapting materials in that teachers append content to the material that is deemed important for satisfying their own and students' ongoing needs (Tomlinson, 2011, 2012).

Such an undertaking is also highly likely to contribute to empowering students because it could expand their socio-educational repertoire to the extent that they become autonomous learners who seek transformation through materials, a point that has been argued for in critical discussions of material development (e.g., Brandao, 2018; Guerrettaz & Johnston, 2013;

Harwood, 2021; Tomlinson, 2012). We believe that materials could fulfill such an expectation (i.e., empowering the students toward self-regulation and autonomy) effectively because, through their multimodality, they contribute to students' social and cultural capitals in a way that paves the way for them to experience empowerment at personal, interpersonal, and ultimately sociocultural levels. For that purpose, teachers' adaptation of materials could be effectively conducive to autonomy because it fills out the areas lacking in textbooks vis-à-vis being responsive to contextual needs and considerations.

The analysis of the teachers' interview responses revealed that they emphasized emotionality between teachers and students based on materials as a key maxim in evaluating materials. Besides the point that this is one of the first findings highlighting the role of emotions in material development and evaluation, it shows the importance of emotions as a central construct in teachers' cognitions. Resonating with Borg (2019), our findings showed that emotions feature as a key maxim for the teacher participants of this study in evaluating materials. Relatedly, emotions were seen as dwelling in the space between teachers and learners with a central role of materials in shaping the emotional dynamics. This finding adds to the literature of SLTC by showing how materials feature as a significant component of teachers' cognitions in opening space for emotions as the center of those cognitions.

The teachers viewed materials as not only pedagogic resources, but also as instruments for learners' sociocultural growth. This finding parallels with the critical arguments that attempt to move materials beyond their instructional values toward being tools for social transformation (see Harwood, 2021; Tomlinson, 2012). Transformation for our teachers meant the rigor of materials in developing critical perspectives that enable students to reinterpret contextual surroundings. This finding reveals that through the different capitals that materials provide for learners (e.g., cultural issues, social events, and expanded knowledge), textbooks can serve as a key inroad into moving students beyond skills and sub-skills toward reorienting their visions. This finding has, however, remained mainly theoretical in the scholarship on materials development/evaluation and it merits attention from future researchers.

Institutionally speaking, the teachers held that materials could reduce the gap between theory and practice and serve as needs-responsive instruments. In his discussion on the role of materials in teachers' professional development, Tomlinson (2012) refers to the important role of materials in exercising praxis and being responsive to needs. However, praxis for our teachers was not defined just in the gap between theory and practice, and manifested in reducing the gaps between institutional stakeholders as well. We believe that such a praxis-oriented perspective should be acknowledged as a key element of SLTC because it has the potential to respond to the permanent concern regarding the gap between cognition and practice (see Basturkmen, 2012; Borg, 2019). Additionally, materials could be a chief component of such an integration of praxis into SLTC because they form a necessary site where cognitions and practices interact. This way, the needs of all the stakeholders could be effectively met and fulfilled because needs analysis could be helpfully done bottom-up (Harmer, 2007), which could embrace the role of materials justifiably and effectively.

Conclusion

The above findings shed new lights on the literature of SLTC and material evaluation by (1) showing how materials serve as an effective agenda to explore teachers' cognitions, (2) unpacking the complexity of SLTC in pedagogical, emotional, interpersonal, and sociocultural

spheres, and (3) developing the line of thinking on how materials function kaleidoscopically when interpreted against teachers' cognitions and performances. Astonishingly, despite the at least three decades of growth of research on SLTC, materials have been conspicuously underrepresented in scholarly discussions in comparison to the central role they play in teachers' daily practice. One step further would be running professional development courses that, as we reported above, embrace the role of personal (beliefs), interpersonal (practices, emotionality, and instructional decisions), and sociocultural (praxis, social-cultural capitals, and macro-level policies) dimensions in the courses. Such an undertaking could feature in online courses, mentoring sessions, peer collaboration, and lesson study groups. Relatedly, acknowledging the limitations of the study (e.g., the third version of the textbook, examining practices, and proficiency level), we hope that the outcomes of this study can help teacher educators and teachers pay more attention to the areas that have been less-attended in their educational institutions in relation to materials so that teachers and learners experience a more educationally-safe environment.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire

Dear Teacher,

We would be thankful if you provide detailed responses to the following questions, which aim to explore your understanding of materials and how you evaluate the material you teach. Please keep in mind the Big English 3 textbook while responding to the questions.

1. Please explain about how you evaluate the textbook in terms of involving the learners?
2. How do you view the textbook in terms of the way it helps you plan your lessons?
3. How does the textbook help you keep order and discipline in the class?
4. How does the textbook play a role in encouraging the students?
5. How does the textbook play a role in the students' accurate language?
6. How efficient is the textbook in terms of its design, instruction, and any other aspect you have in mind?
7. How does the textbook facilitate conformity between teaching and the prescribed methodology?
8. How does the textbook play a role in students' empowerment and autonomy?

Appendix B: Interview questions

1. In your opinion, how do materials facilitate students' participation in classroom activities? Can we thin about materials as a major instrument for involving learners? How?
2. Considering the Big English 3 textbook, do you plan your lessons based on the content of the textbook? How? Is the book effective in helping you plan the lessons? Please explain.
3. In your opinion, do textbooks help teacher keep the class orderly and manage the class well? How? What about the Big English book? Does it help you do so?
4. In your opinion, how do textbooks help encourage students? What about the Big English book? Please share your experiences.
5. How do you see the Big English book in helping improve students' grammar and pronunciation? What activities does it have to help you do so?
6. Generally, do you consider the book efficient in terms of its appearance, activities, and homework? Does it help you fulfill your and students' needs adequately?
7. Is the textbook in line with the institutional policies and the methodology the school promotes? Are there any conflicts? What are the conforming areas? Please explain.
8. In your opinion, does the Big English book have the potential to make the learners autonomous and powerful in their own learning? How?