Novice and experienced EFL teachers' experiences of designing materials: A comparative case study

JIAO LI
YUN WU (CORRESPONDING AUTHOR)
Tongji University, Shanghai, China

XUESONG (ANDY) GAO
University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT: Language teachers' experiences as materials designers have been found to be influenced by various factors at different contextual levels, including teaching experience. Language teachers with different experience levels respond differently to the challenges they experience. However, there is an inadequate understanding of the influence of teaching experience on EFL teachers' professional development in their role as materials designers. This article reports on a comparative case study investigating the similarities and differences in the challenges that Chinese EFL novice teachers and experienced teachers encounter and the strategies that they use to address these challenges. We collected data from interviews, personal materials, and WeChat conversations with four teachers who were designing teaching materials. The findings show that although these teachers face similar challenges in relation to, e.g., knowledge in materials selection and task design, experienced EFL teachers tend to interact with colleagues and students and draw upon prior experiences to respond to these challenges, while novice teachers' responses are more cognition-oriented. This highlights the need to provide resources and support tailored to each group of teachers, bolstering novice EFL teachers' ability to utilize social resources while also enhancing experienced teachers' motivation to expand their knowledge.
Keywords: Materials designers, teacher professional development, novice teachers, experienced teachers, English as a foreign language (EFL)

Experiencias de profesores de ILE noveles y experimentados en el diseño de materiales: un estudio de caso comparativo

RESUMEN: Las experiencias de los profesores de idiomas como diseñadores de materiales influyen factores a diferentes niveles contextuales, incluida la experiencia docente. Los con distintos niveles de experiencia muestran diferentes maneras de responder a los retos. Sin embargo, no se conoce suficientemente su influencia en el desarrollo profesional de los profesores en la enseñanza de inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE). Este artículo presenta un estudio de caso comparativo entre similitudes y diferencias de los profesores chinos noveles y los experimentados ante los desafíos, así como las estrategias que utilizan para afrontarlos. Recogimos datos de entrevistas, materiales personales y conversaciones por WeChat con cuatro profesores que estaban diseñando materiales didácticos. Los resultados muestran que, aunque se enfrentan a similares retos relacionados con, por ejemplo, el conocimiento en la

selección de materiales y el diseño de tareas, los profesores experimentados de ILE tienden a interactuar con colegas y alumnos y a recurrir a experiencias previas, mientras que las respuestas de los noveles están más orientadas a la cognición. Esto pone de relieve la necesidad de proporcionar recursos y apoyo adaptados a cada grupo de profesores, a los noveles de ILE para utilizar los recursos sociales y, al mismo tiempo, motivando más a los experimentados para adquirir más conocimientos.
Palabras clave: Diseñadores de materiales, desarrollo profesional docente, profesores noveles, profesores con experiencia, inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE)

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of materials designers has become indispensable for EFL teachers in their professional practice as they are increasingly required by local governments to design teaching materials relevant to students' local cultural contexts to help cultivate students' values and beliefs (Li et al., 2024). Due to their position on the frontline of language education, EFL teachers are also more familiar with students' needs and wants, and for this reason, EFL teachers often take the initiative to work together to design materials that meet their students' preferences and learning styles (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Moreover, teachers take actions in their classes to spontaneously adapt the tasks and activities of the teaching materials they use to meet the situated learning needs (Ellis, 2003).

With EFL teachers being increasingly expected to design materials themselves, their experiences as materials designers have also received growing attention in research (Li et al., 2023; Li & Gao, 2025). Scholars have found that EFL teachers who design materials face challenges at different levels (e.g. Carabantes & Paran, 2022). This has necessitated further investigation into EFL teachers' experiences as materials designers to shed light on EFL teachers' professional development in designing materials (Tomlinson, 2023). Previous research has reported how language teachers in general respond to the challenges they faced when designing materials with little consideration of the participants' level of teaching experience (e.g. Carabantes & Paran, 2022). However, teachers' teaching experience may influence their professional practices in designing materials; as teachers spend more time in the profession, they gain vital knowledge about language acquisition theory, learners' preferences and learning styles, and other factors which are relevant to materials design. As a result, it can be inferred that EFL teachers with more years of teaching experience may be more able to design materials and to deal with the challenges experienced in materials design (Rahimi et al., 2016; Tomlinson, 2013). For this reason, it is worthwhile examining the experiences of EFL teachers in designing materials with a focus on the role of teaching experience in the process of materials design.

Research into the role of teaching experience in language teachers' professional practices often uses comparative case studies to compare and contrast the experiences between novice and experienced language teachers. However, studies on the role of teaching experience in shaping EFL teachers' materials design experiences are currently lacking. Inspired by these comparative case studies that investigate the role of teaching experience (e.g. Derakhshan & Nazari, 2022), the present study will adopt a comparative case study approach, focusing on exploring the similarities and differences in the challenges that novice and experienced EFL teachers encounter and the strategies that they use to address these challenges.

2. Literature Review

Past research on English language teachers' experiences as materials designers has identified various challenges at different levels (Li et al., 223). For instance, challenges observed at the micro level include teachers' insufficient mastery of English and computer skills (De Laurentiis Brandão, 2018). Another identified issue concerns English language teachers' pedagogical skills (Ulla & Perales, 2021); if teachers lack relevant skills, they may struggle to design materials which respond appropriately to users' cultural backgrounds and language proficiency. Banegas et al. (2020) reported on further problems that language teachers encounter when designing materials, which include "identifying suitable sources of input, bearing in mind the local context and specific needs of the students, and ensuring that there was an adequate balance between content and language" (p. 17). At the meso level, the requirements experienced in teaching practicum settings represent a barrier for English language teachers as these requirements often conflict with what they previously learned in their university studies; this was indicated by Carabantes and Paran (2022), who drew upon activity theory to explore the learning experiences of a group of Chilean pre-service teachers of English during their materials design work. At the macro level, Atkinson (2021) discovered that two expert materials designers with more than 20 years each of teaching experience struggled with the conflict between pedagogical imperatives and the realities of publishing. These challenges and conflicts across different contextual levels compel us to investigate how language teachers respond to these challenges and work to improve those responses, which will enrich our understanding of English language teachers' professional development.

Prior studies have examined how English language teachers who take on the role of materials designers address the challenges they encounter (e.g. Atkinson, 2021; Carabantes & Paran, 2022; Ulla & Perales, 2021). Carabantes and Paran (2022) reported that when Chilean pre-service teachers of English experienced confusion because of the contradiction between the requirements of the teaching practicum setting and the knowledge they had gained in university, they ultimately chose to adopt the pedagogy that they were required to employ in the school setting. Meanwhile, Ulla and Perales (2021) and Banegas et al. (2020) showed that, to deal with challenges arising from a lack of pedagogical skills, teachers tried to meet learners' needs by localizing materials based on their understandings of the target students. Regarding more experienced teachers taking part in materials design, the two expert participants in Atkinson's (2021) study were able to find compromises between competing stakeholders and requirements, one by negotiating with project partners and the other by squaring pedagogic imperatives with publishing realities. Although studies such as these have provided us with a general understanding of how English language teachers respond to the challenges experienced in designing materials, there remains an inadequate understanding of how these responses differ between English language teachers with different levels of teaching experience.

Teaching experience contributes significantly to English language teachers' professional development as materials designers, particularly for those who might have received limited training for developing teaching materials. This can be inferred from the required knowledge and skills reported in literature on principles for materials design (Jolly & Bolitho, 1998; Rahimi et al., 2016; Tomlinson, 2023). For instance, Jolly and Bolitho (1998) proposed that considering learners' needs and learning preferences in the materials design process requires

English language teachers to have extensive knowledge of the target learners. Along with learners' needs and preferences, teachers need require awareness of learners' current skill levels so as to implement the principle of designing materials with appropriate task sequence and complexity (e.g. Tomlinson, 2023; Trabelsi, 2016). As they accumulate teaching experience, English language teachers are likely to acquire this knowledge, and thus improve their skills in designing materials. Therefore, to investigate language teachers' experiences as materials designers, it is necessary to consider the role of teaching experience.

Investigations into the impact of English language teachers' teaching experience on their professional practices often compare and contrast the differences and similarities between novice and experienced teachers with the use of comparative case studies (e.g., Karimi & Asadnia, 2023). These studies have revealed multiple challenges and conflicts experienced by both groups. For example, Derakhshan and Nazari (2022) comparatively analyzed the experiences of experienced and novice teachers engaging in action research. They found that these teachers encountered similar emotional challenges, including unsettling and difficult experiences at the start of the action research. In a similar vein, Karimi and Asadnia (2023) observed that three novice teachers and three experienced teachers shared common experiences of pedagogical and technical challenges when engaging with online instruction. These studies identified few differences in the challenges experienced by novice and experienced teachers.

Despite the similar challenges facing both groups of English language teachers, this line of research has identified differences in their responses to those challenges. For instance, employing a comparative case study to explore two teachers' professional experiences while facing severe poverty, Munroe (2022) found that both a novice teacher and an experienced teacher relied on personality traits such as positivity and creativity to cope; however, the more experienced teacher exhibited more positivity, self-efficacy, and motivation. Similarly, Derakhshan and Nazari (2022) showed that novice and experienced teachers differ in terms of their confidence and abilities when tackling problems, which the researchers attributed to their differing levels of teaching experience. A similar study focusing on novice and experienced teachers' online teaching experiences indicated striking differences in their responses to the pedagogical problems faced in online teaching (Karimi & Asadnia, 2023). More specifically, novice teachers were more likely to mobilize cognitive resources derived from research-based theories and prior teacher education experiences, while experienced teachers primarily relied on social resources from students and colleagues.

Although these and other existing studies have addressed the important role of teaching experience in shaping English language teachers' responses to professional challenges, little attention has been paid to the specific impact of teaching experience on materials design work. Therefore, the present study attempts to use a comparative case study to provide a nuanced understanding of English language teachers' experiences in designing materials. More specifically, it focuses on revealing the similarities and differences in the challenges experienced by novice and experienced EFL teachers in China during the materials design process, and in their responses to these challenges. The research questions guiding the study are as follows:

(1) What challenges do novice and experienced EFL teachers encounter in the process of designing materials?
(2) How do novice and experienced EFL teachers respond to these challenges?

3. Method

3.1. Approach and participants

To address the research question, we conducted a comparative case study of the materials design experiences of novice language teachers and experienced language teachers. Novice teachers are defined as teachers who have at most five years of teaching experience (Çakmak et al., 2019), while experienced teachers are those who have taught for more than five years (Gatbonton, 2008). We adopted a purposeful sampling strategy to select four language teachers (two experienced and two novice) who were designing language learning and teaching materials in a higher education context in China (see Table 1) (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Punch, 2009). These four participants were team members in a materials design group developing an English language textbook for Science and Engineering students. This team was managed by Zhang (note: all participants are referred to by pseudonyms), whose PhD supervisor, an experienced EFL teacher and materials developer, initiated and guided the materials design project. As the manager and leader of the project, Zhang designed a sample unit for the team members to refer to, and this unit was reviewed by his supervisor as well as the publisher who would be responsible for publishing the finished textbook. Our goal was to gain an in-depth understanding of language teachers as materials designers by investigating their materials design processes with a focus on the effect of their relative levels of teaching experience. These four materials designers were brought together by an experienced teacher and materials designer for this materials design project. We chose to study four cases based on Yin's (2014) advice that in-depth multiple case studies should use no more than four or five cases.

Table 1. *Participant profiles*

PARTICIPANT PSEUDONYM	YEARS OF TEACHING EXPERIENCE	EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND	DURATION OF INTERVIEWS	ADDITIONAL DATA RESOURCES
Li	5	Master in English Language; PhD candidate	76 mins & 83 mins	Personal materials; Follow-up conversations
Xue	4	Master in English Language; PhD candidate	77 mins & 90 mins	Meeting notes; Policy documents; Follow-up conversations
Hua	8	Master in English Language	60 mins & 57 mins	Follow-up conversations
Zhang	9	Master in English Language; PhD candidate	74 mins & 52 mins	Sample unit; Follow-up conversations

3.2. Data collection

To understand how the EFL teachers' levels of teaching experience influenced the challenges they experienced in the process of materials design and how they responded to those challenges, the four cases were studied using multiple data collection methods. The collected data includes interviews, WeChat conversations, and relevant personal materials provided by

the participants. We conducted two interviews with each participant to collect the teachers' narratives about their experiences as materials designers. Narratives provide rich insights into the complexities of EFL teachers' experiences, offering a window into the personal, social, cultural, and contextual factors that influence teachers' professional lives (Mishler, 2009). The data they provide offers a holistic perspective on the multifaceted factors that impact teachers' professional development, such as personal, social, cultural, and contextual influences.

At the onset of the study, an initial interview was undertaken to delve into the motives behind EFL teachers' involvement in the materials design group, their impressions of this team and the process of materials design, and their backgrounds as materials designers and educators. A follow-up interview was held a month after the initial one with the aim of understanding the obstacles the participants were experiencing and how their experiences of the materials design process were developing, alongside their future intentions for their engagement in materials design. Throughout the next six months, as they persisted in their involvement with the materials design team, frequent discussions took place between the researcher and the participants via WeChat regarding the problems they faced and the ongoing changes in aspects of the experience such as their perceptions, emotions, and self-efficacy. Participants were also encouraged to contribute personal documents like notes or reference materials in order to provide additional data to validate findings from their narrative accounts and enhance our comprehension of their foray into materials design.

Before data collection began, this study was granted ethical approval from ethical committee of the university. The duration of the interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes, with an average duration of one hour. The interviews took place in Chinese, which was the interviewer and interviewees' native language. The interviews were recorded and they were conducted in the participants' native language in order to minimize the communication barrier between the interviewer and interviewees, fostering a comfortable environment for the respondents to express their opinions openly. Before each interview, the interviewee granted their consent to participate in the research by signing a consent form. At the beginning of each interview, key aspects of consent, including the purpose of the study and the rights of interviewees, were reiterated, and the confidentiality of the interview was assured. We were aware that, along with the time cost to the interviewees, interviews might carry the risk of discomfort related to anxiety induced by the questions, because recalling experiences in materials development might remind participants of uncomfortable situations. To minimize this risk, we let the participants choose the interview mode that they would feel most comfortable with, either video or audio-only.

3.3. Data analysis

We used a thematic analysis approach to explore the collected data on EFL teachers' experiences as materials designers, aiming to identify common themes and patterns (Braun & Clarke 2019). Thematic analysis was chosen because of its flexible nature, which allows for a detailed and nuanced examination of the data.

We used an iterative and inductive approach to identifying codes emerging from the dataset. Following the iterative and constant-comparison method, we categorized the data into similarities and differences between the two groups, as shown in Table 2 and Table 3.

Within-case and cross-case analyses were conducted (Merriam 1988). For example, during the analysis of the interviews, any references made by novice teachers to challenges in the process of materials design were labeled with codes such as "challenge in materials selection _ Xue" or "challenge in materials selection _ Li". Then, we compared the data with the experienced teachers (i.e., Hua and Zhang) to identify similarities and differences, labelling them with codes "challenge in materials selection _ Hua" and "challenge in materials selection _ Zhang". Subsequently, such codes were categorized under the theme of "Challenge _ materials selection". This process continued until the "similarities" and "differences" categories were finalized for each group and data source.

Table 2. *Similarities and differences in the challenges experienced by novice teachers and experienced teachers*

		NOVICE EFL TEACHERS	EXPERIENCED EFL TEACHERS
CHALLENGES	Macro level	Government control over internet use	
	Meso level	Conflicting roles, Team collaboration	
		English language proficiency	
		Knowledge in materials selection and task design	

Table 3. *Similarities and differences in the responses of novice teachers and experienced teachers*

		NOVICE EFL TEACHERS	EXPERIENCED EFL TEACHERS
RESPONSES	Macro level	Referring to national policy	
	Meso level	Not much interaction with others	More interactions with colleagues and students
		Referring to the sample unit provided by the materials design group	
	Micro level	Cognitive processing	Expanding prior experience

In addition, to enhance the reliability of the categories, apart from the first author, the second author also helped with data analysis. Although there were minor areas of initial disagreement, these were resolved through discussion and negotiation.

4. FINDINGS

This section presents and discusses our findings regarding the challenges both groups of teachers experienced and how they responded to these challenges, broken down into analysis of forces acting at the micro, meso, and macro levels.

4.1. Similar challenges, but different use of personal resources at the micro level

The four participants experienced similar challenges in relation to teacher knowledge and teacher emotions at the micro level. However, their responses differed, with novice EFL teachers focusing on acquiring knowledge to gain cognitive development while experienced teachers typically used personal knowledge derived from their prior experience.

All four participants indicated that they felt their knowledge about task design and materials selection was insufficient. Li's experience provides a useful example of challeng-

es relating to task design. Li found it difficult to design tasks with an appropriate level of complexity for her students. She reflected on the tasks she designed during the interview:

> *The tasks I designed require much critical thinking as I designed them based on the speaking tasks in IELTS... However, there may be no more than 5 minutes to do the speaking task through discussion in English. If there are many spoken tasks, students have little time to think about them... So the more spoken tasks, the more challenging they would be for the students.* (Li, Interview 1, lines 691-695)

Even when she actively engaged with the materials design process itself, she highlighted her feelings about designing tasks, as noted in a conversation with the researcher via WeChat:

> *I am working on the Grammar and Writing section that centers on learning about topic sentences and supporting sentences. Previously I thought it was easy to design relevant tasks. However, when I was doing it I found it particularly difficult to design tasks with gradually increasing task complexity. A challenging aspect is that what I believe to be easy points of grammar might be deemed hard by the students, or vice versa.* (WeChat conversation, 16 April 2021)

Similarly, Xue described facing challenges related to two aspects of linguistic knowledge – specifically, lexical and grammatical issues. On the lexical dimension, Xue felt that he needed to achieve a more systematic understanding of words, since each word has its own denotative and connotative meanings. On the grammatical dimension, he said of his experience of learning how to describe proportions and explain cause and effect relationships: "I read grammar textbooks to study, looked things up in dictionaries… so as to make up for my lack of language knowledge." (Xue, Interview 2. Lines 322-333).

In contrast, the experienced teachers never mentioned challenges like these relating to their knowledge of the English language. Even when we asked them specifically, "do you have any challenges in English language", neither of them said that they did.

To respond to the challenges that they experienced on the micro level, the novice teachers and experienced teachers employed different resources. Specifically, the two novice teachers tended to address challenges by attempting to acquire knowledge to improve their cognitive skills relating to specific professional tasks; in contrast, the experienced teachers typically relied on their prior experience to cope with challenges. Below, we discuss one case from each group as an example.

Li actively studied the textbooks that she had used in her previous teaching experience, analyzing the tasks in these textbooks and reflecting on the tasks that she had designed herself, and making revisions to the tasks she had designed based on this reflection. The revisions she made were approved by Zhang, who stated that "[i]t is too good for me to give any more advice" (Li, Interview 1, line 364). Similarly, Li addressed the problem of task complexity by studying the IELTS speaking tests that she had previously taken. Using these tests as points of comparison, she determined that the speaking tasks she had designed were too demanding for the target students. To revise them, she not only referred to the sample unit provided by Zhang, which she described as "well-designed tasks and in good form" (Li, Interview 1, line 702), but also improved her task design skills by studying the tasks in IELTS. She reported:

I studied the tasks in IELTS and the sample unit provided by the team to see how they were designed, what principles and skills they draw upon. Then I tried to adapt the tasks in terms of their forms and types to enhance the diversity of the tasks in the unit that I was designing. (Li, Interview 1, lines 603-607)

In contrast, the micro-level element that the experienced teachers generally employed to deal with challenges was their prior experience and knowledge. For example, to respond to the challenges she faced in selecting materials, Hua drew upon her prior knowledge about good opening and concluding paragraphs. She put significant effort into selecting materials while reflecting upon her prior experience and knowledge. She read multiple opening paragraphs and concluding paragraphs which she considered good examples and evaluated whether they met the criteria that she had developed. Although this cost her a significant amount of time and energy, it provided her with an opportunity to reflect upon and evaluate her prior knowledge.

4.2. Similar challenges but different uses of resources at the meso level

The challenges that these four teachers experienced at the meso level included role conflict and conflicts with team members regarding time and opinions. Both the novice teachers and the experienced teachers described conflicts regarding the sample unit provided by the materials design group. However, they differed in their use of social capital at the meso level to address the challenges they encountered.

All the participants described experiencing conflict with team members. Zhang recounted several examples. The first was associated with his collaboration with group members. As a leader, he found it difficult to coordinate the materials design group, which led to negative emotions. In our first interview, he spent a lot of time talking about the challenges resulting from differences in the team members' availability and in their ability levels, and in some teachers' attitudes toward designing materials. In terms of the different ability levels, he explained:

Team members differ in their materials design abilities. For the inexperienced designers, I have to deal with lots of language issues. Some teachers even have problems with composing active and passive sentences. It gives me a headache. (Zhang, Interview 1, lines 102-104)

The language skills of some team members were so lacking that Zhang felt frustrated and surprised in response. He mentioned: "I had no idea about their ability levels before we started the project, as they were actually recommended by the expert materials designer who initiated this project." This undoubtedly increased the pressure Zhang experienced considering his leadership role in the project. Zhang felt he could do nothing but help to correct the language errors made by other members in their designed materials.

Role conflict, meanwhile, was identified as a challenge by all four participants. For Xue and Hua, these challenges were significant enough to precipitate their withdrawal from the materials design community towards the end of the project. Here, we take Xue as an example, who described the pressure he experienced as a result of dealing with multiple roles:

I was pursuing my PhD study when I participated in the materials design project. Design-
ing materials was additional work for me, which had nothing to do with my PhD studies…
it was challenging to allocate adequate time for each. (Xue, Interview 2, lines 361-363)

Managing multiple roles at the same time was demanding for Xue, contributing to his withdrawal from the materials design group. He provided further detail on the reasons for his withdrawal:

It takes time to write a doctoral thesis, and it also takes time to design a textbook. Moreover,
the editor was always urging me to submit the manuscript. It was difficult to balance all
of them. (Xue, WeChat conversation, 18 October 2021)

In terms of their responses related to the meso-level context, these teacher participants responded to the challenges they faced by drawing upon the sample unit provided by the team leader, particularly at the very beginning of the project and at times when they felt they had no other way to tackle the challenges they were experiencing. For instance, early in the project, Hua referred to the sample unit while working on her designated unit because she thought that "referring to the sample unit for design would make it more efficient to design a unit that meet the expectations of the materials design group" (Hua, April 2021). Similarly, when Li felt uncertain about the characteristics that defined good task design after receiving negative feedback from the group leader, she studied the tasks in the sample unit and tried to design similar ones. As she explained, "I had to constantly confirm whether the tasks that I designed were similar to the ones in the sample unit" (Li, May 2021). In our second interview, she expanded on this:

After repeatedly studying the tasks provided by the leader, I had a better understanding
of what a good task is like. I had no understanding of this before as I had very limited
experience in materials design. (Li, WeChat conversation, May 2021)

The major difference in the responses in relation to the meso context between the experienced teachers and the novice teachers relates to their interactions with others at the meso level, including students, colleagues, and families. The experienced teachers took more socially-oriented approaches, engaging in dialogues and discussions with others to address the problems and challenges that emerged in the design process. For example, when Zhang felt dissatisfied with the tasks he had designed and found that he had run out of ideas for designing innovative tasks, he looked for someone to discuss this with, "even if they were novice teachers, as they may help expand my horizons on task design" (Zhang, Interview 2, line 136). Therefore, when a pre-service teacher, Lei, joined the team in the later stages of the project, Zhang actively collaborated with her and discussed a number of points that he could not resolve by himself, such as the distinction between "task", "activity", and "exercise". Moreover, he was open to the newcomer's feedback, both positive and negative, because as Zhang explained, "if you want to do your best, you shouldn't be afraid of being criticized" (Zhang, Interview 2, line 280). This reflects a desire on the part of the more experienced teachers among our participants to gain knowledge through interacting with others and soliciting others' opinions.

In contrast, the two novice teachers, while they too sought suggestions and feedback from others, did so in a less interactive and social manner. For example, when Li was unsure

whether her selected materials were appropriate or not, she often sent them to the leader of the group for confirmation:

> *I selected several videos. The first one was 5 to 6 minutes in length, which was rejected by Zhang as he said that it was too long to play in class... The second one was about artificial intelligence, and Zhang believed this topic was relevant to the topic of the next unit.* (Li, Interview 1)

When Li received positive feedback, she was delighted. Throughout the project, Li was open to the group leader's opinions and saw them as a resource to help her deal with the challenges that she encountered. However, she rarely entered into dialogues or in-depth discussions with others about the challenges she faced or the feedback she received, which may indicate that, due to her relative lack of teaching experience, she regarded the more experienced members of the group as authorities rather than colleagues.

4.3. Similar challenges and limited use of social resources at the macro level

A major challenge emerging from macro-level forces was the impact of government censorship of digital resources, which was mentioned by all of the participants. For instance, Li reported that "limited access to foreign websites constituted a challenge to materials selection. Because access to websites such as Wikipedia was blocked by the government, it was difficult to select suitable materials for inclusion in the textbook". (Li, Interview, 2021). Moreover, the participants attempted to use VPN (virtual private network) services, which can route internet traffic through third-party servers in other countries, to circumvent access restrictions; however, this process introduced its own difficulties at times. Zhang noted that he had tried several VPNs in the process of designing materials in order to access authentic materials. Even when he identified a good VPN, however, it would often fail shortly thereafter, perhaps due to ongoing government efforts to prevent people from accessing the content that is disseminated on foreign websites.

On the other hand, some national policies at the macro level were employed as a resource participants could use to address the challenges they faced. For example, when Xue encountered challenges related to materials selection, he referred to the Guidelines on College English Teaching (GCET) to help him select materials at an appropriate level of complexity:

> *There are new vocabulary lists in the 2020 version of the guidelines. So we referred to the lists to help us select materials.* (Xue, Interview 1, lines 313-314)

Using the GCET vocabulary lists as a reference, Xue could determine whether the selected materials were at an appropriate vocabulary level for his students. If most of the words in a text were included in the GCET vocabulary list, the text would very likely be suitable. Thus, on one hand, government policies, particularly those related to internet censorship and access, present a hindrance to EFL teachers in their role as materials designers. On the other hand, policy documents can also serve as a valuable resource for EFL teachers to consult when designing materials (Li et al., 2023).

5. DISCUSSION

Comparing the experiences of novice teachers and experienced teachers in materials design yields insights into the similarities and differences between the groups. Our findings show that despite facing similar challenges at multiple levels, such as knowledge of materials selection, task design skills, and role conflicts, the novice and experienced teachers responded to these challenges in different ways and employed different resources to do so (see Figure 2). This extends our understanding of the differences between novice teachers' and experienced teachers' responses to the challenges they encounter in professional practice (Derakhshan & Nazari, 2022; Karimi & Asadnia, 2023).
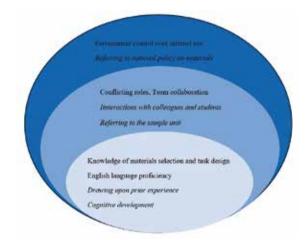

Figure 1. *Novice and experienced EFL teachers' experiences of designing materials*
Note: Regular font in the figure represents challenges that these teachers experienced; Italic text represents teachers' response strategy.

Our findings not only confirm that there is little difference between the challenges facing novice teachers and those facing experienced teachers when taking on new professional roles (Derakhshan & Nazari, 2022), but also enriches our understanding of the specific challenges that both groups encounter while designing materials (Ulla & Perales, 2021). All four teachers participating in this study encountered challenges relating to knowledge of materials selection and task design, conflicting roles, and team collaboration during the process of designing materials. Regardless of the career stage they were at, the experience they had gained through their years of teaching failed to alleviate the challenges they experienced as materials designers. This suggests that teaching experience alone is unable to make a teacher a professional materials designer, a finding that has practical implications for language teacher education. In other words, curriculum design for language teacher professional development needs to include courses which address skills and core principles for materials design, including task design and text selection, and these courses should be available to both experienced and novice teachers (Tomlinson, 2023). In addition, for Xue,

a novice teacher, and Hua, an experienced teacher, the challenge of dealing with multiple roles constituted a major factor in their departure from the materials design community. This highlights the significant impact of EFL teachers' role conflicts in their experiences as materials designers.

On the other hand, novice teachers did experience some challenges that their more experienced peers did not, specifically relating to their English language proficiency. English language proficiency was thus identified as a major differentiating factor in the challenges experienced by the two groups, while other challenges, particularly those at the meso and macro levels, were broadly the same across both groups. This difference may be because teachers improve their English language proficiency throughout their teaching careers, which reflects a need to enhance the support novice teachers receive to develop their English language skills for materials design. This expands de Laurentiis Brandão's (2018) finding regarding the need to enhance pre-service teachers' English language proficiency so that they can play the role of materials designers, by identifying the same need for novice teachers. This suggests that institutions can support their frontline teachers in addressing materials design challenges by offering teachers, and specifically novice EFL teachers, professional development opportunities to improve their English language proficiency.

This comparative study suggests that levels of teaching experience can make a difference in teachers' responses to the challenges they experience as materials designers. More specifically, the novice EFL teachers were more cognition-oriented in coping with challenges, while the experienced EFL teachers were more experientially- and socially-oriented. This echoes findings in existing studies indicating that novice teachers use cognitive resources to address challenges while experienced teachers rely more on social resources (e.g., Karimi & Asadnia, 2023). Our study has not only confirmed the social nature of experienced teachers' responses, but has also pointed out the experiential nature of the experienced teachers' responses in contrast to those of the novice teachers. The social nature of experienced teachers' responses was seen in their interactions with resources at the meso level, including colleagues and students, while the experiential nature was seen in their use of prior experience gained from years of teaching. Our findings also enrich existing understandings of novice teachers' cognitive responses (Derakhshan & Nazari, 2022), identifying novice teachers' tendency to process existing materials, e.g., textbooks and tasks in IELTS tests, at the micro level and their tendency to accept authorities' feedback with less communication and discussion at the meso level. This finding offers practical implications for training EFL teachers to deal with the challenges of materials design based on their needs and wants at different career stages. EFL teacher educators can leverage the distinct ways in which novice teachers and experienced teachers respond to challenges to foster communities of practice (Hua & Zhang, 2023). In this community, experienced language teachers can contribute their expertise in materials design, teaching experience, and social skills, while novice language teachers can contribute by sharing new knowledge they acquire through reading.

Despite the differences in their responses, both groups of teachers drew upon the sample unit provided by the materials design group at the meso level and referred to national policy at the macro level. It should be highlighted that when the teachers had no alternative ways of dealing with challenges, they all tended to study and even imitate the sample unit. This reflects the important role of samples in teachers' professional development as materials

designers. It may also point to the influence of a traditional learning strategy: *shu du bai bian, qi yi zi xian*, which means that read a book many times and its meaning will reveal itself. This corresponds to Langer's (2011) finding that the repeated reading of a text in different contexts enhances understanding and knowledge construction. However, this approach to learning can also be perceived as reflective of a tendency to follow authorities and even as evidence of teachers' lack of creativity in the pursuit of knowledge (Burns & Richards, 2009). For this reason, language teacher education should endeavor to help teachers learn how to use sample units reasonably and in moderation in the materials design process.

6. CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

By comparing and contrasting their experiences, we identified the specific areas in which novice teachers and experienced teachers may need support and guidance for materials design. This offers insights for supporting EFL teachers in becoming materials designers and for creating a variety of resources that will be helpful in this process to teachers at different stages in their careers. We acknowledge that this study has some limitations. The findings from the four selected cases from the Chinese context cannot be generalized to other contexts. However, the deep analysis of these cases provides valuable insights into the experiences of individuals serving as materials designers in contexts with different cultural and institutional policies. Further research can be conducted in other contexts in which national policies on materials design and teacher assessment differ from those in China. Using a larger pool of participants may also contribute insights towards a more generalizable picture of professional development experiences (Li, & Xu, 2023). Future research should aim to comparatively investigate EFL teachers' experiences as materials designers using larger participant groups.

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