5

Adapting Materials

5.1 Introduction

The main concern of all the chapters in this part of the book has been to examine the principles on which current teaching materials and classroom methodology are built. This final chapter in part I looks at some of the factors to be considered in the process of adapting teaching materials within particular classroom environments where there is a perceived need for change and manipulation of certain design features. There is clearly a direct relationship between evaluating and adapting materials, both in terms of the reasons for doing so and the criteria used: this chapter can therefore usefully be seen as forming a pair with chapter 4. We shall first set the scene for a discussion of adaptation by looking at ways in which the concept can be understood. We shall then try to enumerate some of the reasons why teachers might need to adapt their teaching material. Finally, in the main part of the chapter, these reasons will be examined in terms of the procedures typically used in adaptation.

5.2 The context of adaptation

A straightforward starting point for considering the relationship between evaluation and adaptation is to think of the terms 'adopting' and 'adapting'. We saw in the previous chapter that a decision about whether a particular coursebook should be used in a specific teaching situation can be taken on the basis of a number of evaluative criteria. These criteria, formulated as a set of questions to ask about the materials, provide answers that will lead to acceptance or perhaps rejection. For instance, typical questions concerned aspects of 'skills', different ways in which language content is handled, and the authenticity of both language and tasks. However, a decision in favour of adoption is an initial step, and is unlikely to mean that no further action needs to be taken beyond that of presenting the material directly to the learners. It is more realistic to assume

that, however careful the design of the materials and the evaluation process, some changes will have to be made at some level in most teaching contexts. As G. White (1998: 73) points out, 'published materials of any kind have to cater for a very wide range of possible users, which means that they cannot address any individual student or group of students directly'. Adaptation, then, is a process subsequent to, and dependent on, adoption. Furthermore, whereas adoption is concerned with whole coursebooks, adaptation concerns the parts that make up that whole.

An important perspective on evaluation – though of course not the only one – is to see it as a management issue whereby educational decision-makers formulate policy and work out strategies for budgeting and for the purchasing and allocation of resources. In this sense, teachers do not always have direct involvement: they may well influence decisions about whole textbooks only if they are part of a Ministry of Education team concerned with trialling or writing materials, for example. Others, perhaps, may be invited to make suggestions and comments as part of a corporate process of materials selection, but even then the final decision will be taken at a managerial point in the school hierarchy. A far more widespread, and necessary, activity among teachers is therefore that of adaptation, because the smaller-scale process of changing or adjusting the various parts of a coursebook is, as we shall see, more closely related to the reality of dealing with learners in the dynamic environment of the classroom.

This said, let us remind ourselves of another major and persuasive reason for evaluating textbooks even in a context where teachers have little direct say in decision-making. Evaluation as an exercise can help us develop insights into different views of language and learning and into the principles of materials design, and is something we do against the background of a knowledge of our learners and of the demands and potential of our teaching situation. It is difficult to see how the dependent activity of adaptation can take place without this kind of understanding – how can we change something unless we are clear about what it is we are changing?

With this wider perspective in mind, and as a starting point for thinking about the process of adaptation, it will be useful to extend a little the criteria put forward in chapter 4 under the headings of 'external' and 'internal'. External factors comprise both the overt claims made about materials and, more significantly for the present chapter, the characteristics of particular teaching situations. Internal factors are concerned with content, organization and consistency. Thus:

External (what we have)   Internal (what the materials offer)
Learner characteristics   Choice of topics
Physical environment   Skills covered
Resources   Proficiency level
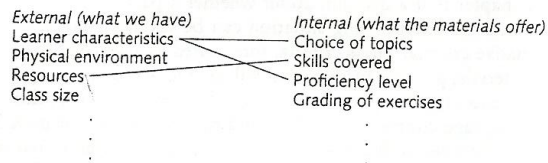Class size   Grading of exercises

Figure 5.1   Matching external and internal criteria.

To adapt materials is to try to bring together these individual elements under each heading, or combinations of them, so that they match each other as closely as possible. The horizontal lines indicate only a very small number of the possibilities for cross-referencing. For instance, we may be unable to use the full range of listening skills practised in a coursebook because of resource limitations; and the link between a stated proficiency level and that of our own learners is an obvious one. Madsen and Bowen refer to this matching as the principle of 'congruence': 'Effective adaptation is a matter of achieving "congruence" . . . The good teacher is . . . constantly striving for congruence among several related variables: teaching materials, methodology, students, course objectives, the target language and its context, and the teacher's own personality and teaching style' (1978: ix). With an emphasis on materials, Stevick talks of bridging a gap: 'the teacher must satisfy the demands of the textbook, but in ways that will be satisfying to those who learn from it' (1972). (Even if we agree with Prabhu's (1987) critique of 'materials-driven' classes referred to at the end of chapter 3, we must recognize that most teachers work with coursebooks, so Stevick's comment is entirely realistic.) In general, then, teaching materials may be internally coherent but not totally applicable in context; alternatively, they may be largely appropriate at the same time as they show signs of an inconsistent organization.

The final point in this section is frequently overlooked, perhaps because it is so much a part of our everyday professional practice that we are unaware of its implications. Adaptation tends to be thought of as a rather formal process in which the teacher makes a decision about, say, an exercise that needs changing, and then writes out a revised version for the class. In fact, although the concept of adaptation clearly includes this kind of procedure, it is also broader than this. Adapted material does not necessarily need to be written down or made permanent. It can be quite transitory: we might think of the response to an individual's learning behaviour at a particular moment, for instance when the teacher rewords – and by doing so adapts – a textbook explanation of a language point that has not been understood. The recognition of the short-term needs of a group may similarly require teachers to 'think on their feet' by introducing extra material, such as a grammatical example or some idiomatic language, from their own repertoire in the real-time framework of a class. Madsen and Bowen make the point clearly:

the good teacher is constantly adapting. He adapts when he adds an example not found in the book or when he telescopes an assignment by having students prepare 'only the even-numbered items'. He adapts even when he refers to an exercise covered earlier, or when he introduces a supplementary picture . . . While a conscientious author tries to anticipate questions that may be raised by his readers, the teacher can respond not merely to verbal questions . . . but even to the raised eyebrows of his students. (1978: vii)

To focus only on these kinds of activities would obviously not give us a complete picture of the concept of adaptation, because it would be necessary at some

stage to extend and systematize its possibilities. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the task of adapting is not an entirely new skill that teachers must learn.

> 1   Before you read on, consider the materials you use most frequently: to what extent do you feel they need, in principle, to be adapted? Try to note down the main aspects of change or modification you think are necessary or at least desirable.
> 2   It will also be useful to think about adaptation from the point of view of the *source* of your materials. Are they commercially produced and widely used internationally; are they designed at national level by your Ministry of Education; or are they perhaps more localized, produced by a team of teachers for a particular area or school?
> 3   If possible, share your comments with other teachers. You could also discuss the scope you have for adapting materials – do you have time? Is it acceptable to do so in your teaching situation? Are you required to adapt?

In this part of the chapter, we have tried to show that adaptation is essentially a process of 'matching'. Its purpose is to maximize the appropriacy of teaching materials in context, by changing some of the internal characteristics of a coursebook to suit our particular circumstances better. We shall now look in more detail at possible reasons for adaptation, and at some of the procedures commonly used.

5.3   Reasons for adapting

We have just asked you to consider your reasons for needing to make modifications to your own materials, and some of the changes you would wish to make. These reasons will depend, of course, on the whole range of variables operating in your own teaching situation, and one teacher's priorities may well differ considerably from those of another. It is certainly possible that there are some general trends common to a large number of teaching contexts: most obviously there appears to be a widespread perception that materials should aim to be in some sense 'communicative' and 'authentic'. Nevertheless, it is worth bearing in mind that priorities are relative, and there is no absolute notion of right or wrong, or even just one way of interpreting such terms as 'communicative' and 'authentic'. It is also the case that priorities change over time even within the same context. For instance, decontextualized grammar study is not intrinsically 'wrong' in a communicatively oriented class, just as role-play is not automatically 'right'. Nor does a need to adapt necessarily imply that a coursebook is defective.

It will be useful to compare your own reasons with those in the following list. The list is not intended to be comprehensive, but simply to show some of the possible areas of mismatch ('non-congruence') that teachers identify and that can be dealt with by adaptation:

- Not enough grammar coverage in general.
- Not enough practice of grammar points of particular difficulty to these learners.
- The communicative focus means that grammar is presented unsystematically.
- Reading passages contain too much unknown vocabulary.
- Comprehension questions are too easy, because the answers can be lifted directly from the text with no real understanding.
- Listening passages are inauthentic, because they sound too much like written material being read out.
- Not enough guidance on pronunciation.
- Subject matter inappropriate for learners of this age and intellectual level.
- Photographs and other illustrative material not culturally acceptable.
- Amount of material too much or too little to cover in the time allocated to lessons.
- No guidance for teachers on handling group work and role play activities with a large class.
- Dialogues too formal and not representative of everyday speech.
- Audio material difficult to use because of problems to do with room size and technical equipment.
- Too much or too little variety in the activities.
- Vocabulary list and a key to the exercises would be helpful.
- Accompanying tests needed.

Undoubtedly much more could be added to this list, but it serves as an illustration of some of the possibilities. All aspects of the language classroom can be covered: the few examples above include (a) aspects of language use, (b) skills, (c) classroom organization, and (d) supplementary material. Some useful examples of adaptation with a particular focus on task-based learning can be found in J. Willis (1996: 145), with some simple suggestions for changing such variables as the class management or the sequence of activities; in Nunan (1999, ch. 11), with procedures for making materials more interactive; and in G. White (1998, ch. 4), with a very useful extended set of examples for dealing with listening materials to help learners to participate more.

5.4   Principles and procedures

The reasons for adapting that we have just looked at can be thought of as dealing with the modification of content, whether that content is expressed in the form of exercises and activities, texts, instructions, tests and so on. In other words, the focus is on what the materials contain, measured against the requirements of a particular teaching environment. That environment may necessitate a number of changes that will lead to greater appropriacy. This is most likely to be expressed in terms of a need to personalize, individualize or localize the content. We take 'personalizing' here to refer to increasing the relevance of

content in relation to learners' interests and their academic, educational or professional needs. 'Individualizing' will address the learning styles both of individuals and of the members of a class working closely together. 'Localizing' takes into account the international geography of English language teaching and recognizes that what may work well in Mexico City may not do so in Edinburgh or in Kuala Lumpur. Madsen and Bowen (1978) include a further category of 'modernizing', and comment that not all materials show familiarity with aspects of current English usage, sometimes to the point of being not only out of date or misleading but even incorrect.

In this section we shall now look at questions of procedure – at the main techniques that can be applied to content in order to bring about change. There are a number of points to bear in mind. Firstly, this can be seen as another kind of matching process or 'congruence', where techniques are selected according to the aspect of the materials that needs alteration. Secondly, content can be adapted using a range of techniques; or, conversely, a single technique can be applied to different content areas. For example, a reading passage might be grammatically simplified or its subject matter modified, or it can be made shorter or broken down into smaller parts. The technique of simplification can be applied to texts, to explanations and so on. Thirdly, adaptation can have both quantitative and qualitative effects. In other words, we can simply change the amount of material, or we can change its methodological nature. Finally, techniques can be used individually or in combination with others, so the scale of possibilities clearly ranges from straightforward to rather complex. All these points will be raised again in the discussion of individual techniques.

The techniques that we shall cover are as follows:

Adding, including expanding and extending
Deleting, including subtracting and abridging
Modifying, including rewriting and restructuring
Simplifying
Reordering

Each will be briefly introduced, and a few examples given. There are implications for all of them in parts II and III of this book where we consider language skills and classroom methodology. Readers interested at this stage in more detailed examples of procedures for adaptation are referred to the 'Further reading' at the end of this chapter. The first references have broadly similar lists of techniques, and offer a large number of worked examples.

1   When you have finished reading through the discussion of techniques, select one or two of them and consider their application to any materials with which you are familiar.
2   It will be useful at this stage to work on a small scale, taking single-content areas, such as an exercise, a text, or a set of comprehension questions.

Adding

The notion of addition is, on the face of it, straightforward, implying that materials are supplemented by putting more into them, while taking into account the practical effect on time allocation. We can add in this simple, quantitative way by the technique of *extending*, and might wish to do this in situations such as the following:

- The materials contain practice in the pronunciation of minimal pairs (bit/ bet, hat/hate, ship/chip) but not enough examples of the difficulties for learners with a particular L_1. Japanese speakers may need more l/r practice, Arabic speakers more p/b, Spanish speakers more b/v and so on.
- A second reading passage parallel to the one provided is helpful in reinforcing the key linguistic features – tenses, sentence structure, vocabulary, cohesive devices – of the first text.
- Our students find the explanation of a new grammar point rather difficult, so further exercises are added before they begin the practice material.

The point to note here is that adding by extension is to supply more of the same. This means that the techniques are being applied *within* the methodological framework of the original materials: in other words, the model is not itself changed.

Another, more far-reaching perspective on addition of material can be termed *expanding*. Consider these possibilities:

- The only pronunciation practice in the materials is on individual sounds and minimal pairs, However, this may be necessary but not sufficient. Our students need to be intelligible, and intelligibility entails more than articulating a vowel or a consonant correctly. Therefore, we decide to add some work on sentence stress and rhythm and on the related phenomenon of 'weak' and 'strong' forms in English. A further advantage is that students will be better able to understand naturally spoken English.
- If there is insufficient coverage of the skill of listening, the reading passage provided may also be paralleled by the provision of listening comprehension material, using the same vocabulary and ideas but presented through a different medium, making sure that it is authentic in terms of the spoken language.
- Although the new grammar material is important and relevant, the addition of a discussion section at the end of the unit will help to reinforce and contextualize the linguistic items covered, particularly if it is carefully structured so that the most useful points occur 'naturally'.

These kinds of additions are not just extensions of an existing aspect of content. They go further than this by bringing about a qualitative as well as a quantitative change. Expanding, then, as distinct from extending, adds to the

methodology by moving outside it and developing it in new directions, for instance by putting in a different language skill or a new component. This can be thought of as a change in the overall system.

Finally in this section, it is worth pointing out that additions do not always have to be made onto the end of something. A new facet of material or methodology can be introduced before it appears in the framework of the coursebook. For example, a teacher may prepare the ground for practice in an aspect of grammar or communicative function determined by the syllabus through a 'warm-up' exercise involving learners talking about themselves and their everyday lives.

Deleting or omitting

Deletion is clearly the opposite process to that of addition, and as such needs no further clarification as a term. However, although material is taken out rather than supplemented, as a technique it can be thought of as 'the other side of the same coin'. We saw in the previous section that material can be added both quantitatively (extending) and qualitatively (expanding): the same point applies when a decision is taken to omit material. Again, as with addition, the technique can be used on a small scale, for example over part of an exercise, or on the larger scale of a whole unit of a coursebook.

We shall refer to the most straightforward aspect of reducing the length of material as *subtracting* from it. The following kinds of requirements might apply:

- Our pronunciation exercises on minimal pairs contain too much general material. Since our students all have the same mother tongue and do not make certain errors, many of the exercises are inappropriate. Arabic speakers, for example, will be unlikely to have much difficulty with the l/r distinction.
- Although a communicative coursebook has been selected as relevant in our situation, some of the language functions presented are unlikely to be required by learners who will probably not use their English in the target language environment. Such functions as 'giving directions' or 'greetings' may be useful; 'expressing sympathy' or 'ordering things' may not.

Deletion in these cases, as with extending, does not have a significant impact on the overall methodology. The changes are greater if material is not only subtracted, but also what we shall term *abridged*:

- The materials contain a discussion section at the end of each unit. However, our learners are not really proficient enough to tackle this adequately, since they have learnt the language structures but not fluency in their use. The syllabus and its subsequent examination does not leave room for this kind of training.
- Students on a short course are working with communicative materials because of their instrumental reasons for choosing to learn English: some of them

wish to travel on international business, others plan to visit a target language country as tourists. The lengthy grammatical explanations accompanying each functional unit are therefore felt to be inappropriate.

Addition and deletion often work together, of course. Material may be taken out and then replaced with something else. Where the same kind of material is substituted, as for instance one set of minimal pairs for another, the internal balance of the lesson or the syllabus is not necessarily altered. The methodological change is greater when, for example, grammar practice is substituted after the omission of an inappropriate communicative function, or when a reading text is replaced by a listening passage. This takes us directly into the next section.

Modifying

'Modification' at one level is a very general term in the language applying to any kind of change. In order to introduce further possibilities for adaptation, we shall restrict its meaning here to an *internal* change in the approach or focus of an exercise or other piece of material. It is a rather important and frequently used procedure that, like all other techniques, can be applied to any aspect of 'content'. It can be subdivided under two related headings. The first of these is *rewriting*, when some of the linguistic content needs modification; the second is *restructuring*, which applies to classroom management. Let us look at some examples of each of these in turn. You will undoubtedly be able to think of many more.

Rewriting   Currently the most frequently stated requirement for a change in focus is for materials to be made 'more communicative'. This feeling is voiced in many teaching situations where textbooks are considered to lag behind an understanding of the nature of language and of students' linguistic and learning needs. Rewriting, therefore, may relate activities more closely to learners' own backgrounds and interests, introduce models of authentic language, or set more purposeful, problem-solving tasks where the answers are not always known before the teacher asks the question. The first two readings listed at the end of this chapter also contain substantial discussion and examples for making textbooks more communicative, as does chapter 9 of Cunningsworth (1984).

It is quite common for coursebooks to place insufficient emphasis on listening comprehension, and for teachers to feel that more material is required. If accompanying audio material is either not available, or cannot be purchased in a particular teaching context, then the teacher can rewrite a reading passage and deliver it orally, perhaps by taking notes from the original and then speaking naturally to the class from those notes.

Sometimes new vocabulary is printed just as a list, with explanatory notes and perhaps the mother tongue equivalent. We may wish to modify this kind of presentation by taking out the notes and writing an exercise that helps students to develop useful and generalized strategies for acquiring new vocabulary.

Equally, a text may have quite appropriate language material for a specific group, but may not 'match' in terms of its cultural content. For example, a story about an English family, with English names, living in an English town, eating English food and enjoying English hobbies can in fact be modified quite easily by making a number of straightforward surface changes.

A last example here is that of end-of-text comprehension questions. Some of these are more like a test, where students can answer by 'lifting' the information straight from the text. These questions can be modified so that students have to interpret what they have read or heard, or relate different sections of the text to each other. Chapter 6 looks at these kinds of tasks.

The point was made in the introduction to this chapter that content changes are not always written down. Adaptation of linguistic content may just require rewording by the teacher as an oral explanation.

Restructuring   For many teachers who are required to follow a coursebook, changes in the structuring of the class are sometimes the only kind of adaptation possible. For example, the materials may contain role-play activities for groups of a certain size. The logistics of managing a large class (especially if they all have the same L_1) are complex from many points of view, and it will probably be necessary to assign one role to a number of pupils at the same time. Obviously the converse – where the class is too small for the total number of roles available – is also possible if perhaps less likely.

Sometimes a written language explanation designed to be read and studied can be made more meaningful if it is turned into an interactive exercise where all students participate. For instance, it is a straightforward matter to ask learners to practise certain verb structures in pairs (say the present perfect: 'Have you been to/done X?'; or a conditional: 'What would you do if . . . ?'), and it can be made more authentic by inviting students to refer to topics of direct interest to themselves.

Modifying materials, then, even in the restricted sense in which we have used the term here, is a technique with a wide range of applications. It refers essentially to a 'modality change', to a change in the nature or focus of an exercise, or text, or classroom activity.

Simplifying

Strictly speaking, the technique of simplification is one type of modification, namely, a 'rewriting' activity. Since it has received considerable attention in its own right, it is considered here as a separate procedure. Many elements of a language course can be simplified, including the instructions and explanations that accompany exercises and activities, and even the visual layout of material so that it becomes easier to see how different parts fit together. It is worth noting in passing that teachers are sometimes on rather dangerous ground, if a wish to 'simplify' grammar or speech in the classroom leads to a distortion of natural language. For example, oversimplification of a grammatical explanation

can be misleadingly one-sided or partial: to tell learners that adverbs are always formed by adding '-ly' does not help them when they come across 'friendly' or 'brotherly', nor does it explain why 'hardly' cannot be formed from 'hard'. A slow style of speech might result in the elimination of the correct use of sentence stress and weak forms, leaving learners with no exposure to the natural rhythms of spoken English.

However, the main application of this technique has been to texts, most often to reading passages. Traditionally, the emphasis has been on changing various sentence-bound elements to match the text more closely to the proficiency level of a particular group of learners. Thus, for instance, we can simplify according to

1   *Sentence structure*. Sentence length is reduced, or a complex sentence is rewritten as a number of simpler ones, for example by the replacement of relative pronouns by nouns and pronouns followed by a main verb.
2   *Lexical content*, so that the number of new vocabulary items is controlled by reference to what students have already learned.
3   *Grammatical structures*. For instance, passives are converted to actives; simple past tense to simple present; reported into direct speech.

These kinds of criteria form the basis of many of the published graded 'simplified readers' available for English language teaching.

Simplification has a number of further implications. Firstly, it is possible that any linguistic change, lexical or grammatical, will have a corresponding stylistic effect, and will therefore change the meaning or intention of the original text. This is particularly likely with literary material, of course, but in principle it can apply to any kind of text where the overall 'coherence' can be affected. Widdowson (1979) goes into these arguments in more detail. Secondly, some teaching situations require attention to the simplification of content when the complexity of the subject matter is regarded as being too advanced. This could be the case for some scientific explanations, for example, or for material too far removed from the learners' own life experiences. Thirdly, simplification can refer not only to content, but also to the ways in which that content is presented: we may decide not to make any changes to the original text, but instead to lead the learners through it in a number of graded stages. We shall come back to this notion of 'task complexity' in the chapters on reading and listening comprehension.

Reordering

This procedure, the final one discussed in this section, refers to the possibility of putting the parts of a coursebook in a different order. This may mean adjusting the sequence of presentation within a unit, or taking units in a different sequence from that originally intended. There are limits, of course, to the scale of what teachers can do, and too many changes could result, unhelpfully, in an

almost complete reworking of a coursebook. A reordering of material is appropriate in the following kinds of situations:

- Materials typically present 'the future' by 'will' and 'going to'. However, for many learners, certainly at intermediate level and above, it is helpful to show the relationship between time reference and grammatical tense in a more accurate way. In this example we would probably wish to include the simple present and the present continuous as part of the notion of 'futurity', perhaps using 'Next term begins on 9 September' or 'She retires in 2005' as illustrations.
- The length of teaching programme may be too short for the coursebook to be worked through from beginning to end. It is likely in this case that the language needs of the students will determine the sequence in which the material will be taken. There is little point in working systematically through a textbook if key aspects of grammar, vocabulary or communicative function are never reached. For instance, if the learners are adults due to study in the target language environment, it will be necessary to have covered several aspects of the tense system and to have introduced socially appropriate functions and frequently used vocabulary.
- Finally, 'reordering' can include separating items of content from each other as well as regrouping them and putting them together. An obvious example is a lesson on a particular language function felt to contain too many new grammar points for the present proficiency level of the learners.

5.5 A framework for adaptation

There are clear areas of overlap among the various techniques discussed in this section, but it would be beyond the scope of this chapter to try to cover all the combinations and permutations. The intention here has been to offer a workable framework into which the main possibilities for adaptation can be fitted (not to offer some 'how to do' recipes, which are well covered elsewhere). Figure 5.2 shows how the considerations on which the principle of adaptation is based fit together.

1 Choose some materials with which you are familiar, or any others you would like to work with. (If you do not have any to hand, look back at the unit reprinted at the end of chapter 2.)
2 Decide on any features of the material you would like to change because it is not entirely suitable for your own teaching situation.
3 Referring as much as possible to the techniques we have been discussing, draw up some suggestions for how to adapt the material to achieve greater 'congruence'.
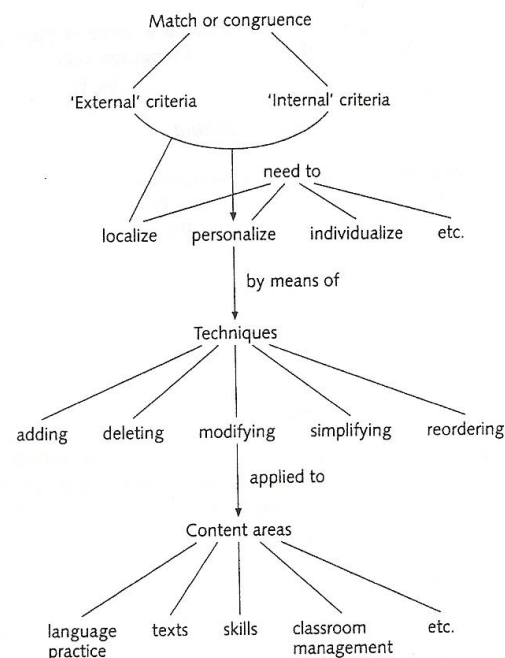4 If possible discuss with other colleagues the reasons for your decisions.

Figure 5.2   A framework for adaptation.

5.6 Conclusion

At one end of the scale, adaptation is a very practical activity carried out mainly by teachers in order to make their work more relevant to the learners with whom they are in day-to-day contact. It is, however, not just an exercise done in self-contained methodological isolation. Like all our activity as teachers, it is related, directly and indirectly, to a wider range of professional concerns. Adaptation is linked to issues of administration and the whole management of education, in so far as it derives from decisions taken about material to be adopted. Further, the need to adapt is one consequence of the setting of objectives in a particular educational context. Finally, adaptation can only be carried out effectively if it develops from an understanding of the possible design features of syllabuses and materials.

This chapter completes our discussion of the principles on which materials and methods are based. In part II we shall show how some of these principles have been expressed in relation to the concept of language skill.

5.7 Further reading

Grant, N. (1987): *Making the Most of Your Textbook*. Grant includes discussion of the principles of adaptation, illustrated by many examples. His book is particularly practical, and focuses on making material developed for the various language skills more communicative.