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Article

The Art of the Possible: The Constraints Associated with Writing Local TESOL Textbooks

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Drawing upon interviews with eight textbook authors working for a Middle Eastern Ministry of Education, this article explores the multifaceted constraints associated with the production of local TESOL textbooks. Significant challenges are at play stemming from tight production deadlines of just 2 months per textbook, thereby precluding any piloting of materials. Furthermore, severe MoE strictures regarding the form textbooks can take are in operation with regard to unit titles, moral values to be transmitted, skills and language content, and space allocated to each segment of the book. Additional constraints include the challenge of writing for a diverse target audience, the proscription of manifold taboo topics, and the lack of textbook development training the authors receive. These constraints reportedly lead to compromises in textbook quality and limit the authors' ability to produce pedagogically effective and culturally sensitive materials. The findings illuminate the complex context-specific dynamics mediating textbook production, highlighting the need for a more nuanced understanding of the local textbook production process and the constraints and challenges writers face.

Introduction

Textbooks are a key instructional resource for the English language teacher and were found to be responsible for around 83% of the classroom discourse in one study (Guerrettaz and Johnston 2013). However, concerns have been raised about the quality of these textbooks: researchers who have performed content analyses of TESOL textbooks focussing upon language, culture, and pragmatics have found the textbooks' curricula wanting. For instance, studies of textbook content which compare the language textbooks teach with corpus-attested language identify omissions of relatively frequent items or structures from the materials and/or misleading/inaccurate linguistic information (e.g. Holmes 1988; Biber and Reppen 2002; Conrad 2004; Lee 2006; Lam 2010). In terms of culture, analysts have called attention to undesirable discourses of consumerism and materialism associated with textbook materials (Kullman 2003; Sokolik 2007; Gray 2010), and how, despite less stereotypical treatments of men and women in contemporary textbooks

than was formerly the case, inequalities remain (Matsuno 2002; McGrath 2004; Goyal and Rose 2020; Gray 2023). As for studies of the treatment of pragmatics in textbooks, Meier (1997: 24) concludes that their treatment is 'arbitrary' and 'oversimplistic'. Hence Nguyen (2011) highlights how local Vietnamese-produced textbooks teach bald-on-record language of disagreement (*I completely disagree; That's wrong*) which corpora suggest speakers largely avoid in everyday exchanges (see also Handford 2010).

Given the numerous studies which present findings similar to those reported above (summarized by Harwood 2014), it is perhaps unsurprising that at times there is something of an anti-textbook discourse in the literature (see the discussion by Harwood 2005); and there may be an assumption that all of these shortcomings are the fault of the textbook writers. However, as textbook writers themselves remind us (see Mares 2003; Bell and Gower 2011; Prowse 2011; Santos 2013; Timmis 2014; Tomlinson and Masuhara 2018; Atkinson 2021a, b; Li et al. 2023), they are obliged to take into account a plethora of constraints as they author their materials, including the following:

> -Commercial constraints. Mares (2003) describes how his publisher stipulated an order for his textbook grammar syllabus similar to competing textbooks, rather than because of any evidence that such an ordering would be maximally effective pedagogically. Bell and Gower (2011) wished to include much more practice material in their global *Matters* textbook but were forced to omit most of this as their publisher limited the length of the book. Furthermore, the short period of time given to Bell and Gower (2011: 149) to complete their book meant that systematic piloting of their materials was impractical; the writers were instead reduced to depending on their "own experience and the experience of advisors."
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> -Constraints associated with target markets, including proscribed topics thought unsuitable for cultural or religious reasons. Gray's (2010) PARSNIP acronym gives a flavour of the wide range of taboo textbook topics, including those relating to sexuality, drugs, and politics. However, Yildiz and Harwood's (2024) recent study suggests that writers are far more constrained than this. Among the taboo words and concepts mentioned to Yildiz and Harwood (2024: 925) by textbook authors are smartphones ("The word 'smart' implies that the phone can think. And that's against Islam"), poverty ("The only time you see a poor person was if they start poor and get wealthy"), and celebrities (Oscar Pistorius: "Amazing running career, murdered his girlfriend.").
>
> -Ministry of education requirements for how textbooks should be written. Whether or not these seem "arbitrary" to textbook writers (Timmis' (2014: 252) reaction to being told his textbook needed to contain "three grammar points per unit"), they undoubtedly constrain the type of materials which can be produced.

Studies of textbook production can therefore give us a better understanding of the pressures publishers and textbook writers may face. Some of these pressures may appear difficult to resist—for instance, pronouncements from ministries of education on taboo words/topics. However, there may be other practices or limitations imposed on textbook writers which appear misguided, and textbook production studies can call these out. Indeed, even in the former case, where the constraints of textbook writing appear difficult to circumvent, raising awareness of these constraints will help explain some of the weaknesses researchers and practitioners may identify in textbooks (e.g. lack of coverage of certain topics). A better understanding of these commercial and cultural constraints may therefore result in more empathy for textbook writers in their formidable task of authoring materials which remain within the confines of what is possible, given the various pressures and interests they are obliged to satisfy.

A recent study of textbook writing constraints (Yildiz and Harwood 2024) focussed specifically on global textbooks and textbook writers, and so here we concentrate on *local* textbooks—that is, textbooks written for a specific region or country rather than for the world (Tomlinson and Masuhara 2018). Textbook production 'remains something of a black box' (Macgilchrist 2014: 4),

and so we explore whether/to what extent the constraints associated with local textbook writing match up with those constraints described by global textbook authors. In the local Middle Eastern context in focus, TESOL textbooks are produced by authorial teams for the local Ministry of Education (hereafter, MoE). One may anticipate that in a local authoring context writers would be less burdened with constraints, as they only have to worry about the sensitivities associated with one particular country/region. However, as we uncover below, constraints associated with local textbook authoring are manifold.

The constraints of textbook authoring in local and global contexts

We now extend our review of textbook production studies which describe the constraints associated with authoring local and global textbooks, beginning with two studies located in China and Thailand.

Li et al. (2023) is a recent study of how and why 15 Chinese textbook writers build ideological content into their materials. Writing exclusively for the Chinese market, national government policy makes clear that textbook writers are 'increasingly expected to design teaching materials that reflect locally appropriate cultural values and ideologies', and by means of qualitative interviews, Li et al. (2023) identify pressures and constraints exerted upon the writers at the macro level (through national government policy), at the institutional and group level (through textbook project leaders and fellow textbook co-authors), and at the individual level (through the writers' own ideological beliefs). At the macro level, writers were expected 'to incorporate elements reflecting Chinese cultural values and political opinions', but found this hard to do with reference to 'universal' topics covered in the textbooks such as office politics. At the meso (institutional/group) level, Li et al. (2023) present the case of Ning, who wished to feature some of Martin Luther King's writing, believing this writing would be potentially inspirational and transformative for her students. However, her textbook team leader deemed these Western texts culturally inappropriate, and she was required to excise them from her materials although she was never provided with a proper explanation of why they were felt to be problematic. Finally, at the individual level, textbook writers' own beliefs were used to justify the treatment and/or exclusion of politico-cultural content. Textbook writers chose to exclude material containing 'erotic' content, 'extreme liberalism', and 'LGBT topics' (7). One of the writers, Wu, claimed that Westerners are 'seeing through biased lenses'; another, Duan, worried that 'liberal' Western values surfacing in materials could 'have an impact on the immature students, possibly leading them astray' (7). These writers' values conformed with the government's conceptualization of 'political correctness' (8).

Ulla and Perales Jr (2021) is another study of local textbook writing practices, in this case, situated in a Thai university, where the English language teachers were required to write their own textbooks for their classes. By means of a qualitative interview and focus group, Ulla and Perales Jr's teachers identified various constraints associated with the textbook writing process, mostly relating to a perceived lack of institutional support:

i) None of the teachers had previous experience of textbook writing or had received any training in textbook writing;
ii) The amount of time teachers were given to author their textbooks was felt to be too short;
iii) The brief teachers were given to help them shape their books was inadequate and unclear; and
iv) Teachers were given no reduction in teaching load in recognition of the time and effort writing a textbook required.

In contrast to Li et al'.s (2023) study, then, here the constraints described are of a more practical and workaday nature.

An alternative methodological approach to textbook production studies, in contrast to the interview/focus group methods utilized in the studies above, is the narrative account. One such study which takes the latter approach is Timmis (2014), in which Ivor Timmis narrates his experience of the

challenges of writing a local textbook for an unnamed southeast Asian country. The textbook authoring process was mediated by the publisher and the local MoE. Timmis describes a number of constraints affecting the production process, one of which concerns a lack of local knowledge: Timmis had never previously visited the country where the book would be sold. Consequently, he felt the need to be more thoroughly briefed about the context, culture, and high-stakes exam the textbooks were expected to prepare learners for. Another knowledge-related challenge was the lack of detail regarding design specifications and methodological principles provided by the publisher to writers via a briefing document. Although this document appeared to allow a good amount of flexibility in terms of the books' design, when the team began to submit draft chapter outlines to the publisher and MoE it became apparent there were additional requirements (e.g. three grammar points per unit); and so substantial changes were needed. Cultural constraints were also evident: the publisher asked Timmis to omit references to alcohol and drugs from a reading text. At times, Timmis (2014: 256) experienced 'frustration' at the publisher's requests for revisions; however, on a number of occasions, he was able to successfully argue against the publisher's requests for changes to the materials. In sum, Timmis (2014: 260) concluded that writing a local textbook mediated by the publisher and MoE was a 'difficult and tense' task due to the challenges mentioned above, and it is interesting to note that many of the constraints identified by Ulla and Perales Jr's (2021) teachers in a non-commercial textbook production context also feature in Timmis' commercial context.

Adopting a very different methodological approach in relation to commercial textbook production, Atkinson (2013, 2021a,b) aimed to explore the writing processes of two experienced textbook writers, TW1 and TW2, by means of think aloud sessions as they designed or revised materials, interviewing the writers before and after each think aloud to understand the rationale behind their authoring decisions. TW1 was writing a textbook for special needs students with learning disabilities. Learner-related constraints surfaced as a result of teachers piloting TW1's draft materials, highlighting the very wide variation in the abilities of the learners. As a result of the piloting, TW1 was better able to cater for the teachers' and learners' needs, providing a menu of optional activities to enable teachers to offer differentiated instruction. Again in response to pilot data, TW1 altered his preferred approach of incorporating lengthy reading texts into the materials and his preference for listening dialogues rather than monologues. Explaining the alterations he made in the context of these learner constraints, TW1 remarked that the special needs teacher-pilotees 'know the students better than I do' (Atkinson 2021a: 9) and were able to provide sound advice on what worked best in the classroom with these particular learners.

In contrast to TW1, TW2 was writing a local secondary school textbook for an African country. TW2 spoke of curriculum constraints: failure to adhere to the national curriculum would have had a disastrous effect on sales figures, as the textbook would have been omitted from the local MoE's approved list. TW2 also faced constraints associated with local cultural values. Designing a fluency activity in which learners solicited advice from each other, TW2 had learners ask for advice about dating rather than about 'boring' topics 'about wanting to study and get a university degree'. Aware that her topic choice was 'slightly risqué', TW2 nevertheless said she would 'see how [the activity] goes down with editors'; although she was aware that the activity would probably be rejected, she included it because of her belief that the topic of dating was what secondary school learners 'are thinking about most of the time' and because her activity would introduce 'some kind of down to earth normal language' (Atkinson 2021b: 265-6). This episode illustrates how textbook writers may (successfully or otherwise) push back against some of the constraints they face as they draft their materials.

Most recently, Yildiz and Harwood (2024) drew upon interviews with six experienced global textbook writers to identify the following constraints:

(i) Publishers' **commercially driven approach**. Whereas writers claimed that formerly (e.g. in the 1970s), global TESOL textbook publishing was associated with more innovative, experimental approaches, contemporary approaches are much more 'cautious' and 'market-driven' (Yildiz and Harwood 2024: 917). Today's global textbook writers, then,

are obliged to produce more regimented products written to specifications 'completely defined' (11) by the publisher.

(ii) **Time**. As in Bell and Gower (2011) and MacKenzie and Baker (2022), writers reported that tight production deadlines affect the quality of their textbooks. Formerly, time constraints were less acute: 6 years would reportedly be permitted to author a textbook series, whereas nowadays the process must be completed in only 2 years, timescales confirmed by Amrani (2011: 268), who also confirms that such tight timescales mean 'this leaves little [or] no time for full piloting'. In addition, contemporary publishers employ larger author teams to get the writing done on time, rather than allowing a smaller, tight-knit author team of only one or two writers to author the series. Given this 'accelerated, atomised' (Amrani 2011: 11) process, textbook series may suffer from a lack of cohesion.

(iii) **Publisher interventions** regarding textbook content. Editors may ask for major changes in content at the last minute: for instance, the layout of the book may necessitate last-minute addition of new exercises or content deletion. Indeed, one writer reports that editors may make changes without informing authors. The impression given is that authors cannot afford to be precious about their materials, and must be willing to quickly make changes due to constraints outside of their control.

(iv) **Quality of feedback** textbook writers receive on their draft materials. Publishers employ readers to review (rather than pilot) draft materials, but writers claimed these readers did not always have the necessary pedagogic expertise to make informed judgements. Rather than recruiting the most qualified, experienced readers, publishers may choose readers who they believe can influence schools' textbook adoption decisions. Publishers also solicit feedback on draft materials from market representatives, some of whom may have limited or no classroom experience. Examples are given of highly dubious feedback from these market representatives that resulted in textbook writers' content being deleted or substantially modified.

(v) **Diversity of the target audience**. Global textbook writers author textbooks sold across highly diverse markets (e.g. including Middle Eastern, Latin American, and European countries). The writers therefore spoke of severe limitations on the materials they could author which would be deemed suitable for all of these territories.

(vi) **Taboo topics**. The writers were given details of cultural sensitivities and lists of proscribed topics, and all agreed that they were required to avoid the taboos which feature in Gray's (2010) PARSNIP acronym. However, global textbook writers also receive publisher feedback relating to potentially objectionable content. At least some of this feedback is seen by writers as overly cautious, for fear of attracting the disapproval of local ministry reviews and exclusion from an approved list of books in one of the target markets. Proscribed words include 'hamburger', 'because it contains the word "ham"', and even certain names for textbook characters: 'Marzia too Iranian, could upset Saudis', 'David is too Israeli' (Yildiz and Harwood 2024: 925).

We close this review of textbook writing constraints by referencing a study by Prowse (2011), which describes a typical materials production cycle in the 1990s, drawing from his own experience and those of other textbook writers. Of relevance here is the part of the chapter titled 'Working with publishers', in which writers refer to a number of constraints they confront. It is stressed that the market is the primary constraint:

> For most UK publishers the influence of the marketing team over almost every aspect of materials production is now paramount, particularly as more market-specific courses are now being produced. It is input from marketing which sets the parameters within which the writer operates.' (Prowse 2011: 160)

Various kinds of publishing constraints are reported, too. There are design constraints connected with the layout of the book, over which the writer has no control: 'Frequently a design for the look

of the student page is finalised before much of the writing is done, and authors write to fit the design'. (161). Then, near the end of the production process, '"finished" units will be copy-edited and sent back to us, usually requesting drastic cuts'. (160). Although this account of textbook publishing is less recent, we cite it here as we made use of it when designing our interview instrument, as we explain in what follows.

The final study we review in detail here is Gok (2019). Located in Turkey, this is a study of local textbook production for primary school learners which is noteworthy because some of the constraints we have explicated above are conspicuously absent. For instance, Gok's textbook authors were not constrained by their local MoE; however, this is because the textbook was produced for a chain of private rather than state schools and did not need to secure MoE approval. In addition, the time constraints we commonly read about in other accounts (e.g. MacKenzie and Baker 2022) are much less pressing here, which meant that it was possible for Gok's writers to build in extensive piloting during the production process: the authors themselves piloted many of the materials both during and after designing them; and two local teachers from across Turkey piloted every textbook unit, presumably to ensure that the book was effective and appropriate for both urban and rural areas alike. Nonetheless, the textbook writers still had to make various compromises. They carefully designed the materials based on a two-year process of needs analyses involving extended classroom observations and teacher input, but when they showed the draft syllabus of the textbook to local teachers, the writers were obliged to make revisions. One revision concerned the textbook's writing activities: due to the relatively late stage at which Turkish children begin learning the alphabet, the teachers argued that writing activities were unsuitable for inclusion at the start of the book. While the writers disagreed with the teachers' stance, they made the changes, acknowledging that if the authoring team had insisted the writing activities remained in Unit 1, 'teachers would have been up in arms' and that a pragmatic approach was needed: 'you do not want to upset the customers'. (Gok 2019: 93). We mention this study to nuance our account somewhat, to make it clear that although it is undeniable that textbook writers will always be obliged to make compromises of some sort, a host of politico-contextual factors will determine the nature and the severity of these compromises. In Gok's study, the constraints are much less pronounced than in the other studies reviewed previously.

In conclusion, while the constraints and compromises global textbook writers may face in textbook production have been discussed (Mares 2003; Singapore Wala 2003; Gray 2010; Amrani 2011; Prowse 2011; Yildiz and Harwood 2024), there has been less focus upon the constraints on *local* textbook writers, and such accounts as exist are often rather brief and lack detailed exemplification, and so here we explore these constraints further to add to extant studies demystifying the textbook production process. The present research duly focuses on the constraints faced by authors working for a local MoE in a Middle Eastern country. Our study contributes to the understanding of textbook production by examining the following research question:

What are the constraints associated with locally produced textbooks?

Methodology

Taking a constructivist approach (see Cresswell 2007), we consider textbooks as commercial, cultural, and social artefacts that are shaped by tighter and looser networks of people, sometimes in accord, at other times less so in their vision for the eventual product. To substantiate our understanding of textbook production in general, and of the constraints operating upon authors in particular, we solicited insider accounts from textbook authors. The data reported were collected as part of a larger project investigating materials development in international and local contexts.

Recruitment of local textbook writers started by determining which countries produce their own textbooks. Contacting the teachers we knew in as many contexts as possible, we asked about the materials used. We then acquired the books in question and reached out to the authors via their social media accounts and contact information stated in their online professional profiles. Leaflets inviting participation in our interview-based project, detailing the project's aim

and scope and the types of questions we would ask, were sent out to potential participants. As a result, a group of authors working on the same textbook writing project led by a local Middle Eastern MoE agreed to participate. The first author then visited the country, conducting face-to-face interviews with eight writers (identified as LA [local author] 1-8; see Table 1) in January 2019. All participants held degrees in disciplines related to the English language (e.g. English/American Literature or English Language Teaching). However, profile information is given only in general terms, and details like gender and specific qualifications are omitted to protect identities.

Aiming to explore why locally produced textbooks are the way they are, our semi-structured interview guide included questions on topics such as textbook writing as an occupation, participants' beliefs with regard to textbook content and their users, and the place of research in materials writing.

We wished to determine the production constraints associated with locally produced materials, so participants were asked to talk about any production problems they had experienced and how the quality of their materials could have been enhanced. Writers were asked to comment on prompt cards based on the existing literature concerning constraints, such as Gray's (2010) PARSNIP list of taboo topics and Prowse's (2011) description of the process of textbook writing. Interviewees were asked whether they were normally provided with publisher guidelines and whether they had ever violated these guidelines (cf. Atkinson's (2013, 2021a,b) TW2).

Data analysis

For the research project, we conducted interviews in two phases. Firstly, authors writing for a local, Middle Eastern market were interviewed. Secondly, authors working for different global publishers were interviewed to compare local and global contexts/circumstances. The audio-recorded interviews totalled some 26.7 hours (1604 mins) in duration (490 mins for the local context) and were transcribed in their entirety verbatim. Coding and analysis were conducted using NVivo.

The coding process started by assigning 'expected codes' to the data (Creswell and Creswell 2018: 270). Issues relating to constraints we had anticipated would arise were piloting, adhering to guidelines, and receiving and responding to editorial feedback, as evidenced in the studies reviewed above. Then the data extracts therein were closely examined, leading to the development of new nodes, sub-themes, and themes. After the themes were categorized, the list of existing descriptive and *in-vivo* codes was revisited to identify links between them. Charmaz (2006: 60) defines this process as axial coding, which 'relates categories to subcategories, specifies the properties and dimensions of a category, and reassembles the data the researcher has fractured to give coherence to emerging categories'. As part of this process, we compared each piece of data classified under each category to identify redundancies and similarities. Then, some codes were subsumed by other codes, while others were dropped altogether. As a result, a coding manual consisting of 59 codes was generated. The complete body of data was reviewed again based on the alphabetized codes, and a map of interrelations was created. The process of coding was completed by applying the codebook to the data for the final time, with all the codes now clearly defined and categorized.

A qualitative higher education researcher coded a complete interview using our nodes for the purposes of establishing inter-coder reliability. Along with our nodes, one of the interview transcripts that the first author had independently coded was shared with the coder. We reached

Table 1: Participant profiles

Participant	LA1	LA2	LA3	LA4	LA5	LA6	LA7	LA8
Years of textbook writing experience	8	5	8	3	4	2	15	2
Level of Education	PhD	MA	MA	BA	BA	BA	BA	BA

agreement on 95.6% (89 out of 93) of the codes with the second coder before further discussion. We either made the changes recommended by the second coder or explained the rationale behind our decision to stand by our original coding decision. At the end of the process, we agreed that all codes were correct and accurate. Finally, we carefully went through all other interviews to detect any instances which could have raised similar disagreements, but no other instances were detected.

The context of local textbook production

Before reporting our findings, we first describe the context, as understanding the contextual textbook production conditions will enable readers to better understand the accompanying constraints. In the local setting, there are two types of employment options available as a textbook writer: (i) work as an in-house or freelance writer for a private local publishing house or (ii) work as a member of an authorial team employed by the MoE. Our participants fall into the latter category. While working as teachers in state schools, they had been asked by the MoE to become textbook writers. LA 2 explained that when the MoE needed to recruit textbook writers, they looked for teachers with postgraduate degrees in what they regarded as relevant disciplines (e.g. TESOL, English/American Literature) and also sought evaluative references from the teachers' employers. Neither their employment status, salary, or job title changed[1], and the team met every day at a school where they worked on their textbook writing project. When there were no active writing projects, the authors resumed their jobs as schoolteachers.

State school textbooks are provided by three main sources: (i) international publishers, (ii) local private publishers, and (iii) the MoE. Local private publishers can be further subdivided according to whether their textbooks are subject to MoE inspection: any private publisher can submit their textbooks for inspection and approval. Materials are evaluated by a panel of specialists consisting of (i) teachers or scholars with a minimum classroom experience of 5 years and (ii) specialists holding a doctoral degree in the related field. Textbooks that reach a certain base point in terms of their adherence to the curriculum, their pedagogical and linguistic soundness, and the appropriacy of their visuals and content are approved for use in state schools for a 5-year period. After 5 years, the books are discarded and a new series of textbooks is written that is aligned with the latest national curriculum; regular changes to the curriculum render existing books obsolete.

Based on the updated curriculum, MoE specialists prepare detailed specifications stating the scope and sequence for each textbook series, itemizing the following information for each unit, page, and activity:

(i) unit titles (e.g. Invitations and Celebrations)
(ii) main values to be covered (e.g. honesty, helping others, patriotism, justice)
(iii) sub-values to be covered (e.g. keeping promises, hospitability, awareness of cultural heritage, sharing)
(iv) where the values are to be covered and types of activities (e.g. content A [e.g. friendship] or B [e.g. helping others], reading text and activity 8 for sub-value 3)
(v) pages and extent (e.g. pp. 113-118 for Content A, unit 8)
(vi) skills practised in the exercise and unit content (e.g. reading, speaking, writing for Content A, unit 8)

The writers are responsible for creating texts, visuals, and tasks which conform with these highly specific directives, fitting exactly within the given number and structure of the pages. The textbook writing team also needs to comply with the curriculum, which includes guidelines on the vocabulary, phrases and structures, skills, achievements, and values to be covered within the textbooks.

Once the guidelines are received and roles are allocated, the team starts working on the textbook series. Each book is written by a smaller team of three authors. Following intragroup

feedback and revisions, drafts are sent out to MoE panels that evaluate/give feedback on content according to pedagogical and cultural appropriacy. The changes required by the panel are non-negotiable. After further revision, hard copies of books are distributed to schools and made available on an MoE online portal. No piloting or trialling of the materials is required by the MoE before distribution and use.

The country and therefore the target audience for the books is diverse in terms of cultural background and academic/proficiency levels. This is because socioeconomic/cultural circumstances differ dramatically across regions, resulting in differences in the quality of language education students receive according to the schools they attend as well as the technological and communicative opportunities they can access. While students in some schools have 6–8 hours of English classes per week, in other schools this is limited to 2–4 hours. However, the same books are distributed to all schools across the country. The textbooks aim to provide teaching material for 6 to 8 hours per week (114–152 hours over 19 weeks on average). As a result, schools with 2–4 hours of English classes per week only have the time to cover approximately a third of the book. This situation contributes to dramatic differences in students' proficiency levels.

The most important constraints in the process of textbook production in this particular context, as reported by the authors, are lack of ample time, MoE interventions, lack of training for authors, lack of principle in decision-making, diversity of the user audience and the proscription of various taboo topics. Each of these constraints is examined in detail below.

Constraints associated with the textbook production process

Time

One of the most important and complained about constraints is the shortness of time allocated for textbook production. Only 6 to 8 months are permitted for the production of an entire textbook series (nine books), and only about 2 months for a single book. The MoE's deadlines are non-negotiable:

> **LA 2:** (*talking about the latest project he was involved in*) Authoring team were told [by the MoE] that they needed to write a group of books. There were four books and four more were needed in two months. The authoring team were worried that it was impossible, but [capital city] wouldn't understand, they want these between the covers no matter what.

These compressed deadlines result in mistakes creeping in, and the deadlines prevent the authors taking steps they would ideally take to make textbooks better, such as more rigorous checking. LA 5 also stated that lack of ample time prevented the team from being able to do enough research on the topics their material focussed on. For instance, for a unit on space travel, authors read news, blogs, and gathered information on the topic, but tight timeframes meant preparation time was inadequate:

> **LA 5:** Even when you write a small bit, you need to do research on it and learn what you are talking about. This takes a lot of time. You need to gather a lot of information. You also need to transmit as much information as possible with as few words as is needed. It is hard and requires a lot of reading. Research takes a lot of time even if we need to do a very small work.

Additionally, since the time devoted to development of textbooks is so limited, piloting is impractical. Recall also that textbooks are produced in 5-year cycles, after which they are discontinued and replaced. Although these new textbooks reflect MoE syllabus changes, where the syllabus has remained the same, some of the materials will be the same/similar to previous textbooks. Therefore another frustration is that the lack of in-use evaluation makes the improvement of existing materials impossible:

> **LA 2**: We cannot fully experience and accomplish all of the processes in writing materials. The books are changed without taking evaluations/feedback from teachers at schools. […] We are experiencing this pointless circle. Then we are also unable to see any results on how we did, as changes are made all the time.

Lastly, time constraints prevent authors from producing more flexible, adaptable materials. The writing team is aware that students' levels of proficiency vary markedly, not least because the number of hours timetabled for English lessons varies across the country. Although authors favour the idea of developing materials to aid teachers in differentiating their instruction and catering for different levels of proficiency, the very tight deadlines prevent this:

> **LA 5**: We would love to do it if we had time. We like to put in content that will help teachers who deal with students at insufficient levels but it takes time. Our biggest problem is time. All we can do is to try and stick with the curriculum.

MoE intervention

The MoE provides writers with detailed, rigid authoring guidelines. These guidelines include unit titles, skills to be practised, and values to be transmitted that limit the freedom of authors in their textbook design. However, the MoE's impact is also seen through the self-censorship that writers un/consciously apply as they anticipate how MoE officials will evaluate draft materials:

> LA 3: There was an extreme sports section. We talked about excitement and 'Wow, it is awesome!' kind of things. But then we made it softer, saying 'These can be good but you must get training for…' sort of thing. [The MoE] may think like, 'What if a kid wants to try these?' Maybe it can actually happen too, so we removed 'wow!' and 'awesome' and 'exciting'. It became like 'Extreme sports require training and caution'.

MoE unit titles such as 'Travelling abroad' must also be used, despite writers' desire to avoid this type of 'touristic' content, given their awareness that many socioeconomically disadvantaged learners will find such content difficult to relate to:

> **LA 5**: (*regarding the cultural appropriacy of materials for learners living in rural areas*)
>
> …it is hard for students. In those places, students may have never been on a holiday in their lives. But if the unit title is tourism or holiday, you have to talk about these, there is nothing you can do. We receive it as a unit title, and we have to write it like that.

The MoE may ask authors to remove whole sections of material they consider inappropriate; and time constraints are foregrounded again in LA 4's quote below because of the last-minute nature of the changes required:

> **LA 4**: While we were writing the [textbook title] series—we were giving the vocabulary on physical appearance—we gave the films for which Hollywood stars received an Oscar for the best make-up to show how their appearances changed. We thought we had done a great job and put [in] really engaging photos, too. That section was sent back to us. One of them was a horror movie, we changed that for the kids not to be affected negatively. But it turned out those artists had other movies and 'adult' movies, so they asked us to remove that part. They had such strict limitations that we were able to use almost no actors. We had to change that and do something else quickly.

Other examples foreground a politically led approach to constraints on content. LA 6 described how the MoE required removal of references to Shakespeare on the grounds that he was thought to be homosexual:

> **LA 6**: What made me sad and surprised the most was when references to Shakespeare were removed. I felt very helpless at that moment. Because we teach English to these students and imagine that they will go to England. Even if Shakespeare is homosexual, that does not prevent him from being a great figure in English literature. We wanted the kids to hear of Shakespeare from us. What is wrong with when we put a small part of Romeo and Juliet in our workbook as an activity in a unit titled 'Love'?

Similar MoE interventions are described in more detail later in our Taboo topics section.

The content of the books is carefully reviewed by MoE specialists and the Ministry panel, and the appropriacy of any content is apparently flagged when they see the smallest chance of it being inappropriate for students. The interviewees reported that visuals were commonly rejected, and this censorship is considered one of the reasons why authors' local textbooks are not as engaging or as well designed as their global equivalents:

> **LA 6:** […] I still don't think we are close to the visual quality in international textbooks such as [name of international publisher] in terms of engaging the students. […] There have been many visuals that were not approved.

Brief shelf life

Another constraint is the textbooks' brief shelf life. A textbook series is produced within 6 to 8 months, used for up to 5 years (although in most cases, not more than 2 years), and replaced with a new series and/or revised versions of previous textbooks. There is no time for any field-testing. LA 2's frustration with this state of affairs is clear:

> **Interviewer**: In these books, is there anything/any part you would do differently when you look back on them?
>
> **LA 2**: Of course there is. For all of them. But we cannot fully experience and accomplish all of the processes. We did not have the chance to fully understand and evaluate the piloting process of the books. As the programmes/curriculum keeps changing in every two to three years, the periods for writing and using at schools are not enough.

The ever-changing nature of the curriculum and the brief shelf life of the textbooks means continual production churn and writers' diminishing enthusiasm, since they are unable to get a proper sense of how their materials are used, what their strengths and weaknesses are, and how they can be made more effective.

Lack of training

Our authors are schoolteachers who became textbook writers because they were recommended to MoE officials as the need arose for additional writers. They learned textbook writing on the job. However, they felt they would have benefitted from textbook development training. For instance, LA 6 noted that she is still waiting to be trained, having already worked as an author for several years:

> **LA 6**: I started working as a member of the team, but I was waiting, like 'When are they going to invite me for the training?'. […] I was, of course, disappointed. There is no time for training, there is time for nothing for us as we have internalised this understanding of 'It'll be all right on the night'. […] We had to learn it all by observing and trying. We learnt from the experienced members of the team. I am still expecting proper training. But I don't want this training from someone from [name of their country]. Who trained them in the first place, right?

LA 3 also underlines their perceived need for 'native speaker' training:

> **LA 3**: …we are not a native speaker…. We need to learn how to write materials to teach their language from them.

We may question LA 3's belief that 'native speaker, international' textbook authors would provide superior instruction to a local author, but this was a common belief across the team, also apparent from LA 6's quote above. The authors think materials development training would potentially help them to blend MoE aims and objectives into given units and prepare content more confidently; and note once again in the below excerpt the perceived superiority of 'native speaker' training to accomplish this:

> **LA 3**: Yes, this is a weakness for us, it would be much better if we had [training]. We talk about this and think, 'If only we were in contact with the world-famous publishers and know how they do this job'. At the end of the day, we are writing books about a foreign language and are not native speakers so we unconsciously cannot think the way they do. While expressing a topic, we sometimes have difficulty in figuring out how a native speaker would phrase that particular topic. It would be better if we could learn from the professionals.

There is therefore an additional perceived constraint emerging in excerpts like the above: the constraint of authors' L2 status.

Lack of principle

Another constraint is the perceived lack of principled decision-making regarding selection of textbook topics, allocation of authoring roles, and planning and writing generally. Different levels of the same textbook series may be written by different authors. It was felt that this process results in the production of textbooks which lack an overall rationale and approach to key elements, like the level of difficulty and continuity from one book to another:

> **LA 3**: [*Name of the series*] was prepared in A1-A2-A3-B1 [CEFR] levels… Each level was written by different groups. For instance, I used A1.2 myself and was satisfied with it, but A2.1 was killing me. It wasn't flowing. I said, 'How can this be published?' while I was using it. You can't engage the students, can't handle the book [as a teacher]….

Diversity of audience

Our writers agreed their target audience differs dramatically in terms of their social and economic opportunities, their daily activities, and what they do in their spare time. For instance, students in the parts of the country which attract tourists may see the need to acquire English. However, students in other regions may be unlikely to spend their weekends at the beach or on an international holiday. Hence, although the situations represented in the textbooks as per MoE requirements may be familiar to some students, they may be far removed from the experience of others:

> **LA 5**: The name of the unit is 'Travel' and 'Different types of holidays' and divided into subheadings like 'Spa holiday, Beach holiday', etc….. Of course, it is a sore point that very few students can actually go on a holiday.

Nonetheless, other writers were more pragmatic. While they acknowledged the difficulties a diverse audience could cause for authoring suitable textbook materials, they felt it was impractical to aspire to satisfy users' needs in every way:

> **LA 1**: You can't make everyone happy because are we going to localise the local? There are many contexts within the [name of the country] context. Different books can be written for east, west, north and south, but I don't think that's realistic. You cannot please everyone. Even individuals are different…, so a middle way is needed.

Instructional time varies across the country, but the same books are used regardless, causing difficulties for teachers who are allocated less time for English classes. However, the writers are bound by MoE guidelines, including far more materials than these teachers can cover:

> **LA 8**: This book is unfortunately distributed to all schools. It is very normal that teachers who do only two to four hours swear at us. They are right in that they say, 'How can I get through this book in so few hours?'. It is impossible for teachers to cover the whole book and stay on track.

The problem for these teachers who are allocated less time for instruction LA 8 refers to is that students take nationwide exams at the end of secondary schooling based upon the curriculum; and so students are expected to have covered the textbooks in their entirety.

Taboo topics

Taboo topics are those purposefully excluded from textbooks. Although the MoE does not provide a list of taboos, there are certain frames of reference in the minds of the authors as well as Ministry officials with regard to what can/cannot be included in textbook content.

Gray's (2010) PARSNIP taboos—politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, -isms (i.e. ideologies), and pork—are regarded as taboos in the local context. In particular, alcohol, sex, narcotics, and pork are said to be definite taboos which cannot be mentioned in any shape or form. However, the approach to the topics of politics/ideologies and religion can sometimes be more flexible depending on which religion, political organization, or idea is represented. For example, references to religion can be approved as long as they represent Islam; and eids, the two festivals that are celebrated by all Muslims, are recommended for inclusion by the MoE instead of festivals from other cultures.

> **Interviewer:** Do you mention alcohol?
>
> **LA 8:** No, I mean, there is no mention of it in any way. Visual, etc, never. […] Religion can be if it is our religion.
>
> **Interviewer**: How can that be mentioned?
>
> **LA 8**: We are asked to mention it. Eids, for example. They [The MoE] say, we get criticisms such as 'Festivals are mentioned but why not the eids?'. We put in festivals from around the world to enhance the cultural knowledge of learners and they say, 'Don't we have our own festivals, our eids?

As the taboos are unwritten rules in this particular context, participants shared their previous experience regarding topics they were requested to remove/exclude from textbooks, and Table 2 illustrates the wide range of proscribed topics. This range goes well beyond the predictable (e.g. guns and violence) to include much less obvious (and questionable) topics (e.g. flamingos).

This extension of taboos into less predictable territories underscores the particular nature of politico-cultural sensitivities within our local context. The proscription of seemingly benign subjects, such as flamingos, Shakespeare, and yoga, alongside more traditionally controversial topics, like guns, death, violence, and nudity, came as a surprise even for our authors who were highly familiar with the local context.

Discussion

Many of the constraints identified by our local textbook writers match up to some extent with constraints described in previous studies, most of which focus on global textbook production. However, more severe constraints are reported by our authors. The frustratingly short deadlines which preclude piloting echo similar complaints by local (Singapore Wala 2003; Santos 2013; Ulla and Perales Jr 2021) and global (Bell and Gower 2011) textbook writers alike. Nevertheless, while Amrani (2011) and Yildiz and Harwood (2024) speak of two-year textbook series deadlines, for our

Table 2: Taboo topics

Taboo	What happened	Why
Guns and violence	Images representing guns were removed	Inappropriate for young learners
Death	A gravestone image was removed	Too depressing
Flamingo	A photo of a flamingo bird was removed	Paedophilic connotation
Male-female love	Romeo and Juliet was removed	Culturally inappropriate
Extreme sports	Story of a boy who was skateboarding on a train was removed	Dangerous example for students
Stories with unhappy/ unpleasant details	Astronaut dog Laika's story was removed	Too depressing as the dog died on the mission
Bar or home party	Content about 'bar' party was first recommended to become 'home' party and finally edited to become 'classroom celebration'	Culturally inappropriate
Pyjama parties	A drawing of girls chatting in pyjamas was removed	Girls staying at somebody else's house is considered inappropriate
Celebrities with bad reputations	References to some actors/actresses were removed	Disputes between the celebrities and the government
Yoga	Reference to yoga as a free time activity was removed	Culturally inappropriate
Shakespeare	References to Shakespeare and his works (e.g. Romeo and Juliet) was removed	Shakespeare is thought to be homosexual
Nudity	Images of women were photoshopped to cover parts of their bodies	Culturally inappropriate
Minorities	Colours in artwork which appear next to one another are the colours of the flag of a disputed geo-cultural region of the local context. Artwork removed.	Political disputes between ethnic minorities within the country
Religious symbols (other than Islam)	An image was edited to remove decorative work at the top of Big Ben which could be mistaken for a cross.	Culturally inappropriate

writers timescales are shorter still, with just 6 to 8 months for a series—2 months per textbook. Another oft-reported constraint by global textbook writers (see Gray 2010) concerns taboo topics. Ludwig and Summer (2023) have recently expanded and updated these PARSNIP taboo topics to include issues such as mental health, human rights, non-drug addictions (e.g. video game addiction), and cyberbullying, but Yildiz and Harwood's (2024) global textbook writers' descriptions of a plethora of taboo topics suggest that proscribed topics are even more extensive than is sometimes appreciated, and findings from our local context are no different, where some of the proscriptions (e.g., Shakespeare, flamingos) seem absurd. The only study we reviewed above which speaks of a degree of proscription somewhat akin to that described by our writers is Li et

al. (2023), which describes a range of politico-cultural constraints and expectations associated with Chinese textbook content. The constraints around religion are interesting in that, contrary to the PARSNIP model, our local writers have the freedom to incorporate religious references. But this freedom only extends to Islam, references to other religions being proscribed. Looked at positively, the ability to include references to the country's dominant religion imbues the textbooks with a distinctive local flavour; but viewed differently, the MoE policy constitutes nothing less than erasure (cf. Gray 2023). The constraints associated with religio-cultural references, then, are far removed from the recommendations made by scholars like Risager (2022) who argue that textbooks should enable intercultural encounters partly by means of textbook materials referencing all of the world's religions. Meanwhile, other writers (Mares 2003; Timmis 2014) refer to MoE/publisher directives regarding textbook content, but the degree of directiveness we read about in other contexts seems less extreme than in the present study. Our textbook writers were not only given unit titles and lists of topics and functions they had to cover; they were also required to transmit specific moral values in specific parts of the book and have their material on any given topic run to a particular number of pages.

There are some clear points of divergence between constraints highlighted in previous studies and in ours. In global textbook production studies, there is much talk of publishers' market-driven approach (e.g. Mares 2003; Prowse 2011), but this was not the case here; our writers were producing textbooks for the MoE on a not-for-profit model. And so it was the various MoE strictures writers faced throughout the production process that were stressed. Despite their wealth of enviro-contextual knowledge, these local writers felt powerless to design their textbooks to be maximally effective pedagogically. They were well aware some schools devoted many more instructional hours to English than others. They were also aware socially disadvantaged learners may lack the opportunities to interact with proficient speakers of English (by means of technology, by means of encounters in tourist locations or in larger or more international cities). Yet our writers felt unable to build the required levels of differentiation and flexibility into the materials because of MoE design requirements. Contrast also the compromises made by TW1 in Atkinson (2021a). Recall that TW1 made various compromises given the learner constraints his special needs teacher-pilotees made him aware of, removing lengthy reading passages and the reduction of spoken dialogues because he reasonably concluded that his pilotees 'know the students better than I do' (Atkinson 2021a: 9), given that TW1 was not a special needs expert. In the case of our local writers, however, things are different: they are experienced English language teachers in the context, and are all too familiar with the various contextual constraints. And yet they are prevented from writing the type of textbook they wish to author which they believe would better serve the needs of the local context in all its diversity, in contrast to the local textbook writers described in Santos (2013), Gok (2019), and Ulla and Perales Jr (2021). Like TW1, our writers compromise because of constraints; but unlike TW1, they do not believe the compromises forced upon them benefit anybody—certainly not the learners or teachers.

Another contrast with previous studies is that our writers had nothing to say about readers' or pilotees' reports on their material, as short deadlines meant there was no time for any sort of trialling. Some other production accounts of local textbooks (e.g. Krantz et al 2022) show how the writers received feedback on their activities from local teachers, providing useful evaluations of exercise types which are well or less favourably received. In contrast, our textbook writers were never able to arrange for teacher evaluations of their books because of their submission deadlines.

Similarly absent from our writers' accounts of textbook production are narratives of cooperation and collaboration between writers and teachers seen in three recent studies (Shu et al. 2023, 2024; Xu et al. 2023; see also Ziebarth et al. 2009; Gok 2019). All three studies report mutually beneficial effects of such collaboration: as Shu et al. (2024: 41) assert, trialling, discussion, and co-authoring of materials involving both textbook writers and classroom teachers over a two-year period resulted in 'multi-directional knowledge flow, co-creation of new knowledge, and positive emotional interactions'. It is important to emphasize that collaboration in these

studies is not restricted to post-production trialling; textbook writers worked with teachers to hone the materials to the needs of the context *throughout* the production process, from the initial stages when activities were first proposed all the way through to their final instantiations. Unfortunately, the highly pressured conditions within which our writers were obliged to author their textbooks meant no such collaboration was possible.

Also distinctive is our authors' desire for textbook development training, which corresponds to the need identified in the literature (see Wette 2010; McGrath 2013; Ulla and Perales Jr 2021) for a focus on textbooks to feature more prominently in pre- and in-service training. We would assert that formal and informal opportunities to trial, discuss, and co-author materials with practitioners, similar to the processes described in the studies cited above (Shu et al. 2023, 2024; Xu et al. 2023), could constitute useful forms of training. But we should also note the insecurity underlying our authors' beliefs that only 'international', 'native speaker' textbook writers could train them to the required standards, and we are obliged to add the writers' L2 status as a further perceived constraint. However much we may feel such beliefs are misguided, being associated as they are with a native speakerist discourse, that is what emerges from the data. Indeed, because our authors felt handicapped by their lack of training in textbook writing and by their L2 status, there was a sense that tight MoE surveillance, normally viewed as a negative, helped ensure they avoided the most egregious language errors in their textbooks:

> **LA 1**: There is a control mechanism above us. We often have problems, but it also has positive effects in terms of guidance, assessment and evaluation, etc. Even our smallest comma is reviewed fifty times. This is actually pedagogically good. Okay, sometimes there are problems in terms of restricting certain things, but we are monitored by an expert eye…, visuals are opened pixel by pixel and the content is looked at. This is actually very important.

Similarly, Vu and Pham's (2023) Vietnamese textbook writers speak of how they were grateful for their publishers' scrutiny in identifying gender imbalances in their draft materials. At least some of the constraints and compromises which are associated with textbook production, then, can be viewed more positively—some of the time (see also similar arguments in Mares 2003; Bell and Gower 2011). It is also worth noting that some of the Chinese local textbook authors in Li et al. (2023: 7), who are subject to heavy scrutiny and surveillance of the politico-cultural content of their materials, raise no objections to this, since their own beliefs and values reportedly accord with governmental policy, the writers warning of the dangers of 'liberal' values corrupting 'immature' learners.

That being said, in this local scenario, the associated constraints are mostly seen negatively by our participants. These writers receive no training and work to very short, strict deadlines on textbooks that are distributed to learners from diverse backgrounds, and textbook production is heavily controlled by the MoE and influenced by the politico-cultural context. The authors believe that, given the necessary time and training, the textbooks they previously produced could have been more engaging, culturally sensitive, and better designed. Our study highlights how textbook writing is mediated and constrained—particularly by the MoE and by wider politico-cultural aspects in this case. Therefore, although by our writers' own admission there were quality issues associated with their materials, unlike in some of the anti-textbook discourse in the literature (see Harwood 2005), this lack of quality cannot be laid exclusively at the door of our authors; it is evident that producing pedagogically sound textbooks in this local context quickly and on time, to please the MoE and satisfy the needs of a diverse range of learners, is a formidable undertaking. Our textbook writers were clear that although some constraints they faced were understandable (e.g. the obligation to avoid taboo topics like guns and violence), many of the constraints they faced were far less defensible, made their lives harder, and compromised the quality of their products.

Our findings should provide much food for thought for MoEs which have local textbook production and adoption policies, whether these MoEs are located in the Middle East, in common with our study, or elsewhere. Clearly, our MoE is associated with a number of frankly poor practices:

changing syllabuses and textbooks very frequently, giving textbook writers such tight strictures that they are prevented from building differentiation into their materials, and giving them far too little time to obtain reader reports and to conduct extensive piloting of draft materials. All of these practices should be changed.

The way our MoE recruits and develops its textbook writers also needs urgent attention. We suggest in-service textbook writing development and mentoring could be enhanced by ministries following the practices described in the accounts above which promote co-authoring, reflective exchanges with practitioners, and piloting (Ziebarth et al. 2009; Hoang 2018; Gok 2019; Shu et al. 2023; Xu et al. 2023). At present, our textbook writers are stuck in a non-reflective, hasty cycle of production; they need to be freed up to obtain the input of other stakeholders (teachers, learners), to pilot their materials extensively, and to have the capacity to reflect upon their practices and grow as textbook developers. There are many appealing arguments put forward in favour of locally produced textbooks versus their global equivalents (e.g. Harwood 2014; Dendrinos 2015; Tomlinson and Masuhara 2018; Gok 2019; Ulla and Perales Jr 2021; Buchanan and Norton 2022; Krantz, Norton, and Buchanan 2022; Mishan 2022): for instance, Tomlinson and Masuhara (2018) claim that the more distant the textbook writers and users are from each other geographically, culturally, and linguistically, the more likely the mismatch between the materials and the target users' needs and wants. Accordingly we see much potential for local textbooks to better meet the needs of learners and teachers than global equivalents—but local does not necessarily mean better if writers are so constrained as to make authoring a quality, field-tested product impossible.

This qualitative study is limited in terms of size and scale, and our review of the literature reveals that production conditions elsewhere vary, many textbook writers being happily less constrained than the writers described here. Nonetheless, our data serve as useful warnings to all ministries and publishers of the deleterious consequences stemming from various constraints placed upon textbook production. Future researchers could usefully adopt a more ethnographic approach to investigations of textbook production by shadowing textbook writers throughout the cycle in order to generate richer data. Similarly, Atkinson's (2021a,b) think-aloud design would generate much fuller perspectives on the part of the writers. Engagement with other actors in the production process, not least editors, would also strengthen future work to bring us a fuller appreciation of the art of the possible in materials development.

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Notes

[1] Teachers did not receive additional income for textbook writing as a matter of course. However, textbook writing could lead to a higher salary in specific circumstances. Teachers were contracted to teach for 15 hours each week, and would receive more income only if they exceeded this figure. But as textbook writers, teachers were routinely paid as if they were teaching for 30 hours a week.

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