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Negotiating Mandate and Practice: University EFL Teachers' Learning Through New Textbook Use in China

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Abstract
This study employs Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) to examine how two Chinese university teachers learn as they use the Understanding Contemporary China textbook series for the first time. Findings reveal that teacher learning is driven by a dynamic hierarchy of four levels of contradictions: From teachers' initial doubts about the textbook's purpose, to tensions concerning specialized knowledge, student participation, and institutional rules, and further extends to tensions with the established teaching routine and overall curriculum design. To resolve these contradictions, teachers drew on mediational means that progressed from external resources (training sessions, expert consultation, official materials) to internalized professional judgment, reflecting a shift from other-regulation to self-regulation. Crucially, the two teachers faced similar contradictions; however, their differing curriculum traditions, rooted in divergent pedagogical norms between interpretation and translation courses, led them to perceive and resolve tensions differently. This resulted in distinct learning processes and practical outcomes. These findings contribute to understanding how contradictions in ideologically oriented reforms can trigger transformative teacher learning and emphasize the role of curriculum tradition as a mediating factor in shaping professional development under reform.

Keywords
Teacher learning; textbook use; activity theory; contradictions; mediation; curriculum reform

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Introduction

Materials are an integral part of the second language classroom, not only as a source of "language input, explanation of language, opportunities for students to practice new or previously learned languages", but also play various functions from "organizers of learning to conveyors of ideology" (Guerrettaz & Johnston, 2013, p. 779; see also Liu, Zhang, & May, 2022; Zhang & Liu, 2022, 2023). The effectiveness of these materials ultimately depends on how teachers use them (Graves, 2019). In practice, teachers usually prefer to continue to use familiar materials. When education authorities require curriculum reform, it not only causes teachers to resist, but also puts them at a challenging intersection between the prescribed curriculum and classroom reality (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2017; Zhu, 2024).

This is particularly prominent in the context where the new textbook not only aims to develop language skills but also to convey specific ideologies and political narratives (Liu, May, & Zhang, 2024). As Littlejohn (2011) suggests, this requires looking "inside the Trojan Horse" of language teaching materials to uncover their hidden pedagogical and ideological agendas. In China, recent reforms have strengthened people's understanding that language education should not only promote language level, but also promote broader goals, such as cultural exchange, national narrative, and value education. In this policy environment, the *Understanding Contemporary China* (UCC) series has been promoted as the flagship collection of materials for university foreign language education. The uniqueness of the UCC series lies in its clear integration of language learning with political and ideological content, aiming to cultivate students' ability to "tell Chinese stories" in foreign languages.

When curriculum reform occurs, teachers are forced to learn how to use new teaching materials. This process exemplifies the principle of learning through use, a strategy that Nation (2026) identifies as one of the most effective ways to develop new knowledge and skills. In this process, textbooks, as a mediational means, promote teachers' learning in use (Grossman & Thompson, 2008; Li, 2025). In recent years, research on material use has gradually shifted from examining teachers' behavior when using materials to exploring the mutual impact of material use on teachers, especially on teachers' professional development and teacher learning (Moore et al., 2023). However, the specific mechanism by which textbooks promote teachers' learning remains under-theorized.

This study takes the essence of Activity Theory, i.e., Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), as the analytical framework to investigate how the contradictions arising from the first use of the UCC series create learning opportunities for college foreign language teachers. By tracking the activity systems of two teachers who teach in different curriculum traditions (advanced consecutive interpretation and Chinese-English translation), this study provides a mechanism-oriented narrative illustrating how teachers resolve contradictions and achieve development. In this way, the study aims to provide a theoretical understanding of teacher learning in the context of curriculum reform and provide insights into ways to support professional development in a similar reform environment.

Literature Review

Teacher Learning Through Curriculum Materials Use

Research on teachers' professional development is increasingly shifting from viewing learning as the acquisition of prescribed knowledge to understanding it as a situated, socially mediated, and dialectical process (Johnson, 2006; Johnson, 2009). Central to this shift is the concept of teacher cognition, that is, what teachers think, know, and believe, which has been shown to exert a profound influence on what teachers do in the classroom (Borg, 2003, 2006; see also Gao & Zhang, 2020; Li, 2024; Sun & Zhang, 2023). As Freeman (2002, p.1) argues, teachers' mental lives represent the "hidden side" of teaching, and understanding teacher learning requires attending to the knowledge and beliefs that underlie their instructional decisions. In this paradigm, teacher learning is defined as "an active process in which teachers engage in activities that lead to a change in knowledge and beliefs (cognition) and/or teaching practices (behavior)" (Bakkenes et al., 2010, p. 536; see also Zhang & Sun, 2020).

Another key concept is "materials use", defined as the "dynamic and complex interaction of the teacher, learners and the textbook itself" (Hutchinson, 1996, p. ii). Accordingly, materials use here refers not to simply covering the book but to teachers' situated work of interpreting, selecting, sequencing, supplementing, and enacting materials in interaction with students and within institutional constraints.

Importantly, materials, intentionally designed to foster student learning, can support teacher learning as well. Researchers have recognized the potential of materials use in fostering teacher learning (Brown, 2011; Remillard, 2000, 2009). As Brown (2011) articulates, materials, functioning as artifacts, mediated teacher cognition and action, thereby creating opportunities for teacher learning through this very process of mediation.

Research on materials use has evolved from empirical inquiry into how materials are employed in language classroom interactions (Guerrettaz & Johnston, 2013; Harwood, 2014; Tomlinson, 2011) to a growing recognition of their impact on teachers, viewing the process of using materials in itself as a form of teacher learning (Davis & Krajcik, 2005; Li, 2025; Moore, 2023). Large-scale and case studies demonstrate that teachers learn through reading, adapting, and enacting materials. Teachers' existing knowledge, beliefs, and identity mediate what they learn from materials; consequently, some teachers change their practice substantially, while others change it only slightly (Charalambous & Hill, 2012; Collopy, 2003; Li, 2023; Zhang & Liu, 2014). This variability underscores the mediating role of teacher cognition, that is, the beliefs, prior experiences, and pedagogical knowledge that teachers bring to their materials use (Borg, 2006; McGrath, 2013).

Recent studies have further enriched the understanding of teacher learning through materials use. Li (2025) traced one EFL teacher's learning through the use of materials, finding that it was "more reflexive than assimilative, stemming from complex interactions between teacher, students, and materials" (p. 1). Li and Xu (2020) identified six interactive processes of materials use, namely identifying, evaluating, adapting, improvising, reflecting, and reconceiving, revealing that teacher knowledge and practice are dialectically related. Moore et al. (2023) highlighted that curriculum materials play a dual role as both part of the professional development process and an outcome of that process. While these studies have advanced the

field, the specific mechanisms through which materials use drives teacher learning under ideologically oriented reforms remain under-theorized, a gap this study aims to address.

While existing studies have approached teacher learning through materials use from diverse theoretical standpoints, such as ecological perspectives (Li, 2025), a multi-perspective approach (interconnected model, boundary theory, Actor-Network Theory) (Moore, 2023), they have yet to sufficiently uncover the internal driving mechanisms of this process, particularly under high-stakes, ideologically oriented curriculum reforms (see also Liu et al., 2024).

Therefore, the key question is not whether teachers adapt, but how the adaptation process during these curriculum reforms becomes a site of professional learning. This question constitutes the central focus of the current research.

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory as a Mechanism Lens

This study takes Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as the analytical framework. CHAT, initiated by Vygotsky (1978), was further developed by Leont'ev (1978, 1981) and Engeström (1987). This theory conceptualizes learning as an object-oriented, tool-mediated and socially organized process (Engeström, 1987; Johnson, 2006, 2009) (see Figure 1).

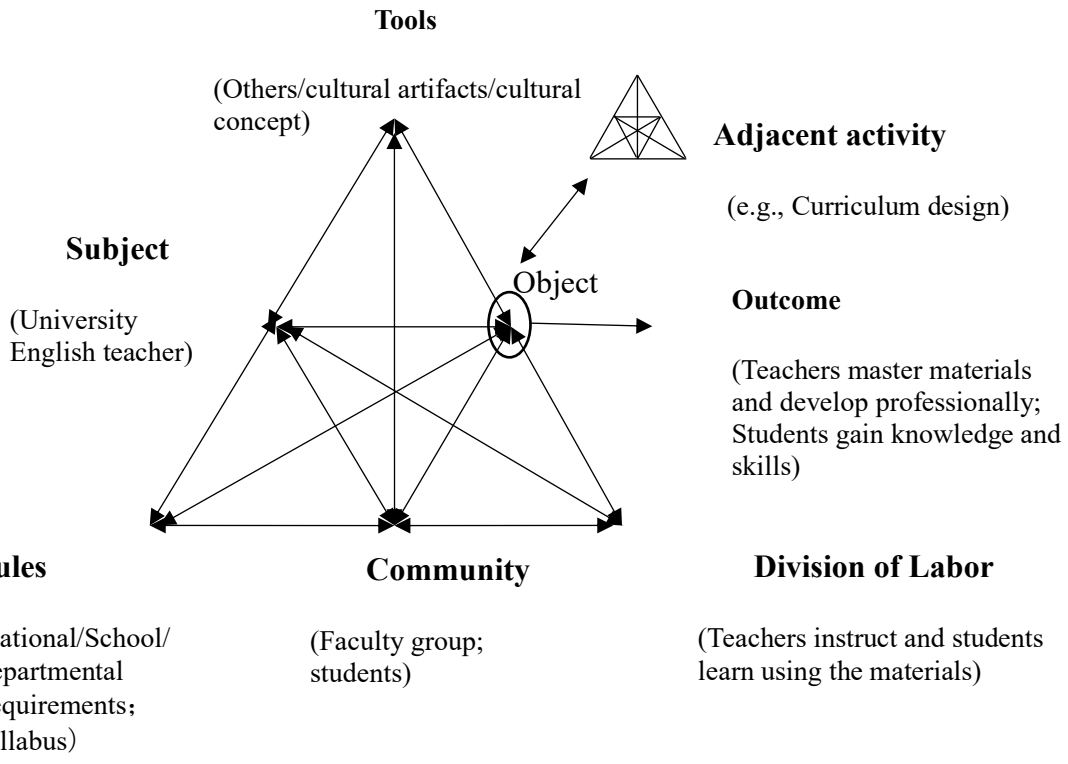


Figure 1. ***Activity system of teachers using new curriculum materials***

In an activity system, subjects (teachers) take action on the object (motives/goals) through mediation tools (such as textbooks, PPT, digital resources) within the community (such as students, colleagues) and with a division of labor (such as institutional roles). The framework positions teaching as a collective activity arising from the dynamic interaction among these

components, rather than as an individual behavior. The above figure is adapted from the general model of the activity system (Engeström, 1987, p. 78) and shows the activities involved in implementing the new curriculum materials.

From the CHAT perspective, contradictions are regarded as historical accumulation of structural tensions that promote change and development (Daniels, 2004; Engeström, 1987, 2001). Engeström (1987, p. 152) delineates four levels: 1) Primary: Tensions "within a component of the old activity"; 2) Secondary: Tensions "between components of the old activity" when a new element is introduced; 3) Tertiary: Tensions "between the old and the given new activity/motive"; 4) Quaternary: Tensions "between the new activity and its neighbor activities". When teachers encounter and resolve contradictions using mediational tools, they engage in learning that transforms their practice. This study focuses on tracing how contradictions emerge and are mediated.

Although CHAT has been used to analyze teacher development (Feryok, 2009; McNicholl, 2013; Wilson, 2014), few studies have analyzed the contradictions and tensions arising from the first-time use of textbooks, especially in an ideological- reform context. This study fills this research gap by examining how contradictions arise in teachers' use of the UCC textbooks, how they resolve them, and how they achieve learning and development.

In addition, the study will pay attention to the role of curriculum tradition, the historically accumulated, discipline-specific norms about teaching practice that are embedded in particular types of courses. In translation and interpreting education, distinct pedagogical traditions have been noted: Translation pedagogy has traditionally emphasized textual accuracy and reflective revision, whereas interpreting pedagogy has emphasized real-time processing and performance under pressure. The present study examines curriculum tradition as a potential mediating variable, exploring how it shapes teachers' perceptions of contradictions and their strategies for resolving them when using unfamiliar textbooks. The following are two research questions:

(1) How do university foreign language teachers learn through the process of using a new textbook series?
(2) What factors mediate this learning process?

Methods

Setting

This study was conducted against the backdrop of China's national initiative to integrate ideological and political education into university curricula (including foreign language education). In this policy environment, the UCC textbook series is introduced as the primary teaching resource, aiming to align language teaching with broader cultural communication and national narrative goals.

This study adopts a qualitative multi-case study design to explore teachers' learning as they use a new textbook series for the first time (Tisdell & Merriam, 2025; Yin, 2018). The case is set at a renowned "211 Project" university in Beijing. The institutional context combines strong expectations for policy compliance with relatively high academic standards for translation/interpretation teaching. In this environment, adopting the UCC series is not only a teaching requirement but also a potential source of tension within the established curriculum design.

Participants

This study uses purposeful sampling to select two college English teachers (pseudonyms: Haiyang and Meili). The researcher selected teachers who are using the series of textbooks for the first time and are willing to participate in the research. This approach enables the researcher to capture teachers' learning processes as they first use the textbooks. At this stage, the contradictions and conflicts they encounter are more prominent. The profiles of the two participants are presented in the table below (see Table 1).

Table 1. ***The profiles of the participants***

Participants	Gender	Title	Teaching Experience (years)	Course	Textbook Used
Meili	F	Associate professor	20	Chinese-English translation	UCC: Chinese-English Translation
Haiyang	F	Lecturer	8	Advanced Interpreting	UCC: Advanced Chinese-English Interpretation

Although both courses aim to familiarize students with the main ideas in contemporary China, their curricular traditions differ. Haiyang's course (advanced consecutive interpreting) emphasizes professional interpreting skills, including procedures, etiquette, and a code of ethics. Students are expected to interpret current-affairs talks fluently, accurately, and completely. In contrast, Meili's course (Chinese-English translation) emphasizes translation methods tailored to different language characteristics and genres. Students are expected to master the basic theory of Chinese-English translation and develop translation skills for Chinese words, long sentences, and a variety of genres.

The two teachers presented distinct academic profiles, differing in both experience and the courses they taught, making them information-rich cases. Importantly, they shared the critical challenge of using UCC materials for the first time, providing common ground to explore teacher learning under similar reform pressures.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were analysed thematically (Clarke & Braun, 2017) by the first author using an iterative, multi-stage process in NVivo. Interpretive rigour was pursued through systematic coding and cross-referencing across data sources and the application of a theoretically grounded coding framework. The second author reviewed coded categories and themes during the later stages of analysis and interpretation to ensure analytical consistency. The analytic process proceeded as follows:

When selecting lessons for classroom observation, the researcher prioritized those in which the UCC textbook content was central to the lesson rather than merely mentioned in passing, as this allowed for a clearer view of the contradictions teachers encountered while

using the new textbooks and how they adapted to them. During observations, field notes were taken, focusing on (1) which parts of the textbook the teacher used (e.g., text passages, tasks, exercises); (2) what adaptations the teacher made (e.g., omitting content, supplementing materials, adjusting the sequence of instruction); and (3) classroom interactions around the textbook (e.g., how the teacher explained, how students asked questions, shifts in participation). Immediately after each lesson, the researcher wrote analytical memos to capture emerging tensions in real time and to prepare follow-up questions for later interviews (for example, "Why was a particular part of this lesson difficult to teach?" or "Why was this task redesigned?").
In addition, the researcher collected physical teaching materials, including the teachers' textbooks, supplementary video clips, and textual resources. These materials helped trace how the teachers' instructional thinking evolved throughout the teaching process (see Table 2).

Table 2. ***Data collection***

Research Method	Data Source	Participants		Total
		Meili	Haiyang	
Case study	Semi-structured interviews	3 interviews (150mins)	3 interviews (150mins)	6 interviews (300mins)
	Classroom observation	440mins	1100mins	1540mins (approximately)
	Documents	Textbooks, PPTs, syllabus, fieldnotes		

Data Analysis

This study adopted thematic analysis, a method for "identifying, analyzing and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data" (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p.297). Data analysis followed the three steps of reading, coding, and theming. To begin, the researcher read the interview transcripts, repeatedly examined the data, and recorded preliminary ideas, unexpected discoveries, or recurring points. Then, the researcher labeled meaningful fragments as codes. Finally, the researcher grouped related codes into broader patterns to develop themes.

Thematic analysis can be adopted inductively or deductively. The inductive approach is "bottom-up and driven by what is in the data"; the deductive approach is "top-down, where the researcher brings to the data a series of concepts, ideas, or topics that they use to code and interpret the data". In practice, "coding data often uses a combination of both approaches" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p.21). Accordingly, this study adopts both data-driven and theory-driven coding strategies to balance openness and analytical focus. For the first research question, thematic analysis was guided by Engeström's (1987) framework of contradictions to identify the tension experienced by the two participating teachers. The operationalization of Engeström's four levels followed specific criteria: Primary contradictions were coded when teachers expressed internal doubts or concerns about the textbook's purpose or teachability; secondary contradictions were identified when tensions emerged between components of the activity system (subject-tool, subject-community, subject-rule); tertiary contradictions were coded when teachers' established pedagogical routines clashed with the new form of activity implied by UCC; and quaternary contradictions were identified when tensions arose between the UCC-centered classroom activity and neighboring activity systems such as broader course objectives or departmental curriculum design. For the second research question, the researcher

drew on the core concepts of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Johnson, 2009) to examine how teachers resolved these contradictions in practice, coding for three types of mediational means: cultural artifacts, social mediation, and teacher experience. The table below showed an example of how the original data were coded and mapped to these theoretical concepts (see Table 3).

Table 3. ***Illustrative examples of coding scheme and thematic development***

Research Questions	Raw data Extracted	Initial Coding	Thematic Categories
RQ1: What contradictions did teacher encounter?	*"To be honest, at first I didn't quite understand why it was necessary to develop an Understanding Contemporary China series—why such specialized, narrowly-focused materials had to be used."* (Meili-interview)	Uncertainty about textbook rationale; questioning materials purpose	Primary contradiction (Engeström, 1987): Internal dilemmas regarding pedagogical rationale
	"Since class time is limited—now only two periods per week—I only select the parts that are most applicable." (Haiyang-interview)	Time constraint; Curricular selection pressure	Secondary contradiction (Subject-rules) (Engeström, 1987): Textbook scope vs. syllabus/ time constrains
RQ2: How did teachers resolve contradictions through mediation?	*"In my class, a considerable portion of my teaching draws on the PPTs provided by the textbook compilation team... I only replaced a few examples."* (Meili-interview)	Cultural artifact (PPT) use; selective adaptation of materials	Resolving secondary contradictions: Cultural artifacts as mediational tools (Vygotsky, 1978)
	"My husband teaches translation, so I consult him. He has participated in the translation of political documents... so whenever there's something I don't understand, I just ask him directly." (Meili-interview)	Expert consultation; Mediated by more capable others	Resolving secondary contradictions: social mediation (others as tools)

To improve the reliability of the analysis, the researcher regularly discussed the codes and themes with a senior researcher specializing in CHAT and teacher learning. These expert consultations play the role of peer briefings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Specifically, after each round of coding, the researcher presented the identified contradictions and their classification to the senior researcher, who provided critical feedback on whether the coding was well supported by the data and consistent with Engeström's (1987) framework. Disagreements were resolved through discussion, and codes were revised accordingly. This iterative process of coding, presenting, receiving feedback, and revising continued throughout the analysis, ensuring that interpretive decisions were not made in isolation but were validated through ongoing expert dialogue.

Findings

Following the CHAT framework, we organize the findings around (a) the contradictions teachers encountered and (b) the mediational means through which they attempted to resolve these contradictions, which in turn catalyzed learning.

Navigating a Hierarchy of Contradictions

Both teachers encountered a dynamic hierarchy of contradictions that structured their problem space. The following table summarizes the hierarchy of contradictions in UCC implementation (see Table 4).

Table 4. ***Hierarchy of contradictions in UCC implementation***

Level of Contradiction	Primary Manifestation in the Activity System
Primary	Internal dilemmas regarding the pedagogical rationale and teachability of UCC
Secondary	**Subject-Tool:** Teacher's existing knowledge vs. demands of specialized ideological discourse **Subject-Community:** Textbook agenda vs. student readiness and interest **Subject-Rules:** Textbook scope vs. institutional time and syllabus constraints
Tertiary	Tension between the new form of activity implied by UCC and the teacher's established pedagogical routines and logic
Quaternary	Misalignment between the UCC-centered classroom activity and neighboring system (e.g.， broader course objectives, departmental curriculum)

Primary contradictions. When using the new *Understanding Contemporary China* textbook series, the case teachers encountered primary contradictions at the internal, subjective level that manifested in two ways. First, the teachers did not fully grasp the intended significance of the new materials. Second, they expressed concerns about using the new textbooks. Both teachers began incorporating the textbook series into their classrooms in response to active promotion by their institution. Initially, however, their understanding of the purpose behind the materials remained somewhat vague. As Meili said, "*In fact, I didn't understand it very well at the beginning. Why must there be an 'Understanding Contemporary China'? It is to use such politically oriented and narrowly focused materials to make Chinese-English translation tutorials.*" (Meili-interview)

Before using the new textbooks, both teachers were worried. For example, Meili was worried about "*whether the effect would be good, or whether the students would be willing to use such a textbook*?" (Meili-interview). Haiyang also expressed her concern about the students' acceptance of the new textbooks, "*These materials are all about politics. Could students focus on learning all the time*?" (Haiyang-interview)

These inherent tensions reflect the conflict between their original professional identity, that is, focusing on genre diversity and skill progression, and the policy-driven new goals contained in the mandated textbooks.

These initial doubts go beyond procedural concerns about unfamiliar materials; they represent a deeper identity tension between the teachers' self-understanding as language professionals and their repositioning as mediators of political discourse. This matters because the nature of the primary contradiction shaped the trajectory of subsequent learning: Teachers

who merely lacked technical knowledge might have been satisfied with content training, but these teachers' doubts about the purpose of the reform required them to engage in sustained reflective practice that ultimately transformed their understanding of their professional role. The primary contradictions thus functioned as a catalyst because they operated at the level of professional meaning, not merely at the level of technical skill.

Secondary contradictions. As teachers started to use the textbooks, the initial primary contradictions turned into secondary contradictions. These tensions appeared at three fronts: The subject-tool contradiction, the new textbooks involved a large number of specialized discourse knowledge that teachers were not familiar with; the subject-community contradiction, students were disengaged as they found the content distant and irrelevant to their own lives; and the subject-rule contradiction, the scope of the textbook clashed with the fixed constraints of teaching hours and syllabus.

Both teachers faced a subject-tool contradiction between teacher knowledge and specialized discourse. They reported a steep learning curve in comprehending and teaching specialized political terminology and policy discourse. Despite having 20 years of teaching experience, Meili admitted that this was her "*first time teaching political document translation*" (Meili-interview). Consequently, teaching the content of the new textbook posed numerous challenges for her. "*Simply understanding the material itself is already a huge challenge*," she noted. For example, she mentioned, "*I remember a very typical example, 'supply-side structural reform.' To be honest, before teaching this course, I had only seen the term but had no idea what it meant*" (Meili-interview). Haiyang, a lecturer with only 8 years of teaching experience but 18 years as a practicing translator, also acknowledged the difficulties. She stated, "*The unit on national defense is particularly challenging to teach. If you ask me to summarize the key aspects in the military unit, I would say it is quite a challenge."* (Haiyang-interview)

In addition, they both encountered subject-community contradiction, namely tensions between the textbook's content and students' preparation and interests. Teachers observed that students often found the UCC texts unfamiliar, abstract, or difficult, which reduced their motivation and participation. Meili stressed that for many students, policy discourse "*felt distant*" from everyday interests and required repeated effort to sustain engagement (Meili interview). Haiyang observed that "*the selected content in the textbook is somewhat abstract, so students tend to 'show little interest' in it*." Some students even told Haiyang that they "*could not understand the political discourse."* (Haiyang interview)

Furthermore, both teachers faced subject-rules contradiction (textbook scope vs. syllabus and time). Both teachers faced constraints related to limited class hours and a predefined syllabus. Haiyang believed that "*the outcome would likely be better if the entire textbook could be covered over one semester*." However, she added, "*since class time is limited—now only two periods per week—I only select the parts that are most applicable for me.*" (Haiyang interview). In practice, she just selected one segment from the textbook for practice and discussion. Meili also needed to strike a balance between the institution's expectation and the time it took students to process complex texts.

In general, these secondary contradictions became the driving force behind learning: Teachers needed to develop a new understanding of the content, try strategies to engage students, and make teaching decisions in line with the curriculum's requirements under time pressure. Crucially, these secondary contradictions did not operate independently; rather, they

interacted and compounded one another. For example, the subject-tool contradiction (unfamiliar political terminology) amplified the subject-community contradiction (student disengagement), because teachers' own uncertainty about the content made it harder for them to present it in an engaging manner. As a result, resolving one contradiction often required simultaneously addressing others, which in turn necessitated the multi-layered mediational strategies documented below.

Tertiary contradictions. Teachers' attempts to resolve these secondary contradictions then brought tertiary contradictions to the fore, highlighting a clash between their established pedagogical routines and the new form of activity implied by UCC. For instance, teachers' habitual sequencing of translation/interpreting instruction (e.g., skill drills, genre variation, progressive difficulty) did not always align with UCC's unit structure and ideological framing. As a consequence, the case teachers made appropriate additions, deletions, adjustments, and modifications to the textbook content, and supplemented it with other teaching materials to better suit the instructional context and student needs. This process constitutes what can be termed as a secondary development of textbooks, echoing Kemm's (2025) observation that teachers do not merely deliver prescribed materials but actively generate and reshape their own teaching resources in response to local classroom demands.

During this process, Meili noted that "*deciding which translation examples to include and which to exclude was a challenge*" (Meili-interview). Haiyang mentioned that, when attempting to supplement the textbook content, finding external materials aligned with the textbook's ideological focus proved difficult. Haiyang hoped that the political discourse in the textbook would serve as "*an overarching framework*," while the external materials would illustrate "*how it is implemented in practice*" (Haiyang-interview). However, she observed that "*if we want there to be a logical connection between the two, we have to sacrifice other aspects, such as consistency in translation strategies*" (Haiyang-interview). This indicated that, when facing tertiary contradiction, the introduction of new tools does not simply add content; rather, it changed the logic of the activity, requiring teachers to reorganize their teaching practices. Ultimately, these newly adapted practices triggered quaternary contradictions, that is, tensions with the adjacent activity system.

Quaternary contradictions. The quaternary contradiction is the tension between the use of new textbooks and the curriculum design. The Advanced Chinese-English Interpretation Course used by Haiyang focuses on developing simultaneous interpretation with text skills, with all exercises designed around this goal. However, Haiyang stated that her course design does not follow the textbook; instead, she designs the course first and then integrates the textbook into it: "*Our classes typically don't start with simultaneous interpretation right at the beginning, so its exercises don't meet my needs*" (Haiyang, interview). Furthermore, the discourses in the UCC reflect different facets of political texts, but students may not have many opportunities to encounter these in their actual future work. Therefore, in her course design, she needs to consider how students "*apply this in real work scenarios.*" (Haiyang, interview)

In contrast, Meili teaches the course "Translation: Chinese to English," whose instructional knowledge objective is "*to introduce the linguistic characteristics of various text types and different methods for translating them.*" However, the Chinese-English Translation Course she uses contains only one text type, political documents, which does not align with the teaching objectives she designed.

In using the new teaching materials, the teachers in the above cases encountered four levels of contradictions: Conflicts between the textbook's ideology and their existing beliefs; misalignments between some specialized terminology in the textbook and their knowledge base; and discrepancies between the textbook and their classroom practices. These contradictions forced them to treat the textbook as a resource. Through various mediational tools, they deepened their understanding of the textbook's concepts, mastered the terminology of political discourse translation, and adjusted their original teaching methods, thereby achieving learning and growth in the process of adopting the new textbook.

Mediation Strategies and Tools that Enabled Learning

For teachers to grow, contradictions should be seen as opportunities for development, drawing on personal experience and agency to resolve them through practice (Sagre et al., 2022). This process is shaped by the sociocultural environment, in which learning is mediated by cultural artifacts, social activities, and relationships, as well as by the strategies teachers adopt (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). The table below illustrates how, in this study, teachers used mediational means and strategies to resolve contradictions when working with the new textbooks (see Table 5).

Table 5. ***Mediational tools and strategies observed in resolving contradictions***

Contradiction Level	Mediational Tools/ Strategies(examples)
Primary	Proactive learning (training/ workshops); Reflective practice
Secondary	Cultural artifact (official PPTs, reference translations, background readings); Social mediation (consulting experts/colleagues); "Secondary development" of materials (re-sequencing, redesigning tasks); Generating coherent supplementary modules
Tertiary	Teaching experience and cultural artifacts (e.g., online resources)
Quaternary	Strategic course redesign (modular integration of UCC); Re-framing the textbook's purpose in relation to disciplinary goals

Resolving Primary Contradictions

When it came to resolving the primary contradictions, both teachers took initiative and actively looked for ways to learn. They both participated, for instance, in training sessions conducted by the general editor of the UCC textbook series. Their willingness to engage and reflect became key to their effective learning. Throughout the entire time they were using the new textbook, the teachers remained in a state of ongoing reflection. Meili, for example, remarked, "*During my lesson preparation, I came to appreciate its relevance to reality*." Through her teaching practice, Meili gradually deepened her understanding: "*Our students can talk a lot about a topic, especially one they are familiar with or fond of. But when you ask them about topics related to China, many students simply have no idea—they are truly in the dark*." Consequently, Meili noted, "*I think the significance of publishing this textbook lies precisely in filling this gap*." Although she had numerous reservations before using the textbook, Meili reflected, "*As I gradually delved deeper into it and slowly applied it in my teaching, I found that it does address the practical problems I have encountered in my over two decades of teaching.*" (Meili, interview)

Resolving Secondary Contradictions

Contradictions between subject and object: The case study teachers leveraged cultural resources. Meili primarily drew upon the supplementary PowerPoint slides provided with the textbook. "*In my class, a considerable portion of my teaching draws on the PPTs provided by the textbook compilation team. The courseware package I use today—including the front page you see, the entire design, and the color scheme—is all theirs. I only replaced a few examples*," she explained. When explaining translation examples, Meili often consults official translations, primarily sourced from the book's reference translations, official websites, and books related to political discourse. Haiyang reads books related to the textbook's themes and also refers to the translation reference answers provided. Furthermore, the teachers sought help from others. Meili mentioned, "*My husband teaches translation, so I consult him. He has participated in the translation of political documents, and I believe his understanding is quite authoritative. So, whenever there's something I don't understand, I just ask him directly*" (Meili-interview). Additionally, both Meili and Haiyang attended lectures and training sessions related to the textbook's content, such as expert demonstrations on using the textbook series. The social relationships between experts and teachers served as mediating tools for teacher growth and development (Johnson & Golombek, 2020).

Contradictions between subject and object: To enhance student engagement and make learning political discourse from the UCC textbooks more attractive, both teachers adopted various strategies, such as incorporating classroom activities, guiding students to ask questions, and substituting translation examples. For instance, Haiyang observed that students did not perform particularly well when directly assigned exercises from the UCC textbook. Consequently, she organized simulated press conferences to help students discover the enjoyment of studying political discourse. Through this process, she found that students *"gained confidence and enhanced their sense of self-efficacy."* (Haiyang-interview)

Contradictions between subject and rules: In the classroom, both teachers adapted the textbook content based on the teaching objectives outlined in the course syllabus. They deleted or supplemented material to ensure that students' translation learning needs were met within the limited class hours. For example, Meili selectively used translation examples from the UCC textbook that she considered homogeneous. When selecting examples, Meili focused on those with "*distinctive translation features or content that is particularly representative in terms of ideas"* (Meili-interview).

Resolving Tertiary Contradictions

Meili possesses extensive teaching experience and has experience using various language learning materials. Beyond teaching translation courses, Haiyang brought years of experience as consecutive interpreter. That background, along with Meili's two decades in the classroom, gave both teachers a sharp eye for what students would find difficult in the new textbook. Both teachers adapted the textbook materials in various ways, including adding, deleting, and rearranging content.

The Chinese-English Translation Course textbook used by Meili categorizes political discourse into different themes, covering aspects of China's politics, economy, diplomacy, military affairs, among others. Meili considered the diplomatic theme to be more closely aligned with students' daily lives and professional needs, and therefore focused her instruction

on this section. Haiyang previously conducted research at a School of Marxism, obtained reference materials from relevant online groups, and also collected lecture materials related to Xi Thought from the internet. During her lesson preparation, she actively sought appropriate materials to supplement and echo the ideological content presented in the textbook.

Resolving Quaternary Contradictions

To fulfill the knowledge objectives, competency goals, and affective aims of her course design, specifically, enabling students to understand the linguistic characteristics of different text types and their corresponding translation methods, Meili drew upon her experience in teaching translation and using other translation textbooks. When integrating the UCC textbook into her class, she selectively used its content. Throughout the semester, in addition to utilizing two units from the UCC textbook for the political discourse translation module, namely, "Introduction to Political Discourse Translation" and "Major-Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics", Meili also designed three other modules: cultural tourism translation, literary translation, and advertising translation. For these, she used materials sourced from news websites, newspapers and magazines, or other translation textbooks.

The textbook used by Haiyang was designed for simultaneous interpretation, whereas her course was structured around consecutive interpretation. Consequently, Haiyang adapted the exercises, using them for consecutive interpretation practice in class to help students *"address the difficulties in interpretation and the practical problems they encounter in real-world interpreting"* (Haiyang-interview). Haiyang believes her class is "highly oriented towards the market and practice" (Haiyang-interview). Therefore, she selects supplementary practice materials based on the ideological content of the textbook. *"It still reflects the discourse of Xi Thought,"* she noted, but allows students to better understand the practical application of political discourse in real-world contexts.

In this study, various mediating tools, others, and activities were found to regulate the participating teachers' use of the textbooks, enabling them to resolve the four levels of contradictions encountered during the adoption of the new materials. This process facilitated the teachers' gradual identification with the concepts embedded in the textbooks, enhanced their subject knowledge, and supported their ability to transform textbook content in classroom practice.

Across these four levels, a developmental pattern emerged in the nature of mediation. At the primary and secondary levels, teachers relied predominantly on external mediational means, such as training sessions, expert consultation, official PPT slides, and reference translations. From a sociocultural perspective, this reliance represents other-regulation, where teachers' learning is scaffolded by external resources and more capable others (Vygotsky, 1978; Johnson, 2009). At the tertiary and quaternary levels, however, the mediation shifted inward, drawing increasingly on the teachers' own accumulated professional experience and pedagogical judgment. This shift illustrates what Johnson (2009, p.17) describes as "the progressive movement from externally, socially mediated activities to internal mediation controlled by the individual teacher". In other words, the teachers progressed from other-regulation toward self-regulation (Vygotsky, 1978), as they gradually internalized the ideological content and took greater control over their own learning and practice, echoing the broader principle that effective learning requires understanding not just what to learn, but how to learn (Nation, 2026). This

trajectory suggests that the learning observed was not merely adaptive but also transformative, as teachers began to internalize the ideological content and reorganize their practice around new pedagogical principles. Both teachers demonstrated transformative learning, particularly in their willingness to redesign course structures and develop new pedagogical activities (e.g., Meili's simulated press conferences, Haiyang's modular integration of UCC content) that went beyond what the textbook prescribed.

Discussion

The findings, therefore, enhance our understanding of teacher learning through the use of new textbooks, especially amid curriculum reform. Overall, the study addresses the research questions by demonstrating that teacher learning is driven by four levels of contradictions (Engeström, 1987, 2001) and facilitated by teachers' active use of mediational means (Vygotsky, 1978; Johnson, 2009), while also revealing that the distinct pedagogical traditions embedded in the two teachers' courses, interpreting versus translation, shaped how they perceived contradictions and prioritized different mediational means. Their divergent course traditions likely influenced Haiyang's prioritization of speed and authenticity when adapting UCC materials, whereas Meili focused on precision in terminology and stylistic consistency. This suggests that curriculum tradition, the historically accumulated, discipline-specific norms embedded in the course, functions as a form of cultural mediation, shaping teachers' perceptions of what counts as a problem and what counts as a solution.

Specifically, this study advances the existing literature in three interrelated ways. First, it explores how contradictions evolve across four interconnected levels within an ideologically driven reform environment, illustrating that these contradictions form an escalating hierarchy that deepens teacher learning over time. While earlier CHAT-related research has recognized the importance of contradictions in teacher development (Feryok, 2009; Sagre et al., 2022), few have detailed how tensions at the primary level lead to secondary, tertiary, and quaternary contradictions, each demanding different mediation strategies. Second, the study introduces curriculum tradition as a mediating factor, demonstrating that historically accumulated discipline-specific norms influence how teachers perceive contradictions and the mediational methods they choose. This expands sociocultural perspectives on teacher learning by highlighting a structural variable that lies between individual cognition and institutional reform. Third, the research traces the transition from externally mediated responses (such as training, expert advice, and official resources) to internally mediated ones (such as personal experience and professional judgment), clarifying how contradictions become catalysts for transformative learning rather than mere adaptation.

This hierarchical escalation of contradictions, as detailed in the Findings, shaped teacher learning as an active, problem-driven process rather than a passive acquisition of knowledge. This finding extends previous research on teacher learning through materials use. Although studies have recognized the potential of new textbooks to catalyze teacher learning (Li, 2023; Li, 2025; Moore et al., 2023), they have not fully revealed the internal driving mechanisms in the context of high-stakes, ideologically oriented reform. Li (2023) showed that replacing textbooks can disturb the classroom ecology and prompt teacher reflection, while Moore et al. (2023) highlighted the dual role of curriculum materials in professional development. However,

neither study traced how tensions escalate to generate sustained learning. The present study fills this gap by demonstrating that contradictions are not merely obstacles but generative forces that propel teachers through contradiction-driven learning (Engeström, 1987). This echoes Sagre et al.'s (2022) finding that contradictions within an activity system drive teachers to develop new strategies and extends this finding to the specific context of ideological textbook reform.

The findings demonstrate that contradictions do not automatically produce learning. From a Vygotskian perspective, mediation is the mechanism through which higher cognitive functions develop: Human activity is initially regulated by external tools, cultural artifacts, other people, and conceptual frameworks, and comes under the individual's own control through a process of internalization (Johnson, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). Johnson (2009) specified three types of mediational tools: cultural artifacts and activities (e.g., textbooks, instructional routines), concepts (e.g., theoretical frameworks, pedagogical principles), and social relations (e.g., interactions with colleagues, experts, and students). The present study finds that all three types were operative.

As documented in the Findings, the mediation at each level of contradiction followed a developmental trajectory. At the primary level, resolution depended primarily on progressive movement from externally mediated activities to internal control: Both teachers initially sought external guidance, such as attending training sessions, but the decisive shift occurred through their own reflective engagement with the materials in practice. At the secondary level, cultural artifacts, official PPT slides, reference translations, and background readings mediated teachers' learning of unfamiliar content. At the tertiary and quaternary levels, neither cultural artifacts nor social consultation alone sufficed; resolution required teachers to draw on accumulated professional experience as a form of internalized mediation. This pattern aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) account of how externally mediated activity gradually comes under the individual's own control through internalization.

In addition to the cognitive and pedagogical aspects, the contradictions discussed here also have a substantial ideological component that deserves closer analysis. The teachers' primary contradictions involved not only uncertainty about how to teach the new materials but also deeper questions about why such ideologically oriented materials were necessary, reflecting a tension between their professional identity as language professionals and their newly assigned role as mediators of political discourse. The subject-tool contradiction was intensified by the use of vocabulary with ideological implications, such as "supply-side structural reform," which required teachers to navigate both linguistic understanding and the political context. At the tertiary and quaternary levels, the tension between teachers' established curriculum traditions and the ideological mandate of UCC indicates that some contradictions are rooted in the struggle between maintaining professional autonomy and aligning with political goals. Recognizing this ideological dimension enriches the CHAT framework by showing that contradictions in ideologically driven reforms can operate simultaneously on cognitive, pedagogical, and identity levels.

Closely related to this ideological dimension is the role of curriculum tradition, which further shaped how the two teachers experienced and responded to the contradictions described above. Although Haiyang and Meili operated within the same institution, adopted the same textbook series, and faced the same reform pressures, their learning processes diverged in ways

that cannot be explained by individual differences in knowledge or motivation alone. The divergence was systematically traceable to the disciplinary traditions within which their courses were historically embedded. Curriculum tradition represents the accumulated, discipline-specific professional logic that shapes how individual teachers perceive contradictions, select mediational means, and reorganize their practices. As Johnson (2009) noted, this logic comprises the "normative ways of thinking, talking, and acting that have been historically and culturally embedded in the communities of practice" (p.17).

From a practical perspective, these findings have several implications for EFL teacher training and curriculum reform. First, teacher education should see contradictions from textbook mandates not just as challenges but as opportunities for professional development. Instead of only teaching technical skills for new materials, programs should offer structured opportunities for reflection to help teachers confront and work through tensions, as negotiating these contradictions leads to meaningful learning. Second, recognizing curriculum tradition as a mediating factor suggests that professional development should be tailored to teachers' pedagogical backgrounds. For example, teachers from interpreting backgrounds may need different support than those from translation courses, since their different traditions shape how they perceive and respond to contradictions. Third, institutions engaged in ideologically driven reforms should provide ongoing support, including expert advice, reference resources, and collaborative planning time, as shifting from external guidance to internalized expertise takes time. Finally, textbook developers should design supplementary materials that openly address potential tensions, offering scaffolding to help teachers navigate ideological content while preserving disciplinary integrity. These implications align with the view of previous research regarding textbook use as a vehicle for teacher learning (Moore et al., 2023; Remillard, 2000, 2009; Richards, 2017), while extending them to the specific context of ideologically driven curriculum reform.

It is also important to recognize that, despite the tensions documented above, the participating teachers showed significant agency and creativity in their responses. Meili's design of simulated press conferences turned a pedagogical challenge, students' disengagement with political discourse, into an innovative activity that helped students build confidence and self-efficacy. Similarly, Haiyang's strategic redesign of simultaneous interpretation exercises for consecutive interpretation practice reflects a creative adaptation that kept the textbook's ideological content intact while aligning it with her course aims. These instances demonstrate that teacher learning during reform is not merely a reactive response to contradictions but also involves actively reshaping the conditions of practice and developing locally effective solutions. Such responses may also influence broader curricular approaches. A more balanced perspective on teacher learning thus recognizes both the challenges posed by contradictions and the proactive, agentic responses they inspire.

The present study has several limitations. First, its focus was confined to two experienced teachers over a single semester. Future research could extend this through longitudinal designs, tracking teacher development over longer periods to examine how their learning trajectories evolve. In addition, subsequent studies might involve novice teachers. Such investigations would illuminate how the relative absence of accumulated professional experience shapes the dynamic relationship between contradiction and mediation, as well as what forms of institutional scaffolding could effectively compensate for this experiential gap. Moreover,

identifying and classifying contradictions naturally requires interpretive judgment. While the coding process followed Engeström's (1987) framework and was validated through continuous peer debriefing with a senior researcher, different analysts using the same framework might interpret configurations or boundaries between contradiction levels differently. This interpretive aspect of contradiction analysis should be recognized as a methodological limitation.

Despite these limitations, the present study demonstrates that textbook implementation under reform, when understood through the integrated lens of contradictions and mediation offered by CHAT and Vygotskian sociocultural theory, constitutes a powerful yet often overlooked site for understanding the mechanisms of teacher learning and professional development.

Conclusion

This study investigates how university EFL teachers learn when using an ideologically oriented textbook series for the first time and how they apply CHAT as an analytical framework. The results point to the following interrelated conclusions.

The study shows that teachers' learning through textbook use is driven by four levels of contradictions: Their internal questioning of the textbook's purpose (primary contradiction); classroom-level challenges related to specialized knowledge, student engagement, and time constraints (secondary contradiction); established teaching routines (tertiary contradiction); and broader curriculum goals (quaternary contradiction). To resolve these contradictions, the participating teachers drew on mediational means at both the individual and sociocultural levels. Individual factors included teacher agency, reflection, and prior experience. Sociocultural factors encompassed cultural artifacts such as PowerPoint slides, official translations, and online resources, as well as experts who served as more capable others. Through this learning process, the teachers enhanced their knowledge of the textbook content and reorganized their strategies for using materials.

Equally significant, the study identifies curriculum tradition as a key variable shaping teachers' learning pathways. Despite similar reform pressures, the two teachers' historically embedded curriculum traditions shaped their perceptions of contradictions, their selection of mediational means, and their reorganization of their practices.

Turning to practical implications, teachers should be encouraged to view the contradictions arising from the use of new textbooks as opportunities for professional growth rather than mere obstacles. Institutions, for their part, need to provide resources and create collaborative spaces for teachers during curriculum reform

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