

Developing language-learning materials for publication: A framework and process for material design, writing, and evaluation

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ABSTRACT

Material development plays an important role in education, especially in learning and instruction. Material development in language learning refers to all the processes that practitioners use to produce and/or evaluate materials for learning and instruction, including curriculum analysis and material design, production, evaluation, adaptation, and research. This research reports on the preliminary results obtained from the evaluation of the learning materials developed and produced for the use of language learning in particular. However, all of the processes can be adapted and made use of in the making of other academic learning materials. In addition, it is also the purpose of this research to provide descriptive details of all the procedures involved in writing materials. The applications of theory to the practice of designing, evaluating, adapting and supplementing materials are presented. Multimedia materials which make use of print, graphics, video and sound and are used as resources to encourage learning are also demonstrated. In this way, the study offers constructive suggestions for systematizing materials design. It is hoped that this study will revive interest in long-neglected features of materials design and development. Finally, the information presented should be useful to teachers, scholars, curriculum developers and those who are interested in materials publication.

Keywords: materials development, materials evaluation, materials design, language learning

1. INTRODUCTION

Since 1970 there has been a significant movement in the field of language learning and instruction. Learners have become the center of language learning. The shift from teacher-based or material-based to learner-based curriculum has dramatically changed the roles of teachers, instructional methods, material design and core curriculum etc. That is, materials, teaching methods, curriculum and assessment are all designed to suit learners and their needs. The role of teachers is to facilitate learners' learning. Therefore, teachers need to monitor what is going on in the classroom to support and, thus, enhance students' learning process.

Material development refers to all the process made use of by practitioners who produce and/or use materials for language learning, including material evaluation, their adaptation, design, production, exploitation and research (Tomlinson, 2012, p. 143-144). Richard (2005) identifies three factors that shape the effectiveness of materials in language teaching – teacher, learner and contextual variables. Teacher factors involve

the teacher's language proficiency, training and experience, cultural background and preferred teaching style. Learner factors include learners' learning style preferences, their language learning needs, interests, and motivations. Contextual factors refer to the school culture, classroom situations, class size and availability of teaching resources in situations where the materials will be used. Apart from these three factors, theory of language and language use reflected in the materials as well as the theory of language learning on which the materials are based are the two crucial factors determining what the materials will look like and how they will work.

Although learners should be the center of instruction, course or teaching materials -- textbooks in particular -- still form an important part in language instruction as they determine the content, methods and procedures of learning. Alwright (1990) argues that materials should teach students to learn and that they should be resource books for activities for learning and instruction. Students learn what is presented in the textbook and the pedagogic principles the textbook adopts certainly influence students' learning process or how students learn the language. In addition, it cannot be denied that teachers, even experienced teachers, need course materials for their classes. Although they can teach without a textbook, it is more practical, in reality, to have a textbook to follow.

In the field of English language instruction, course materials include textbooks, CDs, computer software and visual aids on which teachers rely heavily to support their teaching and their students' learning. However, for this study the focus is on textbook writing for language learning. Commercial English language textbooks have been widely used in many parts of the world. British publishers and American publishers have big market shares. Yet, more and more teachers and educators show enthusiasm in creating and producing their own school/institution course books which are locally well-received as teachers are more aware of the needs of their students; hence, they are able to design the materials that meet the needs and demands of a particular group of students. However, most locally-produced or home-made materials usually lack theoretical backup and they are not probably developed through research pathways.

In addition, not every teacher can become a material writer. Training courses and/or a framework for materials writing should, therefore, be available. An exploration on language learning approaches also needs to be emphasized during the in-service training program so that teachers or educators who want to write their own course materials are aware of approaches to teaching language that they want to focus their materials on.

While those locally-produced materials can fit well in the learners' context, some argue that the quality of many of them does not meet the standard not only because they are not piloted before being implemented, but because they are too limited and serve only a specific group of learners. On the other hand, the mass-published materials are usually professionally-planned and are backed up by theoretical standpoints; still, they usually fail to fulfill the true needs of learners. In short, there seems to be some limitation on both locally-produced and mass-published materials; still, they play an important role in language classes as they offer a useful resource for teachers – ideas for classroom activities, for communicative interactions, for practice exercises/activities on grammar,

vocabulary, pronunciation etc. For English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers, since English which is the target language is not usually available for use in the EFL environment, materials for classroom use are even more essential. Through the materials, teachers can involve learners in meaningful encounters with English in situations that are similar to authentic environment.

Up to dates, there is very little publication on English language teaching/learning textbooks written for Thai contexts in particular to serve the needs of Thai students who learn English as a foreign language. Most of the commercial textbooks available in Thai market are usually produced in a native-speaker situation. Many of the cultural contexts presented in these textbooks seem, therefore, out of reach or even irrelevant to EFL learners in different parts of the world – Thai learners in particular. The classroom situation in native-speaking country on which the commercial textbooks rely differs from that in Thai EFL learning environment. For example, the bigger class size of 30-50 students cannot be compared to the small class size in a native-speaker environment. In addition, the number of teaching hours in Thailand is very limited to one hour per week or the maximum of 5 hours per week with the lack of the support of the English speaking environment. Consequently, it is obvious that commercial materials produced for global use cannot fully meet the needs and expectations of Thai teachers and students. That is to say, the one-size-fits-all approach does not work.

This study explores the process of materials writing for publication in the field of English language learning in an EFL context. The produced materials or textbooks will not just serve a specific language classroom, but can be used by other students throughout the country – Thailand in this context. It is also the attempt of this study to set a framework for materials writers to follow with the aim to cater for the needs of Thai learners at large and with the support from pedagogic principles and evaluation of materials used.

2. THE PROJECT

The project arises due to the disadvantages of commercial textbooks and the needs for contextualization with the hope to overcome the lack of ‘fit’ of the commercially produced textbooks and with the hope to turn their disadvantages to become advantages for our teacher-produced materials. Moreover, it is also one of the objectives of the project to encourage teachers to make use of resources available for them in their context. Available teaching resources include something that is as basic as blackboards, pieces of chalk, to something that are more technological involvement such as computers, audio-visual equipment and Internet.

In designing materials, there are three components that are taken into consideration. First, the core curriculum and context are significant as they set the scope for teaching materials. Our newly-developed textbooks are bound by a mandated curriculum which have to be taken into account to define the content and skills to be taught. The curriculum outlines the goals and objectives for the learners and the course; as a result, the teacher needs to keep these aspects at hand when designing materials (Nunan, 1988).

The context of EFL in Thailand may impact on the design of the type of materials. For example, English-speaking setting is very rare in Thai context. The lack of access to native speakers may require materials that provide audio-visual aids with the voice of native speakers.

Secondly, access to resources such as a language lab, a computer with or without Internet access, a CD player etc will also impact on materials design. The impoverished reality definitely influences the effectiveness of teaching materials.

Teacher's competence and confidence are another factor determining how teachers carry out tasks/activities offered by textbooks. In addition, it's the teacher's responsibility to modify, adapt or supplement a textbook.

3. STEPS FOR DESIGNING EFFECTIVE ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS FOR PUBLICATION

After the exploration of the project, certain steps towards materials development has been identified and summarized as follows:

Step 1: Identification of the core curriculum by the finding of what is needed and expected to achieve at different age level of learners

Whatever curriculum, it prescribes goals and learning standards. It also provides a framework and direction for provision of education. It is the teacher's responsibility to make students achieve the established goals. To reach the goals, the textbook should be designed in a way that responds to and supports the core curriculum.

Step 2: Contextual Awareness by the finding of suitable, familiar contexts, texts and ideas with which to work

The context of the teaching and learning situations has an impact on the design of the textbook because it gives the material designers an idea of what should be put in the textbook. Considering the context is essential to the success of the textbook. The textbook designed for an EFL setting should be different from that designed for a second language environment, for example.

Step 3: Pedagogical appropriateness of activities, exercises, tasks, projects selected and used

In designing materials, pedagogic principles lead and guide the design of the activities in the textbook. Without any pedagogy, it is impossible to give a framework or outline to the textbook. Currently, there are a number of established teaching and learning approaches. Each of these approaches is evolved for a specific purpose and then guides the teacher in implementing a certain teaching method in the classroom. In addition, it identifies types of teaching/learning activities, learner roles and teacher roles. However, some activities, exercises, tasks or projects supported by a teaching and learning approach may not be appropriate to all levels of learners. Therefore, the materials writer should carefully select them.

Step 4: Physical production of materials, involving consideration of layout, type size, visuals, reproduction, CD length etc.

Once the writing is done, publication of the materials comes into play. At this point, the aesthetic principles of a designer and the pedagogic principles of the writer have to be balanced. Consequently, the designer and the writer need to work together closely to ensure that the content is properly and attractively presented and at the same time to make the students and teachers to feel that they are using materials that are useable, up-to-date and attractive.

Step 5: Use of materials

When looking inside the materials, the teacher should be able to see how they are divided into sections and sub-sections, how the sequence of the content is laid out, whether certain elements, such as appendices, indexes, wordlist, etc are available. Materials are produced for teachers to use. So, it is important that they can be used.

Step 6: Evaluation of materials

Criteria for evaluating the materials include reference to the content, the appearance and the aesthetic aspects of the textbook.

- Academic knowledge: the content that the learners are to focus on should include both form and function. The aim of the textbook is to help alert learners to underlying forms while providing opportunities for communicative activities. Encouraging learners to develop independent and creative expressions is as important as stimulating them to take an analytical approach to the language in front of and around them.
- Clarity of instructions: The instructions given to teachers and learners should be clear and effective. That is, for learners they should be written in language that is suitable for them. For teachers, instructions need to be concise and efficient in terms of pedagogy so that the teacher who uses the material know what and how to deliver the teaching. The instructions should guide the teacher to the underlying objectives of the given activities.
- Integrated language use: Naturally, people listen and speak together and read and write together. There are times when we read and then talk or listen and write. It is somewhat unnatural to focus on one particular skill at a time. To use the target language in an authentic manner, it is highly recommended that the produced materials offer opportunities for integrated language use.
- Authenticity: The language presented in the textbook should not distort the authenticity of the language. It should not be presented specifically for language learning purposes. Naturalness of the target language as it is used by native speakers to communicate with each other should be promoted. Another aspect in terms of authenticity that should be focus on is authenticity in tasks/activities. Tasks or activities required in the classroom should encourage the use of the language that reflects the language required in the world beyond the classroom.

- **Organization:** Coherence is an essential aspect that should not be overlooked. The textbook should be organized around an identifiable principle and follow a discernible pattern throughout. Organization should refer to clarity.
- **Physical appearance:** First impression is as important as the academic value of the textbook. Physical appearance includes the font size, the quality of pictures, the layout, the color and even the quality of paper used to publish the textbook.
- **User-friendliness:** When designing a textbook, not only should the designer be concerned about the pedagogic principles or the content, but he or she should also think of how the user uses the textbook. For example, is there enough space for the user to write down the answer to the exercise? Does the layout facilitate the learning or the reading? etc.
- **Durability:** Durability seems irrelevant unless we think of the cost effectiveness. Making the textbook durable for reuse should be taken into consideration if we want to save the trees.
- **Flexibility:** The textbook should have enough flexibility in terms of content and activities so that the teacher can make choices. Having a variety of inputs benefits both the teacher and students because we cannot assume that teachers or students are the same everywhere even in the same country. Providing a range of activities/tasks gives room for teachers to choose what is best for their students and how they can deliver what is best for them.

4. THE REVIEW OF THE MATERIALS

After the completion of the materials writing, a focus group was formed. To set a focus group, guidelines for conducting a focus group were studied thoroughly and were followed closely (Eliot & Associates, 2005), Ten scholars are selectively assigned to the focus group. They were sent the textbook along with the CDs and the teacher's manual. They were asked to read and analyze the materials before a meeting was set for them to come to share their perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes towards the materials. The discussion lasted all day long to provide an opportunity for all the respondents to participate and to give their opinions.

The notes were taken during the discussion and then were grouped according to the topics and sub-topics of the review. Suggestions and recommendations of how to improve the materials were also noted and given to the authors so that they could make adjustment or correction before trying out the materials.

5. CONCLUSION

The project was started out with the doubt on whether it is worth the time and effort to produce our own materials. In the end, all parties involved realized that they had learned extensively and their effort is worth a thousand more. Seeing the finished product gives them proud and make them understand what the textbook is all about. They have become better teachers, not just material writers.

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