

Guidelines for Designing Effective English Language Teaching Materials

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Abstract

There are many reasons why English language teachers may choose to construct their own teaching materials, despite the availability of commercially produced materials. This paper presents some of these reasons by examining advantages and disadvantages of teacher-produced materials. The authors also suggest factors that teachers should take into account when designing or adapting materials for diverse learners, and present a set of guidelines for designing effective materials for teaching and learning English.

Introduction

Teaching materials form an important part of most English teaching programmes. From textbooks, videotapes and pictures to the Internet, teachers rely heavily on a diverse range of materials to support their teaching and their students' learning. However, despite the current rich array of English language teaching materials commercially available, many teachers continue to produce their own materials for classroom use. Indeed, most teachers spend considerable time finding, selecting, evaluating, adapting and making materials to use in their teaching. In this paper we synthesise a range of ideas from the literature on materials design. We consider why teachers might want to design their own teaching materials and look at some of the advantages and disadvantages. We examine six factors that teachers need to take into account when considering designing their own materials; and finally we present ten guidelines for designing effective English teaching materials.

Why English Language Teachers May Choose to Design their own Materials

Advantages

Discussions about the advantages and disadvantages of teacher-designed materials usually centre on a comparison with using text or coursebooks. Rather than focusing on coursebooks, we have turned our focus to teacher-produced materials and consider that the disadvantages of coursebooks can become advantages for teacher-produced materials. The key reasons why teachers may wish to produce their own teaching materials can be linked to four themes distilled from recent literature on this topic (e.g., Altan, 1995; Block, 1991; Harmer, 2001; Podromou, 2002; Thornbury & Meddings, 2001, 2002).

An important advantage of teacher-produced materials is **contextualisation** (Block, 1991). A key criticism of commercial materials, particularly those produced for the world-wide EFL market is that they are necessarily generic and not aimed at any specific group of learners or any particular cultural or educational context. The possible lack of 'fit' between teaching context and coursebook has been expressed thus: "Our modern coursebooks are full of speech acts and functions based on situations which most foreign-language students will never encounter... 'Globally' designed coursebooks have continued to be stubbornly Anglo-centric. Appealing to the world market as they do, they cannot by definition draw on local varieties of English and have not gone very far in recognising English as an international language, either." (Altan, 1995, p. 59). For many teachers, designing or adapting their own teaching materials, enables them to take into account their particular learning environment and to overcome the lack of 'fit' of the coursebook.

Another aspect of context is the resources available. Some teaching contexts will be rich in resources such as coursebooks, supplementary texts, readers, computers, audio-visual

equipment and consumables such as paper, pens and so on. Other contexts may be extremely impoverished, with little more than an old blackboard and a few pieces of chalk. A lack of commercial materials forces teachers to fall back on their own resources and designing their own teaching materials can enable them to make best use of the resources available in their teaching context. A further aspect that is not often mentioned in the literature is the cost of commercially produced resources. For many schools, teacher-produced materials can be the best option in terms of both school and student budget.

A second area in which teacher-designed materials are an advantage is that of **individual needs**. Modern teaching methodology increasingly emphasises the importance of identifying and teaching to the individual needs of learners. English language classrooms are diverse places not only in terms of where they are situated, but also in terms of the individual learners within each context. Teacher-designed materials can be responsive to the heterogeneity inherent in the classroom. This approach encompasses the learners' first languages and cultures, their learning needs and their experiences. Few coursebooks deliberately incorporate opportunities for learners to build on the first language skills already acquired, despite research suggesting that bilingual approaches are most successful in developing second language competence (Thomas & Collier, 1997). A teacher can develop materials that incorporate elements of the learners' first language and culture, or at least provide opportunities for acknowledgement and use alongside English. In addition, teacher-prepared materials provide the opportunity to select texts and activities at exactly the right level for particular learners, to ensure appropriate challenge and levels of success.

In designing their own materials teachers can also make decisions about the most appropriate organising principle or focus for the materials and activities. And this can be changed over the course of the programme if necessary. Most coursebooks remain organised around grammar elements and the PPP (presentation, practice, production) model of teaching, often with an "unrelenting format" which can be "deeply unengaging" (Harmer, 2001, p. 6). By taking more control over materials production, teachers can choose from the range of possibilities, including topics, situations, notions, functions, skills etc, or a combination of these principles, as starting points to develop a variety of materials that focus on the developing needs of their particular group of learners.

Personalisation is another advantage of teacher-designed materials. In his 1991 article, Block argues in favour of 'home-made' materials saying that they add a personal touch to teaching that students appreciate. Tapping into the interests and taking account of the learning styles of students is likely to increase motivation and engagement in learning. Podromou (2002) further suggests that there is also greater choice, freedom and scope for spontaneity when teachers develop their own materials.

A further advantage of teacher-designed materials is **timeliness** (Block, 1991). Teachers designing their own materials can respond to local and international events with up-to-date, relevant and high interest topics and tasks. The teachable moment can be more readily seized.

In conclusion, the advantages of teacher-designed materials can be summed up in the idea that they avoid the 'one-size-fits-all' approach of most commercial materials.

Disadvantages

There are a number of potential pitfalls for teachers who would be materials designers. These can be considered under three headings, the first of which is **organisation**. Coursebooks are usually organised around an identifiable principle and follow a discernible pattern throughout. While this can be rather dull and boring (or 'unrelenting') it does provide both teachers and students with some security and a "coherent body of work to remember and revise from" (Harmer, 2001, p. 7). In contrast, teacher-designed materials may lack overall coherence and a clear progression. Without some overall organising principle, materials may be piecemeal and can result in poorly focused activities lacking clear direction. This is frustrating and confusing for learners who may not be able to see how their English is developing.

A further aspect of organisation relates to the physical organisation and storage of materials. Without a clearly thought through and well-organised system, teacher-produced materials may be difficult to locate for ongoing use, or may end up damaged or with parts missing.

Possibly the most common criticism levelled against teacher-made materials is to do with their **quality**. At the surface level, teacher-made materials may “seem ragged and unprofessional next to those produced by *professionals*.” (Block, 1991, p. 212, emphasis in original). They may contain errors, be poorly constructed, lack clarity in layout and print and lack durability. Harmer probably speaks for many when he says, “If the alternative is a collection of scruffy photocopies, give me a well-produced coursebook any time.” (2001, p. 7).

In addition, a lack of experience and understanding on the part of the teacher may result in important elements being left out or inadequately covered. Teacher-made materials may be produced to take advantage of authentic text. However, if not guided by clear criteria and some experience, teachers may make inconsistent or poor choices of texts. A further problem may be a lack of clear instructions about how to make effective use of the materials – particularly instructions designed for students.

Yet another disadvantage of teacher-made materials, and perhaps the key factor inhibiting many teachers from producing their own teaching materials, is **time**. However passionately one may believe in the advantages of teacher-designed materials, the reality is that for many teachers, it is simply not viable – at least not all the time.

Factors to Consider When Designing Materials

We turn now to consider six key factors that teachers need to take into account when embarking on the design of teaching materials for their learners. These relate to, and refer back to some of the advantages and disadvantages. Some will also be expanded further in the guidelines which follow.

The first and most important factor to be considered is the **learners**. If the point of teacher-created materials is relevance, interest, motivation and meeting specific individual needs, then clearly teachers must ensure they know their learners well. Any consideration of syllabus or materials design must begin with a needs analysis. This should reveal learning needs with regard to English language skills in listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary knowledge and grammar; as well as individual student’s learning preferences. It is not just learning needs that are relevant to the teacher as materials designer, however. Equally important is knowledge about students’ experiences (life and educational), their first language and levels of literacy in it, their aspirations, their interests and their purposes for learning English.

The **curriculum and the context** are variables that will significantly impact on decisions about teaching materials. Many teachers are bound by a mandated curriculum defining the content, skills and values to be taught. Whether imposed at school or state level, a curriculum outlines the goals and objectives for the learners and the course of study. Whatever the curriculum, it is the teacher’s responsibility to ensure that the goals and objectives of the overarching curriculum are kept close at hand when designing materials (Nunan, 1988).

As noted earlier, the context in which the teaching and learning occurs will impact on the types of materials that may need to be designed. For example, a primary-level mainstream, English-speaking setting, with a set curriculum and access to native speakers may require materials that facilitate interaction about subject content, and develop cognitive academic language proficiency. However, refugee adults may need teaching materials that focus on meeting immediate survival needs and gaining employment.

The **resources and facilities** available to the teacher-designer are also mentioned above as an element of context. Clearly teachers must be realistic about what they can achieve in terms of materials design and production within the limitations of available resources and facilities. Access to resources such as computers (with or without Internet access), a video player and TV, radio, cassette recorder, CD player, photocopier, language lab., digital camera, whiteboard, OHP, scissors, cardboard, laminator etc will impact on decisions in materials design. Hadfield and Hadfield (2003) offer some useful suggestions for ‘resourceless’ teaching which address the impoverished reality of some teaching contexts.

Personal confidence and competence are factors that will determine an individual teacher’s willingness to embark on materials development. This will be influenced by the teacher’s level of teaching experience and his or her perceived creativity or artistic skills and overall understanding of the principles of materials design and production. In reality, most teachers

undertake materials design to modify, adapt or supplement a coursebook, rather than starting from scratch, and this is probably the most realistic option for most teachers. Decisions available to teachers include the following (adapted from Harmer, 2001 and Lamie, 1999):

1. Add activities to those already suggested.
2. Leave out activities that do not meet your learners' needs.
3. Replace or adapt activities or materials with:
 - supplementary materials from other commercial texts
 - authentic materials (newspapers, radio reports, films etc)
 - teacher-created supplementary materials.
4. Change the organisational structure of the activities, for example, pairs, small groups or whole class.

Modern technology provides teachers with access to tools that enable professional results in materials production. Computers with Clipart, Internet access and digital pictures offer unprecedented means for publishing high quality teaching materials.

A less exciting, but nevertheless important factor to consider in designing materials is **copyright compliance**. Teachers need to be aware of the restrictions that copyright laws place on the copying of authentic materials, published materials and materials downloaded from the Internet for use in the classroom. This is particularly important when creating course materials that will be used by a large number of classes over time. Copyright law has implications when creating materials that include excerpts from published works. An example of this would be creating a worksheet that uses a picture or exercise from a commercial text, alongside teacher-created activities. While an idea cannot be copyright, the expression of the idea can be and teachers need to be mindful of this.

Time was discussed earlier as a disadvantage for teachers who wish to design their own materials. It is thus, important to consider ways to make this aspect manageable. Block (1991) suggests a number of ways in which teachers can lighten the load, including sharing materials with other teachers, working in a team to take turns to design and produce materials, and organising central storage so materials are available to everyone.

Guidelines for Designing Effective English Teaching Materials

Teacher designed materials may range from one-off, single use items to extensive programmes of work where the tasks and activities build on each other to create a coherent progression of skills, concepts and language items. The guidelines that follow may act as a useful framework for teachers as they navigate the range of factors and variables to develop materials for their own teaching situations. The guidelines are offered as just that – guidelines – not rules to be rigidly applied or adhered to. While not all the guidelines will be relevant or applicable in all materials design scenarios, overall they provide for coherent design and materials which enhance the learning experience.

Guideline 1: English language teaching materials should be contextualised

Firstly, the materials should be contextualised **to the curriculum they are intended to address** (Nunan, 1988, pp. 1–2). It is essential during the design stages that the objectives of the curriculum, syllabus or scheme within the designer's institution are kept to the fore. This is not to suggest that materials design should be solely determined by a list of course specifications or by large inventories of vocabulary that need to be imparted, but these are certainly among the initial considerations.

Materials should also be contextualised **to the experiences, realities and first languages of the learners**. An important part of this involves an awareness on the part of the teacher-designer of the "socio-cultural appropriacy" (Jolly & Bolitho, 1998, p. 111) of things such as the designer's own style of presenting material, of arranging groups, and so on. It is essential the materials designer is informed about the culture-specific learning processes of the intended learners, and for many groups this may mean adjusting the intended balance of what teachers may regard as more enjoyable activities and those of a more serious nature. Materials should link explicitly to what the learners already know, to their first languages and cultures, and very importantly, should alert learners to any areas of significant cultural difference.

In addition, materials should be contextualised **to topics and themes that provide meaningful, purposeful uses for the target language**. Wherever possible, these should be chosen on the basis of their relevance and appropriateness for the intended learners, to ensure personal engagement and to provide motivation for dipping further into the materials. For some ages and stages the topics may well be ‘old faithfuls’, such as money, family and holidays. Part of the mission for the materials designer is “to find new angles on those topics” (Bell & Gower, 1998, p. 123) and having done that, to develop activities which will ensure purposeful production of the target language or skills. When producing materials for one-off use with smaller groups, additional student engagement can be achieved by allowing students to ‘star’ in the passages and texts that have been designed specifically for them.

Guideline 2: Materials should stimulate interaction and be generative in terms of language

Hall (1995) states that “most people who learn to communicate fluently in a language which is not their L1 do so by spending a lot of time in situations where they have to use the language for some real communicative purpose” (p. 9). Ideally, language-teaching materials should provide situations that demand the same; situations where learners need to interact with each other regularly in a manner that reflects the type of interactions they will engage in outside of the classroom. Hall outlines three conditions he believes are necessary to stimulate real communication: these are the need to “have something we want to communicate”, “someone to communicate with”, and, perhaps most importantly, “some interest in the outcome of the communication” (p. 9). Nunan (1988) refers to this as the “learning by doing philosophy” (p. 8), and suggests procedures such as information gap and information transfer activities, which can be used to ensure that interaction is necessary.

Language learning will be maximally enhanced if materials designers are able to acknowledge the communication challenges inherent in an interactive teaching approach and address the different norms of interaction, such as preferred personal space, for example, directly within their teaching materials.

Effective learning frequently involves learners in explorations of new linguistic terrain, and interaction can often be the medium for providing the ‘stretch’ that is necessary for ongoing language development. Materials designers should ensure their materials allow sufficient scope for their learners to be ‘stretched’ at least some of the time, to build on from what is provided to generate new language, and to progress beyond surface fluency to proficiency and confidence.

Guideline 3: English language teaching materials should encourage learners to develop learning skills and strategies

It is impossible for teachers to teach their learners all the language they need to know in the short time that they are in the classroom. In addition to teaching valuable new language skills, it is essential that language teaching materials also teach their target learners how to learn, and that they help them to take advantage of language learning opportunities outside the classroom. Hall (1995) stresses the importance of providing learners with the confidence to persist in their attempts to find solutions when they have initial difficulties in communicating. To this end, strategies such as rewording and using facial expressions and body language effectively can be fine-tuned with well designed materials.

In addition, materials can provide valuable opportunities for self-evaluation by providing the necessary metalanguage and incorporating activities which encourage learners to assess their own learning and language development. This can utilise the learners’ first language as well as English. Some EFL course books, such as Ellis & Sinclair (1989), also build in exercises for students to explore their own learning styles and strategies.

Guideline 4: English language teaching materials should allow for a focus on form as well as function

Frequently, the initial motivation for designing materials stems from practitioners’ desires to make activities more communicative—often as “an antidote to the profusion of skills-based activities and artificial language use pervasive in the field of ESL instruction” (Demetron, 1997, p. 5). Sometimes, though, in the desire to steer a wide berth around this more traditional approach, materials are developed which allow absolutely no scope for a focus on language form.

The aim of Guideline 3 is to develop active, independent language learners. To help meet this goal, materials also need to encourage learners to take an analytical approach to the language in front of and around them, and to form and test their own hypotheses about how language works (Nunan, 1988). Well-designed materials can help considerably with this by alerting learners to underlying forms and by providing opportunities for regulated practice in addition to independent and creative expression.

Guideline 5: English language teaching materials should offer opportunities for integrated language use

Language teaching materials can tend to focus on one particular skill in a somewhat unnatural manner. Some courses have a major focus on productive skills, and in these reading and listening become second-rate skills. With other materials, reading or writing may dominate. Bell & Gower (1998) point out that, “at the very least we listen and speak together, and read and write together” (p. 125). Ideally, materials produced should give learners opportunities to integrate all the language skills in an authentic manner and to become competent at integrating extra-linguistic factors also.

Guideline 6: English language teaching materials should be authentic

Much space has been devoted in language teaching literature to debating the desirability (and otherwise) of using authentic materials in language teaching classrooms and, indeed, to defining exactly what constitutes genuine versus simulated texts (e.g., Harmer, 1998; Hedge, 2000; Nunan, 1988, 1991). It is the authors’ view that it is imperative for second language learners to be regularly exposed in the classroom to real, unscripted language—to passages that have not been produced specifically for language learning purposes. As Nunan points out, “texts written specifically for the classroom generally distort the language in some way” (1988, p. 6).

When the aim for authenticity **in terms of the texts** presented to learners is discussed, a common tendency is to immediately think of written material such as newspapers and magazines. Materials designers should also aim for authentic spoken and visual texts. Learners need to hear, see and read the way native speakers communicate with each other naturally.

Arguably more important than the provision of authentic texts, is authenticity **in terms of the tasks** which students are required to perform with them. Consideration of the types of real-world tasks specific groups of learners commonly need to perform will allow designers to generate materials where both the texts and the things learners are required to do with them reflect the language and behaviours required of them in the world outside the classroom.

Guideline 7: English language teaching materials should link to each other to develop a progression of skills, understandings and language items

One potential pitfall for teacher-designed materials mentioned in the first part of this article relates to the organisation within and between individual tasks. There is a very real danger with self-designed and adapted materials that the result can be a hotchpotch of unconnected activities. Clearly stated objectives at the outset of the design process will help ensure that the resultant materials have coherence, and that they clearly progress specific learning goals while also giving opportunities for repetition and reinforcement of earlier learning.

Guideline 8: English language teaching materials should be attractive

Criteria for evaluating English language teaching materials and course books frequently include reference to the ‘look’ and the ‘feel’ of the product (see, for example, Harmer, 1998; Nunan, 1991). Some aspects of these criteria that are particularly pertinent to materials designers are discussed below.

Physical appearance: Initial impressions can be as important in the language classroom as they are in many other aspects of life. Put simply, language-teaching materials should be good to look at! Factors to consider include the density of the text on the page, the type size, and the cohesiveness and consistency of the layout.

User-friendliness: Materials should also be attractive in terms of their ‘usability’. Some simple examples: if the activity is a gap-fill exercise, is there enough space for learners to handwrite

their responses? If an oral response is required during a tape or video exercise, is the silence long enough to allow for both thinking and responding?

Durability: If materials need to be used more than once, or if they are to be used by many different students, consideration needs to be given to how they can be made robust enough to last the required distance.

Ability to be reproduced: Language teaching institutions are not renowned for giving their staff unlimited access to colour copying facilities, yet many do-it-yourself materials designers continue to produce eye-catching multi-coloured originals, and suffer frustration and disappointment when what emerges from the photocopier is a class-set of grey blurs.

Guideline 9: English language teaching materials should have appropriate instructions

This guideline applies as much to the instructions that are provided for other teachers who may use the materials, as it does for the intended learners. It seems to be stating the obvious to say that instructions should be clear, but, often, excellent materials fail in their “pedagogical realisation” (Jolly & Bolitho, 1998, p. 93) because of a lack of clarity in their instructions. For instructions to be effective, they should be written in language that is appropriate for the target learners, and the use of the correct metalanguage can assist with making instructions more concise and efficient.

Guideline 10: English language teaching materials should be flexible

This final guideline is directed primarily at longer series of materials rather than at one-off tasks, but has pertinence to both. Prabhu (cited in Cook, *c.* 1998) maintains that much of a student’s language learning is “mediated by the materials and course books the teacher uses in terms of both language content and teaching technique” (p. 3). He proposes constructing materials that allow teachers and students to make choices—at least some of the time. He suggests the materials designer may offer flexibility in terms of content by providing “a range of possible inputs . . . [that] are not themselves organised into lesson units” (cited in Maley, 1998, p. 284), and that teachers or, indeed, students, could then choose which of these to use and which “procedure” (e.g. comprehension exercise, grammar awareness exercise, role play, etc) to apply to them.

Maley (2003) takes this idea a stage further, acknowledging the benefits of diversity in the areas of content, roles and procedures for both teachers and students, and proposing that flexibility is also possible in approach, level, methodology, logistics, technology, teaching style, evaluation procedures and expected outcomes. He concludes with this challenge for materials designers: “Those involved . . . could greatly extend and diversify the range of what is offered to students with relatively little effort. Will they make that effort?” (p. 7).

Conclusion

In the end, teachers must weigh up the benefits and costs of designing their own teaching materials and make their own decision as to whether it is worth the time and effort. As Harmer (2001) puts it, “The good DIY teacher, with time on his or her hands, with unlimited resources, and the confidence to marshal those resources into a clear and coherent language program, is probably about as good as it gets for the average language learner” (p. 9)

Inevitably there will be numerous constraints on any materials designer and compromises will be necessary. Materials that satisfy the guidelines proposed, though, could make the difference between a class of diverse learners in an excited “state of ‘expectancy’ (What will happen this time?) rather than ‘expectation’ (Oh, not that again!)” (Maley, 2003, p. 2). A tantalising proposition!

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