

DEVELOPING TEACHER-MADE MATERIALS

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Abstract

Teaching materials form an important part of most English teaching programs. From textbooks, videos 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 synthesize 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 investigate 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.

Discussions about the advantages and disadvantages of teacher-designed materials usually centre on a comparison with using text or coursebooks. Rather than focusing on course books, we have turned our focus to teacher-produced materials and consider that the disadvantages of course books 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.

An important advantage of teacher-produced materials is contextualization[1]¹. 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. 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.”[2]². 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.

¹ Block, D. (1991). Some thoughts on DIY materials design. *ELT Journal*, 45(3), 211–217.

² Altan, M. Z. (1995). Culture in EFL contexts: Classroom and coursebooks. *MET*, 4(2), 58–60.

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 emphasizes 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[3]³. 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 organizing principle or focus for the materials and activities. And this can be changed over the course of the programme if necessary. Most coursebooks remain organized around grammar elements and the PPP (presentation, practice, production) model of teaching, often with an "unrelenting format" which can be "deeply unengaging"[4]⁴. 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.

³ Thomas, W. P., & Collier, V.P. (1997). School effectiveness for language minority students. NCBE Resource Collection Series, 9, December. Washington, D.C.:National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education. Retrieved 29 January 2004 from: <http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/pubs/resource/effectiveness/thomas-collier97.pdf>

⁴ Harmer, J. (2001). Coursebooks. A human, cultural and linguistic disaster? MET, 8(4), 5–10.

Personalization is another advantage of teacher-designed materials. In his 1991 article, Block argues in favor 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 further suggests that there is also greater choice, freedom and scope for spontaneity when teachers develop their own materials. 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.

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 scratch, and this is probably the most realistic option for most teachers. Decisions available to teachers include the following:

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.

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.

References

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