

MATERIAL WRITING FOR AND IN THE EFL SETTING

Oscar Molina Márquez
Pontificia Bolivariana University

SHARING EXPERIENCE

The idea behind presenting a paper or a workshop at the XIX Annual English Language Teaching Symposium, at the Centro Colombo-Americano, sprang from my experience as both a teacher-trainer in Microteaching Sessions and a need to provide language teachers with some insights regarding materials development for and in the EFL setting.

In my last microteaching session at Fundación Universitaria Luis Amigó, last December, I had the chance to train public primary and secondary school teachers and guide their final projects which they were supposed to develop. As a result, then, the materials developed were based on a response to children's particular interests in terms of topics, areas of knowledge, and to the lack of appropriate materials for children of lower socio-economic classes.

The aim of the project was and still is to have primary and secondary school teachers write pedagogical and instructional materials to be covered in language arts sessions, based on the linguistic needs of their learners of English as a foreign language.

The methodology adopted by the teachers was based on both psychological principles underlying language acquisition/learning process (constructivism), idea developed by Piaget, and the linguistic theories supported by Chomsky (Competence-Performance), and Krashen (Monitor's Model).

The topics were chosen based on the following criteria:

1. Relation to the curriculum.
2. Emphasis on values, morals and ethics.
3. Variety in the language classroom.
4. Emphasis on principles, such as sharing.
5. Varied activities and strategies to be developed.

Materials written and developed by the teachers in this course include: Acrostics, Poems, Reflections, Riddles, Rhymes, Prayers, Soup of Letters and Short Stories. The topics covered, and the type of written discourse used, provide children with variety in the language classroom.

Based on the following flow-diagram introducing the steps involved in the process of materials writing, proposed by Jolly and Bolitho (1998), we can evaluate the materials prepared by the public primary and secondary school teachers for and in the EFL setting.

IDENTIFICATION by teacher or learner(s) of a need to fulfil a problem to solve by the creation of materials.

EXPLORATION of the area of need/problem in terms of what language, what meanings, what functions, what skills etc?

CONTEXTUAL REALISATION of the proposed new materials by the finding of suitable ideas, contexts or texts with which to work.

PEDAGOGICAL REALISATION of materials by means of finding appropriate exercises and activities AND the writing of appropriate instructions for use.

PHYSICAL PRODUCTION of material, involving consideration of layout, type size, visuals, reproduction, tape length etc.

Although 'materials often seem more prominent than any other element in the curriculum', as Nunan (1988) suggests, we as language teachers should bear in mind how skillful the language teacher is for the manipulation and exploration of the materials. That is to say, the methodology, method, approach, technique, strategy and activity used or adopted by the teacher in the language classroom. These materials and their application and use in the classroom should interact with the previous or background knowledge, the learner has, be it in terms of linguistic competence or academic knowledge in a certain area of the curriculum.

Depending on the following criteria instructional materials do play a role in the acquisition/learning process of the foreign language:

- a. The method or approach to be used or adopted in the language classroom, the teacher based on his learners' age, interests, attitudes, motivations, and level of proficiency in the target language, the language teacher, therefore is responsible for selecting and exploring the instructional materials.
- b. The language skills the language teacher wants to emphasize on, that is to say, the learners' linguistic needs tell the language teachers which language skills should be reinforced. Then, in his planning he is responsible for selecting the appropriate techniques and strategies which can strengthen his learners' grammatical, pragmatic or communicative competence.
- c. The model of classroom interaction given, proposed, or adopted by the language teacher in the language classroom, may be suitable to the following types of interaction:

1. Individual work.
2. Pair work.
3. Group work.
4. Classwork.

Depending on the model of classroom interaction either adopted by the learner or imposed by the language teacher, we can detect, in EFL settings, learners' personality traits, learners' strategies, social interaction strategies, power, leadership, and management.

Methodology is also a key element in the planning of language arts lessons. It depends on the type of instructional materials selected. The instructional materials, in turn, depend on the type of methodology adopted, taking into account, of course, the purpose, goals, characteristics of the materials, and the audience to which they are going to be addressed.

Instructional materials, in themselves, are neither good nor bad. It is the teacher's experience, the make-up of the class, the level of language proficiency which really matter. Language learners, for example, can compare their cultural values, morals, and principles, with that of the target language being portrayed or shown either in novels, short stories, videos, and the like.

Bell and Gower (1998) propose eleven principles on which materials writing should be based. The following principles, then, can give you an idea of which criteria language teachers must bear in mind when either selecting, producing, or adapting instructional materials:

1. Flexibility.
2. From text to language.
3. Engaging content.

4. Natural language.
5. Analytic approaches.
6. Emphasis on review.
7. Personalised practice.
8. Integrated skills.
9. Balance of approaches.
10. Learner development.
11. Professional respect.

An approach which has been around for about ten years is the *Topic-based approach* (Hudelson, 1991). Teachers of English as a second or foreign language have the possibility to provide variety in their language classroom only if this approach to language learning is adopted or implemented in the EFL setting.

Although Hudelson suggests this approach be used with and for children, I really consider that it can also be expanded to EFL teaching to adolescents and even to adults. What it really changes is the depth in which the topics are treated.

The *topic-based approach* may be approached in the following terms:

Let us suppose the topic to be explored is *the family*, which may be explored either with children, adolescents or adults, and even for beginners, intermediate or advanced language learners.

On the one hand, *the family* may be explored in terms of other areas of the curriculum, that is, math, biology, religion, art, pastimes, music, physics, chemistry, language, etc.

On the other hand, *the family* may be explored only if the components of the

previous curriculum are also explored.

Let us consider the following mind map:

```

  THE FAMILY  __ math __ numbers  __ quantities
                                      __ even
                                      __ odds

```

Topics can be chosen based on the learners' linguistic, and pragmatic needs so that they may be able to fulfil communicative tasks successfully.

Topics may cover themes such as:

- | | |
|-------------------|----------------|
| a. Myself. | e. My toys. |
| b. My bedroom. | f. My school. |
| c. My family. | g. My pets. |
| d. My home/house. | h. My friends. |

The type of questions may be classified as:

a. Yes/No Questions:

Learners are expected to answer *Yes* or *No*. At this stage *understanding* or *comprehension* is more important than *production*. The former relates to what Chomsky calls *competence* and the latter refers to what Chomsky calls *performance*.

- 'Are you happy today?'
- 'Yes.'

b. Information Questions:

Learners are expected to provide the language teacher or another partner with the piece of information being asked.

- 'What is your name?'
- 'Camilo.'

c. Either/Or (choice) Questions:

Learners are expected to choose between two alternatives, from which the hearer must select only one.

- 'Are you hungry or thirsty?'
- 'Hungry.'

The language teacher may start asking relevant and meaningful questions to his

language learners, first using *Be* in the simple present tense, then in the progressive aspect, then, the language teacher may switch to *Do*, as the course advances, the language teacher may and should introduce other auxiliaries *Can* in other tenses and aspects, since the emphasis is on communicative tasks rather than on a sequential presentation of the structures of the target language being learned.

And I personally agree with Krashen on this particular point, since language learners should be familiar more with the *use* of the language rather than with its *usage*. *Use*, then, has to do with language in action, that is, language is used to fulfil a communicative and social need, where interaction is paramount. *Usage*, on the other hand, makes emphasis on correctness, on the application of a prescriptive grammar: 'Knowledge' of the language is viewed in terms of the manipulation of its rules.

Following Dubin and Olshtain (1986), in surveying existing materials, it is necessary that language teachers, curriculum designers, and materials writers, reflect on the quality and impact of instructional materials in the acquisition/learning process of the foreign or second language, that is, depending on the setting within which the language is being taught or learned. Some other conditions that also should be met are:

1. The kind of instructional materials to be used or developed.
2. If those materials are going to be implemented in bilingual programs or in intensive courses.
3. If they respect and correspond to the learners' mental and/or

psychological age, and the like.

Then, in surveying existing materials, Dubin and Olshtain (1986) propose the following questions:

1. By whom and where were developed the materials developed?
2. Are the materials compatible with the syllabus?
3. Do most of the materials provide alternatives for teachers and learners?
4. Which language skills do the materials cover?
5. How authentic are the text types included in the materials?
6. How do learners and teachers who have used the materials feel about them?

One alternative for the language teacher in writing, creating, developing or adapting instructional materials is that he can make use of them through writing materials for the EFL setting, in the EFL setting and for both the language teacher and his language learners. The following will provide language teachers, curriculum designers, and materials writers with some insights concerning materials writing:

❖ GOALS:

- ❑ *Instructional materials help language teachers explore the linguistic needs, the socialization processes of the child, based on his maturity, and his cognitive, and mental stages.*
- ❑ *It is through the use of instructional materials that the child may explore his individual or group interests, and identify and solve his logic or relationship problems.*
- ❑ *Instructional materials contribute to the understanding, relationship of the environment,*

depending on the interaction established between the language learner and his real world.

❖ **OBJECTIVES:**

- ❑ To present contents: Knowledge and skills.
- ❑ To reinforce and integrate the learner's background knowledge with the new knowledge.
- ❑ To promote socialization processes in the child.
- ❑ To awaken interest, creativity and imagination in the child.
- ❑ To contribute to the development of the thinking processes in the child.

❖ **CRITERIA:**

- ❑ Acquisition and availability of instructional materials.
- ❑ Usefulness and cost of instructional materials.
- ❑ Application or areas of work they make emphasis on.
- ❑ Presentation and reinforcement of contents.
- ❑ Relationship with the curriculum and the needs of the child.

❖ **TYPE OF INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS:**

❑ **Realia:**

- Fruits: orange, banana, apple, pear, mango, etc..
- Tastes: sour, sweet, flat, salty, bitter, etc.
- Colors: blue, red, yellow, brown, green, etc.
- Shapes: round, square, circle, triangle, rectangle, etc..
- Sizes: big, large, small, little, medium-sized, tiny, etc.
- Clothing: shirts, pants, shoes, socks, belt, etc.
- Materials: paper, glass, cotton, plastic, cardboard, etc..
- Weight: heavy, light, etc.

❑ **Printed Material:**

- Books.
- Short Stories.
- Magazines.
- Newspapers.
- Textbooks.

❑ **Tangible Objects:**

- Dolls.
- Cars.
- Plasticine.
- Rings.
- Ropes.

❑ **Visual Aids:**

- Real Objects.
- Flash cards.
- Pictures.
- Posters.
- Big Books.

❑ **Listening Material:**

- Tapes.
- Songs
- Rhymes.
- Story telling.
- Descriptions.

❑ **Audivisual Aids:**

- Movies.
- Cartoons.
- Videotapes.
- Songs and lyrics.
- Tapes and printed material.

❑ **Interactive Teaching Material:**

- Educational software.
- Reading analysis.
- Tapes and written material.
- Movies which promote reflection and analysis.
- Written compositions based on a given topic.

❖ **SELECTION CRITERIA:**

- ❑ Do the materials respect the learners' pace?
- ❑ Do they fit the learners' needs?
- ❑ What kind of development can the learners get from them?
- ❑ What areas of knowledge do they emphasize on?
- ❑ Are their contents coherent, cohesive, colorful, and agreeable?

❖ **USE CRITERIA:**

- ❑ Are they used to introduce a topic?
- ❑ Are they used to develop a topic?
- ❑ Are they appropriate to motivate learners and have them interested?
- ❑ Are they used to evaluate and assess learners' pace and progress?
- ❑ Do they present contents based on the integration of areas of knowledge?

❖ **EFFICIENCY CRITERIA:**

- ❑ Do they fit the linguistic, cultural, and psychological goals and objectives proposed?
- ❑ Are they easy to use?
- ❑ Do they keep learners' interested and motivated?
- ❑ Can the information in them be taken and applied in real life?
- ❑ Do they provide language teachers with tools to relate background knowledge to the new one?

❖ **EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT CRITERIA:**

- ❑ Do they help learners achieve their goals and objectives?
- ❑ Do they involve curricular integration?
- ❑ Do they keep the child motivated to learn, interact and socialize?
- ❑ Do they emphasize on the four language skills?
- ❑ Do they reflect language and culture as they are used and experienced in real and meaningful contexts?

Techniques and strategies should be thought of in terms of the following: Task, skill, subskill, work system, level, purpose, motivation, function, target audience, and depth.

◆ **Task:** Homework, activity, assignment, reinforcement, assessment.

◆ **Skill:** Listening, speaking, reading, writing.

◆ **Subskill:** Grammar, vocabulary and culture.

◆ **Work system:** Individual, pair, group, class.

◆ **Level:** Beginners, intermediate, advanced.

◆ **Purpose:** Ask for a favor, apologize, express sympathy.

◆ **Motivation:** Intrinsic, extrinsic, integrative, instrumental.

◆ **Function:** Convey meaning, establish social relationships, keep one's cultural identity and respect others' identity traits.

◆ **Target Audience:** Children, teenagers, adolescents, adults.

◆ **Depth:** Depending on the previous knowledge, interests, attitudes, needs of the target audience.

Questions concerning Materials Writing

1. Who should be responsible for materials writing for and in the EFL classroom – the language teacher, the learners, or both?

2. How meaningful is language comprehension and/or production by EFL learners when exposed to EFL materials?
3. What role does the EFL context play in the development and/or production of EFL materials?
4. How does EFL materials writing affect language learning in EFL settings?
5. What kind of methodology should be implemented in EFL environments if language learners are to be active participants in their language process and make it meaningful and engaging?
6. How does materials development contribute to the internalization of the foreign language in artificial environments like ours?
7. Which language skills should be emphasized in EFL settings? Why?

REFERENCES

- Bell, J. and R. Gower. 1998. Writing course materials for the world: a great compromise. In *Materials Development in Language Teaching*, ed. B. Tomlinson. The United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Dubin, F. And E. Olshtain. 1986. *Course Design*. USA: Cambridge University Press.
- Hudelson, S. 1989-1993. EFL Teaching and Children: A Topic-Based Approach. In *Teacher Development: Making the Right Moves*, ed. T. Kral. USA, Washington, D.C.: English Teaching Forum.
- Jolly, D. and R. Bolitho. 1998. A Framework for Materials Writing. In *Materials Development in Language Teaching*, ed. B. Tomlinson. The United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Nunan, D. 1988. *The Learner-Centred Curriculum: A Study in Second Language Teaching*. Great Britain: Cambridge University Press.