

GUIDELINES FOR DESIGNING EFFECTIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING MATERIALS

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Abstract

Most English language teachers in the 21st century have access to a significant and growing range of teaching materials and resources to guide and enhance the teaching and learning experience. Course books are the most obvious resource used by teachers, with various combinations of students' books, teachers' books, audio and video tapes, CDs and web-based resources supplementing these. Despite this large range of available resources, many teachers continue to produce their own materials for classroom use. This article provides 10 guidelines to assist teachers who would like to, or already do, design their own materials for classroom use. The guidelines reflect best practice principles from the literature and are offered as a framework to provide for the design of coherent and effective quality materials.

Introduction

Teaching materials form an important part of most English language 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, anecdotal evidence suggests that 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.

Teacher-designed materials can 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 provide a framework for teachers as they navigate a range of factors and variables to develop materials for their own teaching situations. These guidelines are a synthesis reflecting best practice principles in the literature and our experience as teachers, teacher educators and materials designers. By necessity they are broadly stated as space prevents a fully detailed discussion of each. The principles are offered as suggestions rather than as rules to be rigidly applied or adhered to. While not all the guidelines will be relevant or applicable in all materials design scenarios, when taken together they provide a framework within which to bring coherency and quality to teacher-designed materials to enhance the learning experience.

Guideline 1: English language teaching materials should be contextualized

A common criticism of commercial materials, particularly those produced for the worldwide EFL (English as a Foreign Language) market, is that they are necessarily generic and not aimed at any specific group of learners or any particular cultural or educational context

(Harmer, 2001). For many teachers, designing or adapting their own teaching materials enables them to take into account their particular teaching context and to overcome the lack of ‘fit’ of the coursebook. Materials need to be contextualised in two key areas: the curriculum and the learners.

The Curriculum

The curriculum provides the overarching framework of target content and skills within which teachers must plan their programmes of work. Nunan (1988) argues that materials should be contextualised **to the curriculum they are intended to address** to ensure that English language teaching is focused, relevant and appropriate. It is therefore essential during the design stages that the objectives of the curriculum, syllabus or scheme within the designer’s institution are kept to the fore (Nunan, 1988).

Materials should also be contextualised **to topics and themes that provide meaningful, purposeful uses for the target language** within the curriculum. 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 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 that will ensure purposeful production of the target language or skills.

Learners

Materials should also be contextualised **to the experiences, realities, needs and first languages of the learners**. Modern teaching methodology increasingly emphasises the importance of identifying and teaching to the individual needs of learners. Thus teachers must ensure they know their learners well. English language classrooms are diverse places in terms not only of where they are situated, but also of the individual learners. The starting point of any materials design should be a needs analysis, which, in addition to revealing students’ learning needs with regard to English language skills, should also aim to determine the students’ life and educational experiences, their first language and levels of literacy in it, their interests, their aspirations, and their purposes for learning English.

Although variously described and weighted (see Berwick, 1989; Brindley, 1989; Richterich & Chancerel, 1987; Robinson, 1991), a needs analysis commonly consists of “present situation analysis”, i.e. student’s current English proficiency (Kuter, 1999, p.3), usually gauged through formal diagnostic assessment tasks; and “target situation analysis”, i.e. language requirements for the target situation (Kuter, 1999, p.3), often gained via informal information gathering activities such as learner questionnaires, interviews with parents and/or students, and using previous school records. The nature of the data collected and how this process is managed is dependent on the context in which the language learning occurs.

A thoughtful needs analysis also provides the teacher-designer with an awareness of the “socio-cultural appropriacy” (Jolly & Bolitho, 1998, p. 111) of such things as the designer’s own style of presenting material, of arranging groups, and so on. It is essential that materials designers inform themselves about the culture-specific learning processes of the learners.

For many groups, this may mean adjusting the balance between what teachers may regard as more enjoyable activities and those of a more serious nature (Bell & Gower, 1998).

With an effective needs analysis as the foundation, materials can then be designed which are responsive to the heterogeneity inherent within the classroom, and which link clearly to what the learners already know. They can also make relevant links to learners' first languages and cultures and, very importantly, alert learners to any areas of significant cultural difference. Few course books explicitly incorporate opportunities for learners to build on the first language skills they have already acquired. It is possible, though, for a teacher to develop materials that incorporate elements of the learner's first language and culture, or at least provide opportunities for acknowledgement of these alongside English.

Finally, teacher-prepared materials provide the opportunity to select texts and activities at exactly the right level for specific learners, thereby helping to ensure appropriate levels of challenge and success.

Guideline 2: Materials should encourage 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). For many language learners, the classroom is the main environment where interactive L2 opportunities are available. Ideally, then, language-teaching materials should provide for situations where learners need to interact with one another in a manner that parallels the type of interactions they aim to 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) similarly advocates a "learning by doing" (p. 8) approach and suggests employing activities such as information gap and information transfer to create situations that necessitate interaction.

Effective language learning also involves learners in frequent 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 link to each other to develop a progression of skills, understandings and language items

One potential downside to teacher-designed materials relates to the organisation within and between individual tasks. While course books are usually organised around identifiable principles and follow a discernible pattern throughout, teacher-designed and adapted materials can lack overall coherence and result in a hotchpotch of unconnected activities (Harmer, 2001). Without some overall organising principle to provide coherence, materials may be piecemeal and can result in poorly focused activities. This lack of direction can frustrate and confuse learners, and prevent them from seeing how their English is

developing. Common ways of organising materials include topics (my family, the environment, leisure); grammar or structures (present simple, questions forms, phrasal verbs); functions (apologising, giving directions, asking for advice); and situations (shopping, going to the doctor). Many modern syllabuses and course books use a 'multi-strand' approach to be as widely relevant as possible (Ur, 1996).

In addition to organising principles, clearly stated objectives from the outset 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 4: English language teaching materials should offer opportunities for integrated language use

Language-teaching course books that aim to develop one skill in particular can tend to focus on the target skill in a somewhat unnatural manner. Some have a major focus on the productive skills of speaking and writing. 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 should give learners opportunities to integrate all the language skills in an authentic manner and to become competent at integrating extra-linguistic factors such as pragmatics and body language appropriately.

Many of the materials that teachers design are based on modifying, adapting or supplementing existing course materials. As Harmer (2001) and Lamie (1999) point out, this may be done by:

- adding activities to those already suggested
- leaving out activities that do not meet learners' needs
- replacing or adapting activities or materials with:
 - supplementary materials from other commercial texts
 - authentic materials (newspapers, radio reports, films etc)
 - teacher-created supplementary materials
- changing the organisational structure of the activities, for example, pairs, small groups or whole class.

Such adaptation and enhancement often allows learners' needs to be more specifically addressed and further interaction and meaningful integration of skills to be achieved.

Guideline 5: English language teaching materials should encourage learners to develop learning skills and strategies

Because 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 (Nunan, 1988), it is essential that language-teaching materials also explicitly focus on efficient language-learning strategies and help students take advantage of the multitude 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, pragmatic skills and strategies such as rewording and turn-taking, can be further developed with well-designed materials.

In addition, materials can provide valuable opportunities for self-evaluation by imparting the necessary metalanguage and by incorporating activities that support learners in their assessment of their own learning and language development. This strategy can allow learners to utilise both their first language and English. Some EFL course books, such as that by Ellis and Sinclair (1989), also build in exercises that allow students to explore their own learning styles and preferred strategies as an important means of promoting ongoing independent development.

Guideline 6: English language teaching materials should promote a focus on form as well as function

The initial motivation for many practitioners to design their own materials has grown, in part, from dissatisfaction over the past two decades with “the profusion of skill-based activities and artificial language use pervasive in the field of ESL instruction” (Demetrian, 1997, p. 5). Individual activities and, indeed, whole courses have been developed to encourage meaningful language use, with a focus on oral interaction in real-life situations. This swing away from the more traditional product or grammar-oriented approach, however, has resulted in the development of many materials that allow little scope to focus on the formal aspects of language.

The aim of Guideline 5 is to foster active, independent language learners. To help meet this goal, learners need to have an understanding of the underlying forms and patterns of language and a metalanguage with which to describe and discuss language. Well-designed materials should thus encourage learners to notice repeating patterns and their exceptions, and provide opportunities for regulated practice, thereby increasing learners’ confidence to engage in more independent and creative expression.

Guideline 7: English language teaching materials should be authentic

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

Where authenticity **in terms of the texts** presented to learners has been discussed in the literature, there has been a tendency to think immediately of written material such as newspapers and magazines. Materials designers should aim to design materials that also utilise authentic spoken and visual texts. Learners need to read, hear and see the way native speakers communicate naturally with one another.

Arguably more important than the provision of authentic texts is authenticity **in terms of the tasks** that students are required to perform with them. Consideration of the types of real-world tasks that 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.

Authenticity has a further advantage in that it provides the opportunity for teachers to respond to local and international events with up-to-date, relevant and high-interest topics and tasks. Personalising teaching materials in this way can enhance learner motivation and advance increased engagement in the learning activities (Block, 1991).

Guideline 8: English language teaching materials should be appealing

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

Appearance criteria that are particularly pertinent to materials designers are:

1. *Physical appearance*: Initial impressions can be as important for motivation and effectiveness in the language classroom as they are in many other aspects of life. Put simply, language teaching materials should be good to look at and should utilise recognised guidelines for typography and layout. A basic knowledge of the availability and effect of differing typefaces, for example, and the ability to manipulate weights and sizes within these, is essential if a materials designer is to create dynamic and appealing materials without sacrificing their clarity and readability. Good choices in these areas can provide for a reader what volume, pitch and intonation do for a listener.

Typefaces, line length, character size, serifs and case are very large subjects in their own right and there are numerous publications available to guide novice materials designers in their decisions regarding appearance and functionality. Useful references include: *Write, edit, print: style manual for Aotearoa New Zealand* (1997), and *Preparing instructional text: document design using desktop publishing* (1992).

2. *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? If learners are to check their accuracy in computer-based tasks, have you ensured a minimum number of keystrokes to reduce wait-time?
3. *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 can they be made robust enough to last the required distance.
4. *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, only to 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 provided for other teachers who may use the materials, as it does to the instructions for the intended learners. It seems to be stating the obvious to say that instructions should be clear, but often otherwise excellent materials fail in their “pedagogical realisation” (Jolly & Bolitho, 1998, p. 93) because of lack of clarity. For instructions to be effective, it is important that they are provided in language that is appropriate for the target learners. Incorporating visual support to scaffold the instructions can also help to lead learners in manageable steps through more complex activities. Use of the correct metalanguage can assist in making instructions more concise and efficient. For example, ensuring that important processes (such as critiquing, analysing, evaluating and reporting) are clearly understood will assist learners to interpret instructions as intended.

Guideline 10: English language teaching materials should offer flexibility and diversity

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. Prabhu (cited in Maley, 1998) 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” (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, suggesting that diversity in terms of teaching content, the roles of students and teacher, and teaching procedures offer benefits for both students and teachers. Teacher designed materials provide opportunities to add variety to classroom routines and activities, perhaps ‘breaking rules’ (Fanselow, 1987 cited in Maley, 2003) to find “new ways of doing old things” (Maley, 2003, p.5). Maley argues that diversity enhances student motivation, sustains attention, and meets a range of learning preferences and needs. 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

Ultimately, it is teachers who must weigh up the benefits and costs of designing their own teaching materials and decide 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).

Despite guidelines on best practice in materials design, constraints will invariably limit the ability of many materials designers to work to them, and compromises will doubtless be necessary. We would encourage designers to prioritise the principles encased in the above guidelines according to their context, individual aims and the time available. However, materials that satisfy the proposed guidelines to the greatest extent possible 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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